

An Activist Strategy for Teaching and Learning in Two Courses

“Theologies of Childhood” and “Theology, Violence, and Reconciliation” are two courses involving different (but occasionally overlapping) subject matter. Theologies of Childhood is a practical theology course that looks at the meanings of childhood in Christian tradition and the relationships between these theological understandings and practices with children. Theology, Violence, and Reconciliation addresses Christian perspectives on, and intersections with, violence, toward engagements in the practical theological work of reconciliation. Both courses are grounded in a practical theology methodology that moves between three primary activities: (1) engagement with and description of a particular context, community, or situation where people struggle for justice and work to practice the Reign of God announced by Jesus; (2) engagement of multiple and interdisciplinary resources toward more adequate understandings, analyses, and interpretations of that particular situation of struggle or life context held under the norm of emancipatory justice; and (3) the construction and engagement of strategies of action and hope that can participate in God’s transforming work of love and justice. The teaching strategy I engage for both courses is an effort to en flesh this methodology through a pedagogy in which course participants learn to describe, analyze, strategize, and act in concrete contexts. Although these two courses have widely differing foci, I have used a similar teaching strategy in each of these courses, as a way to involve course participants in active and activist forms of learning that can matter outside of the classroom and be a means of praxis-oriented, integrative teaching-learning.

The backbone of this teaching strategy is partnership with one or more contexts in which people are addressing the issues of our course’s focus in their lives. Modeled on Participatory Action Research designs in which “outsiders” partner with “insiders” to work on a problem or issue of their mutual concern, we form a relationship with a group or agency in the community that becomes a site for learning in addition to the classroom. (In this method of education, classrooms function as “zones of intensification” per Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger for reflection on learning that takes place not only in the engagement with texts and ideas but also in the practices engaged outside the classroom.) Currently, for example, this semester’s Theologies of Childhood course has a partnership with the Carpenter’s Shelter, in which our course participants’ interests in learning about how long term homelessness effects the lives of children meet with the shelter’s needs for persons who can tutor, offer childcare, and be otherwise involved with children at the shelter. We have a “service learning” arrangement of mutual benefit to students and to the shelter and its residents. A previous semester’s Theology, Violence, and Reconciliation course involved a similar partnership through the chaplains office in the county adult detention facility, in which course participants were involved in various ways with family members (many of whom were children) in the waiting area of the jail.

These contexts and the people who inhabit them provide a shared situation for learning and engaging skills of social analysis as course participants seek more adequate ways to understand the situations of struggle they encounter there. I teach in abbreviated form ethnographic skills and sociological practices of analyzing a context (e.g., participant observation in a context; listening and interviewing; identifying social/structural features; using census data and other demographic information to examine the economic and

population features of a setting in its ecology) that course participants make use of as they engage the situation and people. This skill set is also preliminary to noticing and making sense of power relations there. The face to face encounters in a context have a way of “problematizing” previously unquestioned assumptions and facile understandings about children, violence, the system of incarceration/ “justice”, etc. Meanwhile, situating the learning experience in contextual practice offers the partner organization beneficial resources in the form of tutors, advocates, teachers, servers, etc. through the work of the course participants in that organization.

A second key feature of this teaching-learning strategy is the constitution of its primary assignment as an “action project” to be designed and carried out over the course of the term. Action projects provide a means for learners to develop an area of their own interest within the course, in a strategic intervention within a ministry situation of their concern.

For example, in one semester of the Theology, Violence, and Reconciliation course, a Quaker student became troubled by what he saw as a basic inconsistency in his community’s commitments to nonviolence and their theological emphasis on a substitutionary theory of atonement. For his action project, he created an adult education experience that provided a process for its participants to examine the gaps between the implicit theology in their framework/practices of nonviolence and the explicit theology of their “liturgical” language. The two-fold results were that more people in the community participated in a nonviolence training session with intentional links to the work of the Meeting in their local community, and there was a conscious decision by the leadership and members of the Meeting to change certain previously unexamined public forms of expression of the meanings of redemption through Christ. In another example, a small group of women students designed and carried out a series of puppet shows and discussion groups with children in a battered women’s shelter where they were involved as interns, focused on supporting the children to deal with their experiences of witnessing violence. Some action projects involve congregations in justice ministries or in education towards such ministries; other action projects take place directly within the partner organization for the class.

One difficulty with this strategy is that it is labor- and time-intensive for teachers and learners, and course participants often say that although they were very glad to have these learning opportunities, these modes of learning took up more time than the average 3-credit class. Others note the difficulty in designing and implementing an action project within the bounds of the semester. I have explored options for more credit hours, and for extending the time for project completion beyond the semester, but find that academic structures and registrars’ requirements do not always lend themselves well to these kinds of adjustments.