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The Promise and Peril of the Interfaith Classroom

At the beginning of each of my classes at Augsburg College, I ask students to make a name tent. They fold a piece of card stock paper in half and on the outside, in thick marker, write the name they wish to be called for the semester. On the inside of the tent, I ask them to answer a series of questions, which I explain will be for my eyes only. One question I ask is: What is your religious preference, if any? The cultural diversity of the College is reflected in the wide variety of names on these tents: Samira, Blake, Mai, Alejandra, Mohammed, Hannah, and Ramon, to name a few. The rich differences in how students orient around religion is reflected on the inside of the tent: Muslim, Lutheran, Shamanist, atheist, agnostic, Catholic, spiritual, and more.

It is with great excitement that I view this diversity and think about the learning potential in this kind of classroom environment. At the same time, I hear the caution in the words of world religions scholar Diana Eck, when she writes, "Pluralism is not the sheer fact of plurality alone, but its active engagement with plurality" (191). In other words, while there is great promise in the interfaith classroom, just having a group of students who orient differently around religion in the room does not necessarily lead to a pluralistic environment where interfaith dialogue can flourish.

The Power of Pairing Opposites

My years teaching in the religion department at Augsburg College have given me much practice nurturing interfaith

conversation in the classroom. While there is always an intangibility as to why a robust interfaith community develops sometimes and at other times does not, I have found that there are certain qualities to consider in creating a vibrant interfaith environment. I find that the best way to think about these qualities is in pairs of seeming opposites: dialogue and debate, safety and risk, commonality and particularity. These qualities play out in the classroom, not in adversarial ways, but in creative tension.



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Dialogue and Debate

Diana Eck traces the origin of the word dialogue to the Greek word meaning "through speech." She posits that, in an interfaith environment, dialogue involves reciprocal conversation. Mutual witness takes place, where each

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party bears witness to the truth he or she possesses. At the same time, each participant engages in mutual transformation, which does not imply agreement with the other but rather willingness to question one's own position and to be changed by the encounter (19). For me, dialogue is the default position in the interfaith classroom because it fosters the qualities of critical loyalty, deep listening, intellectual empathy, and active respect.

Conversely, according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the definition of the verb debate is "to dispute or argue about," which is certainly how debate is viewed in our political culture. It is a competition in which one side's arguments win out over the other. When we move to the noun form, debate is defined as "a regulated discussion of a proposition of two matched sides." This kind of carefully planned discussion can be a useful technique in an interfaith setting in order to discuss not truth claims, but rather particular issues in an interfaith world that can help student clarify their positions.

Safety and Risk

The second set of qualities—safety and risk— can perhaps be seen as even more diametrically opposed to one another. Currently, there is much conversation about safety in the university classroom, much of it stemming from the positive impulse of ensuring that underrepresented voices are valued and heard, without the risk of micro (or macro) aggressions based on race, class, culture, religion, or sexual identity. As stated above, dialogue requires intellectual empathy and active respect which helps to create safe space.

At the same time, safety is not an absolute value and must be balanced against risk taking. Betty Barrett suggests that while educators should promise that students will not be subjected to behaviors that threaten the social or physical integrity of the learning environment, they "may not be able to (nor should they) promise students in good faith that the intellectual enterprise and scholarly exchanges are safe and comfortable endeavours" (10). Najeeba Syeed-Miller applies this notion to the interfaith classroom, asserting that "we must disarm the notion of a 'safe' classroom and disabuse students of an expectation of a risk-free learning experience" if we seek to prepare students to navigate the complex, rich,

and choppy waters of our interfaith world. According to transformational learning theory, it is only through a series of disorienting dilemmas, where one's taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions are challenged, that transformation can occur, that the learner may create new, inclusive, and more accurate beliefs to guide his or her actions (Mezirow 17). Disorientation involves sitting with discomfort and risking a change in the way you see the other and the world.

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Commonality and Particularity

The final set of qualities for consideration when creating a vibrant interfaith environment is commonality and particularity. A laudable goal of the interfaith classroom can be to create a sense of solidarity across religious and nonreligious worldviews—a sense that we are all one human family and perhaps we share some universal values. Karen Armstrong, scholar of world religions, and founder of the Charter for Compassion, believes that compassion is a universal value that "lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat others as we wish to be treated" (6). Discovering commonality can lay the foundation for lasting interfaith relationships.

At the same time, the interfaith classroom should be a place that affirms the distinctiveness and value of *different* cultures, religions, and worldviews, recognizing the *unique* contributions each perspective brings to the world house. The particularities *within* traditions should be celebrated as well. There are, after all, many Judaism, Christianity, and secular humanisms. By affirming particularity, students are empowered to bring their unique identities, which are increasingly hybridized, either due to how they were raised or by their own choosing. In the classroom at Augsburg College, I have encountered more than one Christian-Shamanist and Buddhist-Lutheran, not to mention many who identify as "spiritual-but-not-religious."

I have even encountered a “Muslic,” a young woman raised to practice both the Catholic tradition of her mother, and the Muslim tradition of her father. By affirming both particularity and communality, one’s individual and unique story can to be put into conversation with the larger narratives of religious and philosophical traditions, thus further expanding the interfaith conversation in the classroom.

Conclusion

The promise of the interfaith classroom is that it can create a space to fulfill the primary purpose of education. According to Trappist monk and interfaith advocate Thomas Merton, this purpose is “to show a person how to define himself [or herself] authentically and spontaneously in relation to the world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual” (3). This environment can nurture self-understanding and an expanded worldview while holding the qualities of dialogue and debate, safety and risk, and communality and particularity in creative and productive tension.

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