

Over the past six years of teaching, I have tried several different strategies for encouraging students to engage in social analysis and action for transformation in the world. In this brief paper I'll discuss a few strategies that have been successful and how I am trying to integrate them into a single approach.

One of the reasons it can be difficult to bring scholarship and activism together is that privileges and cultivates a particular kind of knowing. It is steeped in a modern sense of how humans know that does not fit well with activist commitments. In teaching modern Christian thought, I spend a fair amount of time covering the development of this modern epistemology that privileges the individual, autonomous, rational subject who aims for objective knowledge in abstraction from community, culture, and embodiment. My attempts to get students involved in social analysis and transformation are challenges to this epistemology.

While I critique it directly in lectures, I also challenge this epistemology through texts that present other views of knowledge or ways of knowing (slave narratives, accounts of mystical experiences, autobiographical accounts of activists). Further, I require my students to use the knowledge gained in the classroom to analyze real world situations. For example, students in a course on Christian Understandings of Evil read many theologians and philosophers on the subject of Evil, then investigate a real-world occurrence of evil and try to understand the evil through the theoretical lens of one of the authors. Often this leads to real insight regarding the situation they are analyzing. Even more often, it leads to insight regarding the limitations of the theoretical lenses. It is the beginning of a back and forth between the classroom and the world, where students begin to see how each bears on the other.

Through all of this, however, the basic epistemology that funds abstracted scholarship in academia is still reenacted. The very structure of higher education in America is so built on this Enlightenment epistemology that all alternatives or objections are undermined by the system they are taught within. No matter what we say or read about knowing in ways other than the modern model, we are still performing that model in our classroom.

So I also offer my students the opportunity to convey the knowledge they gain through classroom work and their own analysis in non-traditional ways. Closely supervised, students may opt not to write a traditional paper, but rather to make an argument in another way. Some of the best work I have received includes an hour long documentary exploring local religious activism called "New Haven Jesus," a comic book on evil, a series of eleven poems based on the commandments building an argument about God's culpability for suffering, short stories, and plays. The students who choose to do creative projects invest far more of their time, their energy, and themselves into the work. In the course of this, they become deeply involved in what they are studying and begin to know in new ways.

Studying performance and theology together has given me the opportunity to experiment further with altering the fundamental epistemology of the classroom. In a course called Theology, Theatre, and Performance, I explained to students on the first day that both Christianity and theatre are about communal meaning-making, and therefore our study about them would be a communal process. Furthermore, both Christianity and theater are embodied experiences. As we studied performance in relation to theatre and theology, we would also perform. What this meant concretely was that in every class,

while we would read and discuss texts, we would also participate in embodied, communal exercises that pertained to the ideas of the text. I lead the first couple of these, borrowing acting exercises. Then the students took over, borrowing and inventing ways of performing what we were reading about during class.

To give a few examples: when we read the Ignatian exercises, the student presenters led us through a guided meditation based on the exercises. When we read Judith Butler on performativity, students initiated an exercise called “park bench.” Three chairs together at the front of the class formed a park bench upon which we would all have a turn waiting for the bus, a new student to join in each time someone departed. Each of us were given slips of paper that detailed a gender and sexual identity that we were to perform on the bench. On another day, we did a forum theatre, a form of theatre aimed to support revolution by transforming spectators into spect-actors. Every day we did something new.

This class was a revelation to me and to each of the students. Students came to class well-prepared and buzzing with excitement every week, grasped Butler in great depth in record time, formed a remarkable community, and had higher-level academic discussions than I’ve ever witnessed in a classroom. By the end of the semester, it was apparent that the most profound knowledge gained during the class was not about theater or theology, but about knowledge. This class was so very different from others because it cultivated and recognized different ways of knowing—embodied, communal, performative ways of knowing.

This was such a success it is vital to me to continue this work in other classes. It is more difficult in classes where performance is not part of the topic to be studied. Also, while this technique generated a minor revolution in epistemology, it didn’t move directly into social justice issues, as did the former strategies. Thus I plan to incorporate both kinds of practices in other courses.

Next year I will teach the Evil course again, and will repeat the former strategies of having students study texts from various types and genres, apply the insights gained to specific social situations, and convey their arguments in creative forms of their choosing. I will also require embodied communal performances, where we learn together in new ways. One of these is a driving tour of New Haven, where students in small groups will drive a defined route through the town we live in, seeing the extremes of wealth and poverty, the structural and systemic issues that shape community life. Another is to volunteer in small groups to specific social service agencies in town, doing activities such as making and serving meals at Columbus House. While many of the students (especially those who self-select into a class on evil) already do such things, I believe that doing them together as part of a class will have a different effect on their reflections and on the epistemology of the course.

I hope that this approach will integrate two strands of resistance to non-activist academia. The first is focusing on social justice (through texts and analyzing concrete situations) and the second is changing epistemologies (through creative projects and communal, embodied practices of knowing).