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# Somewhere I've Never Been: Part 2

John Lanci
*Stonehill College*, jlanci@stonehill.edu

## Recommended Citation

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# Part II

John R. Lanci

Stonehill College

In the first part of this essay, I suggested that teaching during a pandemic, while challenging and often uncomfortable in its remoteness, offers us the chance to re-examine all of the teaching we do, even in the good times. What if we focused less on content delivery, such as lectures, and instead attempted to explore methods of "deep learning," a collaborative endeavor that would foster students' abilities to evaluate, contextualize, and take ownership of their time in the classroom (or the Zoom gallery)? We scholars may feel most alive when immersed in the second or third centuries of the common era, but our students benefit most when they can mull over the implications of ancient material for life in the world today.[1]

Part one reflected on some of the methodological underpinnings of the active or engaged pedagogy that will foster deeper learning. Here, I would like to move from the theoretical to the practical. How might the changes I am advocating look in action?

Recall my department's experience with the story of Adam and Eve. No matter what kind of religious training our students had before they came to college, just about none of them seemed to be familiar with the story of our progenitors in Genesis, not even the ones whom we knew had encountered them in Catholic high school. It seemed to be an argument against the way they had been taught: rote memorization of the material which, after it was spit back on a test, was quickly forgotten. How could we see to it that our students' learning "stuck"? In that context, I asked, what would a class look like if we shifted our main focus away from content delivery and toward content reception and integration?

Consider this:

In addressing the tale of our mythical progenitors, instead of recording a lecture on the origins and content of Genesis, we first make a list of the outcomes we want to shoot for as a result of this class. Then, as we normally would, we circulate a list of sources, mostly electronic, and have everyone read the basic story (Genesis 1-3) and what some previous interpreters have made of it. We include questions to focus their reading and thinking about the texts.

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[1] I am once again indebted to editor Nate DesRosiers and his anonymous readers for encouragement and much helpful feedback.

When the class meets, we host a discussion about the creation story using the focusing questions which, by the way, should not have easy answers. Not, for instance, "Who are the main players in the garden event?" or "How does the story fit into the various source-theories about how the text was created?" but instead, one or more like the following:[2]

- Why do you think someone would tell or write this story? Why would a community continue to re-tell it over time?
- What do you think text tells us about how the authors view the world and our place in it?
- How does the story configure gender and gender roles? Does this text have a role to play in current conversations about gender? How so, or why not?
- Re-read Genesis 1:28-30, where God calls upon humans to "fill the earth and subdue it" and have dominion over all creatures. Some people toss this text into discussions about global climate change and what we should be doing about it. How would you use this text in such a discussion (hint: it could support more than one position)?

A summary question, perhaps for a follow-up class or writing assignment, might include some variation on the following:

- Is this story true today? How so?
- If the story is a myth (presuming we have discussed already the nature of religious myth), what deeper truths may lie beneath the surface?
- Why not "cancel" this text? Why should we still read it at all?

With questions such as these, their sources—if they are academic essays and not pious treatises—will offer students little by way of answers, so they will have to stop and think about what they have read, and they will do it in light of their own experience. Even a question as simple as, "Whom do you identify with in the story, and why?" one that sounds way too touchy-feely for most of us, will get them thinking and talking, and once that happens, once they sense that this is *their* discussion, we can insert some quality content into the midst of it. "Ah, you identify with the serpent! Say more!" can lead into a discussion of the nature of evil or if the serpent is actually evil at all. And why a serpent?

Real discussion here is driven by our questions, not our answers; how the conversation will actually go will be determined by what the students think and say. At the end of the hour, if we have poked here and prodded there—but never taken control of the conversation—chances are the class will have touched on and perhaps completed the outcomes we listed for ourselves before we started.

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[2] Good discussion will not ensue by way of a forced march through way too many questions. I offer an array of possibilities here; there is no way I would try to cover all—or even most—of them in on session.

The discussion may not have gone exactly as we had hoped or planned—real discussion among any group of peers is messy, after all—but we will have promoted student investment and offered them a chance to consider together an important source. At the same time, even a touchy-feely prompt can nudge them to delve deeper than before into questions that have an impact on our life today and the choices they may make in the future. So, for instance, as they struggle with whether or not the text is "true," they may together begin to question the nature of what is true and what is not.

Sharing with students the responsibility to create a meaningful course will encourage them to invest themselves in it even, I suspect, at a distance. That investment comes slowly; without the threat of a quiz on the content, one risks that chance that students will skip the reading and preparatory thinking. This may happen at first, but if the discussion is driven by student input and they get the impression that it's safe to say what they are really thinking, in my experience most students will find the time to do the preparation; they will have things to say and will say them if they get a sense that the instructor is actually interested in their ideas.

At the end of class, we go one step further and tell everyone to continue thinking about what they said and heard, and write about it. "What was the best part of this discussion, and why? Go deep!" is a soft-ball question for first-year students which, if you hold them to it, forces them to think on the page.

More advanced students might be actively engaged by more imaginative questions: "How would you explain to your family/your grandmother/an evangelical aunt what we have learned today? Write the script of a short sketch or a play rendering the conversation." or "Can you tell me a story, set in 2020, that grapples with one of the points you think Genesis is trying to make?" These questions demand that students have read and wrestled with the text, recalled the class's conversation, and can now apply what they have learned, while at the same time exercising their imaginative powers and writing well.

When I give them an assignment like this, I ask of them three things: Write the paper only you could write, read what you wrote and then go deeper, and don't hand in your paper until you are proud of what you have written. This involves more work on my part—some students will want to do the assignment in multiple drafts and the "proud" part may wreak havoc with hard deadlines. But on the plus side, I won't be reading slight variations of the same paper ten, fifteen, or twenty-five times. This will also cut down on some kinds of plagiarism; I've never met a student who had the depth of motivation needed to discover, copy, and then personalize this kind of material from another source.[3]

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[3] Of course, Mom or Dad or Grandma might get involved and write the paper for their beloved one. That's always a possibility. But what if you allowed or even encouraged a relative to be part of the process, as an interviewee or first reader who includes his or her comments on the work at hand? It might become a dialogue between the student and his or her domestic cheerleader. And that could make for a rich learning experience for all involved, no?

In my own experience, when given the chance to be creative, some folks in every class take that prompt and run with it in ways that surprise me. I can read twenty student papers, some in multiple drafts, and enjoy the experience, even without the support of an alcoholic beverage.

Now, if one of the goals of a course is to induce students to do historical research, a paper to demonstrate more than imaginative competency will be required. Even in this situation, where content is critical, one can increase student investment and reward creativity by, among other things, negotiating with each student to develop a unique and engaging thesis. *Thesis* is the operative word here. Rather than having students rack up and display facts on a topic, thus showing the instructor that they know how to use the internet (or—some still do—the library), challenge them, in remote conversation with you, to develop their own thesis about the topic and have them make their case. This will decrease—though admittedly not eliminate—the amount of plagiarism with which you will have to contend. (Not surprisingly, plagiarism seems to be running rampant in remote classroom situations. The best way I know to tamp it down is to corner students by demanding that they do creative, clearly original thinking on the page. It takes a lot more out of them—and out of us—but, again, it fosters deeper learning and a more nuanced appreciation of the material we lovers of antiquity cherish.)

Any final assignment, be it a research paper or an in-depth reflection paper, can become a personal encounter between faculty and student. When both are involved in creating the assignment—through on-line conversation and perhaps more than one draft—a connection is made. I realize how unrealistic this sounds if you are dealing with a large class and not a small seminar. But as I will discuss in part three of this essay, there are things we can do to promote collaboration with students that will allow us to share some of the workload of multiple drafts and the other techniques available to engage students actively.

There's no getting around it: the kind of work I am talking about in this essay is labor-intensive, but the learning that results is learning that lasts. And inviting students to share their thoughts about important topics—important to us, like martyrdom of religious dissidents in the third century, or important to them (and us), like the current controversies concerning race or gender and climate change—and then having them write about what they have been thinking, well, all of this can be a refreshing reminder of why we agreed to teach in the first place.