

From: [Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation](#) on behalf of [Center for Faculty Innovation](#)
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Humility
Date: Thursday, January 16, 2020 11:28:15 AM

Humility **by Emily O. Gravett**

Just last week, over Winter Break, some JMU colleagues and I attended a five-day [Social Justice Institute](#) at the University of Virginia (UVA), coordinated by their [Center for Teaching Excellence \(CTE\)](#). There were about 30 faculty in attendance, from UVA, JMU, and William & Mary. I was part of the organizing team for this institute and led/co-led several sessions of my own. While there is much that could be said about this week, and I hope to offer additional reflections, take-aways, and opportunities in future Toolboxes, I want to welcome you to the start of a new semester by focusing on humility... and how this institute prompted me to think about it.

On the third day of the institute, I was leading a session solo about civil discourse, joint inquiry, and big questions in the classroom—essentially, how to have difficult conversations about difficult topics in class (as I frequently do in my religion courses). I presented some examples from my own teaching to illustrate the broader concepts, but I did so without much context or explanation. These examples were, to put it bluntly, not received well. Some of the participants voiced disapproval, disagreement, dissent, even disgust, in response to what I shared. (And there may have been others in the room who felt similarly, but who chose not to say anything at all.) It was itself a difficult moment, to say the least. It was hard to make room for further comments, to thank participants for their feedback, to not immediately shut the conversation down. I wanted a sinkhole to open up beneath me and swallow me whole. It took everything I had, in that moment, just to stay standing up at the front of the room, as I felt my whole body flush, my heart race, and my mind go blank.

The next morning, at the guidance of one of my long-time CTE mentors, Dorothe Bach, whose wisdom and kindness I have benefited greatly from over the years, I offered an apology to the entire group. I was sorry for the ways that my careless presentation (and, as it turns out, questionable pedagogical choices) had affected participants. I wished I had prepared and presented differently. I had, of course, not intended to cause harm, but, as we had discussed many times in the institute, intent is not the same as impact. Offering this apology, though heartfelt, was also hard for me to do. I have apologized to students before, but this was the first time I had done so in front of my peers.

Just last fall, Ed Brantmeier (CFI and the College of Education) shared with our office [an article on “intellectual humility” \(2019\)](#)—the “characteristic that allows for the admission of wrongness.” This piece really resonated with me... and I recalled it as I was reflecting on the last week. Practicing intellectual humility is difficult for many of us in academia: admitting we’ve made a mistake, changing our minds publicly, retracting results, acknowledging failure or wrongdoing. My colleague in Philosophy & Religion, Bill Knorpp, is an exemplar of this practice. He routinely qualifies his comments and creates space for being challenged, for being wrong, for being changed. So often I hear him say, “What’s your opinion on this?” or “I hadn’t thought of it that way” or “I could be wrong.” It is one of the things that I respect most about him. It was this inspiration and these ideas that I drew upon during the institute.

After all, in that difficult moment, was I not a stand-in for all instructors? I was positioned as a “teacher” (facilitator), leading a session for colleagues who were engaging as “students” of the institute. Just as we were having a difficult moment in our institute, they too would experience difficult moments in their own classes (if they hadn’t already). More accurately, in my mind, were we all not learners? I am not some social justice or pedagogy “expert,” smugly sitting at the finish line of some inclusive teaching journey, waiting for everyone else to catch up. I continue to learn and grow, just like everyone else in the room (including the facilitators). The experience was humbling for me—and reminded me of how important humility is to the overall endeavor of higher education, no matter who or what we are teaching.

Below are several ways I try to practice humility in my own classes.

- At the beginning of the semester, I explain to students how professors specialize in very narrow areas of expertise, and we cannot possibly know everything about everything in our fields
- I tell my students that I plan to learn from and alongside them—and that they will learn from each other
- I encourage, and create a variety of opportunities for, students to ask questions in class (and I provide a lot of [“wait time”](#) for them to do so)
- Together, the students and I create community norms in which disagreement, even with me, is encouraged
- I say “I don’t know” when students ask me a question I can’t answer; I then find out and get back to them
- I correct or apologize for mistakes I have made in class; if a student has shown me the error of my ways, I thank them in front of everyone
- I routinely solicit feedback from students about how the course is going, through TAPs, informal in-class polls, and one-on-one conversations
- I change my course design and my instructional strategies based upon feedback that students and colleagues give me

Of course, I recognize that who I am (for instance, white) allows me latitude to be humble in ways that not all instructors can. I recognize that humility is not always called for; if others are consistently underestimating you—or entire groups you belong to—a humble response may not be appropriate, productive, or desirable. Still, there are ways to embody humility as an instructor, if we so choose (or, if the situation requires, as the institute did for me)—to show students the importance of this orientation, in academia and in life.

I hope you have a wonderful semester.

About the author: Dr. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an assistant professor in the [Department of Philosophy & Religion](#). She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.

To unsubscribe from the TEACHING-TOOLBOX list, click the following link:
<http://listserv.jmu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=TEACHING-TOOLBOX&A=1>