
Listening in the Classroom

BY MELISSA BROWNING

The classroom as a pluralist space should be appreciated for its potential to cultivate peace and extend moral awareness. As teachers and students listen—to texts, to marginalized voices, for privilege, and through activism and experiential learning—they can work together to create learning rooted in justice.

During the first week of class this semester, I invited my students to name the countries they were connected to. Using an online travel map, we went through each country and they answered “yes” if they or a member of their immediate family had lived in or visited that country. Among the forty-three students, 149 countries were represented. According to the travel map’s calculation, our class was connected to two-thirds of the world.

My classroom reflects the diverse student body of Loyola University Chicago as a whole, in which eighty-two countries are represented and twenty-eight percent of students self-identify as Asian American, Latin American, African American, or Native American. Twenty-seven percent speak a language other than English at home. The Chicago neighborhood surrounding the university reflects a similar diversity: eighty languages are spoken within a two-mile radius of campus. In my class, about twenty-five percent of students were born outside the United States or are second-generation U.S. citizens or residents. Another twenty-five percent, born in the United States, already have traveled or lived abroad.

While university students tend to come from privileged households that are not representative of our country as a whole, they do reflect the increasing pluralism in classrooms, from elementary schools to graduate schools, across the United States. The migration movements associated with

globalization that have shaped urban populations for years are broadening to include midsize cities and small towns. The resulting religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in classrooms has both positive and negative consequences.

For instance, when my class discusses HIV/AIDS, I point out that the connections we identify on the map show how quickly a virus like HIV can spread. This is surely one way in which globalization may be destructive. Yet the same connectedness has the positive consequence of indicating who we should be as moral people, with ethical obligations and a sense of vocation in relation to the whole world.

In a similar way, the pluralism present in schools can serve the common good as it helps us discern the contours of our moral obligation as people of faith. The classroom as a pluralist space should not be seen as a space of contention or disagreeableness, but should be appreciated for its potential to cultivate peace and extend moral awareness.

THE CLASSROOM AS PLURALIST SPACE

“A globalization of what it means to live the shalom intended by God,” theologian Mercy Oduyoye urges, “is demanded by the globalization of the power of those who would rule the world by economic success.”¹ The two are tied together. A globalization of shalom must become our response to the destructive potential of the interconnected power structures of our world. The classroom as pluralist space can break new ground for developing a globalization of shalom, if we can learn to listen.

Classrooms can break new ground for voice finding and solidarity if they are environments where all voices are invited to be in dialogue. But if classrooms are to be effective models of shalom, intentional listening is required from both teacher and students. Five key areas of intentional listening—to texts, to marginalized voices, for privilege, and through activism and experiential learning—can foster an atmosphere of solidarity as the (former) oppressed and (former) oppressors work together to accomplish a pedagogy rooted in justice. When close attention is given to these key areas, the classroom becomes a space of transformation as students’ relation to the subject at hand and to one another as fellow learners forms them as moral persons.

Regardless of the subject matter they teach, most teachers hope the content of their courses will extend beyond what students must learn for assignments and exams. Understanding the classroom as an intentionally pluralist space can help them accomplish this task. Within each discipline there are historic and present inequalities and hegemonies. Mathematics and the sciences historically have marginalized women and girls; histories sometimes have told only one side of the story; and literature has been used to create and reinforce hegemonies of race, class, and gender. Theology—the discipline from which I teach ethics—may be the worst offender as it has evoked God in the name of wars, slavery, imperialism, and gender

discrimination. This is why it is necessary, in every setting and discipline, to reimagine the classroom as a pluralist space.

Of course, simply having a diverse group of students is not enough for the classroom to *function* as a pluralist space in which alternative views can challenge and test the prevailing one. Too often, different and dissenting voices are silenced by the dominant voice. It is up to teachers to model good listening practices, so that students learn to listen to one another. As teachers do this, the pluralism present in both culture and classroom offers a unique opportunity for them to explore human flourishing and moral decision-making not only through the content they teach, but also through the pedagogies they employ.

LISTENING TO TEXTS

A good course always begins with a good syllabus, or lesson plan, that includes the seminal texts on the subject. Yet, if we seek to re-create the classroom as a pluralist space, we must question what texts are considered “seminal,” and whether or not they can be considered seminal in all contexts. Miguel De La Torre makes a convincing case that Latino/a scholars need not locate themselves within a Eurocentric discourse on ethics. The work of European American ethicists might be fine for European Americans, De La Torre says, but this body of work does not provide a helpful starting point for Latino/as because it is complicit with empire and does not understand the situation of the oppressed.²

Teachers can take De La Torre’s view into account when they select texts – books, articles, artwork, and so on – for their students to study. Do the chosen texts reinforce hegemonies or encourage liberation? When they do enforce hegemonies, should they be discarded? Or are there additional readings that can point out the hegemonies present in the text while bringing the text into dialogue with pluralistic perspectives?

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Who writes the texts can be important also in drawing out responses from students or silencing them. Selections written by women, by individuals in the Two-Thirds World, and by others who have been historically marginalized can create space for students from these same contexts to find their own voice. For example, studies on women in the classroom show they are reluctant to speak up or have a tendency to speak with disclaimers or with

hesitation. To what extent is this due to the lack of women's voices present in a typical course reading list? When women read women, when students from the Two-Thirds World read literature from the Two-Thirds World, space for speech is created as students discover that their own stories resonate with what they are reading.

Within my discipline of theology, listening to texts also means giving attention to sacred texts. For college students who have grown up in various faith traditions, a theology classroom often provides the first place to encounter sacred texts outside of a community of faith. This distance is important, especially for women students and students from the Two-Thirds World, because of the ways sacred texts have been used in oppressive ways. Engaging the text from a new perspective of distance can create space for students to see how the texts have been interpreted in both beneficial and detrimental ways. The distance created by academic study can allow room for students to read women's voices into sacred texts or to critique the ways in which the texts have been used to authorize violence and empire. For this reason, when sacred texts are used in classrooms, it is important that they be read from varied perspectives. The biblical story of the Exodus, for example, has been read from both a liberationist perspective (focusing on God's freeing of the captives) and a postcolonial perspective (focusing on the colonization of the promised land).³ By placing these two readings, both originating from the Two-Thirds World, in dialogue, a pluralist space can be created where students can learn to read the texts from mutually enriching perspectives.

LISTENING TO MARGINALIZED VOICES

Attention to the texts we choose is one way of listening to marginalized voices. But not all "texts" that should be written have been written. Within the bodies of literature in each discipline, there are important voices that are often overlooked as the body of literature is developed and extended by those with privilege, education, and the time to write. Liberation theologians have drawn our attention to this by arguing that theology happens not in ivory towers but in base communities. For this reason, it is important to question not only who we are reading, but also with whom our writers (and we) are in conversation. For example, African feminist theologians have argued that the African woman has "yet to be consulted by the theologian."⁴ The classroom as pluralist space not only seeks out marginalized voices through the careful choice of texts, but also incorporates the stories that have not yet been written.

The use of ethnographies, or life stories, in the classroom, can provide a way to re-create the classroom as a pluralist space. In my course this semester on HIV/AIDS, the readings for each day include both an ethnography and an "issue reading." When we talk about AIDS orphans, we not only read statistics and an ethical reflection on what should be done, but we also

listen to the story of an orphan in her own words, through anything from a YouTube video to an NPR interview. Each day of class begins with the ethnography, rooting the subject for the day in a life story, with equal authority given to it and the issue reading.

Students can also accomplish this by completing qualitative interviews and creating their own ethnographies. One of my colleagues requires her students to interview individuals who are different from them in at least three ways. Through this encounter with someone of a different culture, socioeconomic class, or gender, the students are able to anchor the content of the course to issues of race, class, gender, and privilege.

LISTENING FOR PRIVILEGE

To varying degrees, university classrooms are sites of privilege. The rising costs of tuition and the competitive nature of admissions policies have created an atmosphere where students without the financial or academic credentials are often unable to further their studies. Likewise among primary and secondary schools, some districts and certain schools represent privilege and wealth more than others. Both privilege and the lack thereof are issues in the classroom. But the classroom as pluralist space can be a site for recognizing and examining privilege.

In the United States, where our history is tied to both slavery of African Americans and injustice toward Native American peoples, perhaps the most important place to begin is with the privilege tied to skin color. Beyond teaching about the negative effects of racism, it is important to take the next step to interrogate whiteness. Emilie Townes proposes just this when she points out that “the notion of race has been collapsed into this uninterrogated coloredness by academic, economic, ethical, social, theological and political arguments.” She goes on to say the focus has been on “darker-skinned peoples almost exclusively” as the social construction of whiteness is ignored. The bottom line,

Townes argues, is that whiteness benefits white people. Therefore our starting point should not be with racism, but with the social construction of whiteness, which has created and perpetuated racism.⁵

What does this look like

in the classroom? Townes suggests seven “moral benchmarks” that can provide a starting point for an analysis of race and racism. Among these benchmarks, Townes gives attention to building community through a willingness to risk, emphasizes new patterns of understanding that require a lifetime of practice, and points out the importance of naming one’s social

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location. We must admit that we are both “victim and perpetrator” on conscious and unconscious levels. Townes’s sixth benchmark applies equally to both teachers and students: “as individuals, you must be willing to be changed, grow, admit your participation and your resistance to race and racism in the communities of the classroom, the church, the society, the academy, the city. It is far too easy to project onto others that which you do not

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work on within yourself.”⁶ She encourages her readers to examine their own social location in light of the social locations of others both inside the classroom and beyond its walls. Unlike a comparative approach that merely contrasts the “other” with the dominant culture, when we interrogate the meaning of whiteness in the classroom, we can teach and

learn in ways that interrogate racial hegemony.

The privilege that is associated with race and racism is not the only sort of privilege we should listen for in the classroom. We must also listen for the ways that prejudices of gender, sexual orientation, imperialism, and socioeconomic class shape teaching and learning. What distorting myths about women, the poor, individuals who are gay or straight, or people who live in the Two-Thirds World do we bring into the classroom and let stand in the way of our fulfilling moral obligations to one another? As these stereotypes arise in the classroom and interfere with our seeking the truth, we must take the time to explore why they exist.

To debunk such myths, it helps to ask, who has the authority in the conversation? To whom must we listen? Theorists refer to this authority as “epistemological privilege” in the conversation. As an example of this strategy, postcolonial theologians remind us that while there is a place for the former colonized and the former colonizers in each conversation, the former colonized must be given epistemological privilege.⁷ By shifting the privilege to them, by realizing that the locus of authority may not belong to anyone present in the classroom, we become aware of some of our socioeconomic myths as we abdicate authority that is not rightly earned. We can more rightly discern international justice when the locus of authority is not the scholar or teacher, but the story of a woman who picks tea leaves in Kenya, or the story of a child orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Haiti. When these voices are given epistemological priority, our own ways of knowing are reshaped through hearing their stories.

LISTENING THROUGH ACTIVISM AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In every classroom, regardless of the subject being taught, connections can be made to historic or present injustice. As a result, every course can include activism and experiential learning, two important resources for learning. In my course on HIV/AIDS, students submit their group project as a podcast (rather than a written assignment or class presentation), which we broadcast through a university Web channel. As their assignments are shared with the wider community, the students' motivation can potentially leave the realm of "work for grades" and enter the realm of "work for justice."

Similarly, components of experiential learning within the course design can remove students' grade-oriented focus as they find opportunities to bridge the gap between the classroom and the community. The immediate goal of this type of learning and activism is not to change the world but to help students develop moral habits. The ten hours of community service they log may do little for the service agencies they assist, but it may have a significant impact on the students' moral formation. As students and teachers connect the content of the course to the injustices of the world, they can find spaces of solidarity by stepping outside of their comfort zones and confronting structures of privilege and power.

Beverly Haddad, a theologian and Episcopal priest in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa, is a model of an "activist-intellectual." She has created a Bible study for women in rural Vulindlela, South Africa, in which participants use drama, art, and other voice-finding activities to confront the unspeakable issues like rape and HIV/AIDS that are present within their culture. Haddad articulates two goals that are applicable to teachers in pluralistic classrooms. One goal is to create "conscientization," or the awareness of one's own situation, as students become aware of oppression and privilege. The other goal is to "unify and structure" understandings so that students, following the teacher's lead, become "boundary-crossers" who, in the classroom, inhabit both worlds of the privileged and the oppressed.⁸

LISTENING AS SOLIDARITY

In a classroom in our pluralist culture, why should we balance listening and speaking in the ways mentioned above? We have an obligation to create space not only for individual voice finding, but also for communal moral formation.

The promise of an ethics of listening in the classroom is that students and teachers learn to *hear one another into speech*.⁹ As we learn to listen both to marginalized voices and to our own places of privilege, the classroom becomes a space to cultivate peace and discern the contours of our common moral obligations. As we listen together through activism and experiential learning, we develop a solidarity of listening that can lead to justice beyond the classroom walls.

NOTES

1 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 44.

2 Miguel De La Torre, "Rejecting Euroamerican Ethics for a Latino/a Ethics of Jodien-do," paper given at Society of Christian Ethics Annual Meeting, January 9, 2009.

3 See, for instance, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), and Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

4 See Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, "Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community," in *With Passion and Compassion*, edited by Virginia Fabella, M. M., and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 4; and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters Of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 82.

5 Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.

6 *Ibid.*, 78-79.

7 For more on this, see Beverly Haddad, "Faith Resources and Sites as Critical to Participatory Learning with Rural South African Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22:1 (2006): 135-154.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Nelle Morton develops this image of hearing one another into speech in *The Journey Is Home* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985).

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