




Teaching-from-the-Heart Toolkit

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This toolkit showcases pedagogical resources aimed at fostering learning communities willing to embrace vulnerability as an essential component of deep-rooted growth and reflection in a classroom setting. The information gathered here rests on the assumption that lasting learning begins with the heart. The strategies gathered in this document approach teaching as a delicate zone fraught with the potential for disruption, discomfort, tenderness, and emotional, and intellectual growth. This toolkit is based on my experiences as a professor of Spanish and Latin American studies at the undergraduate level. I teach language, culture and literature courses beginning at the intermediate level of proficiency. My teaching experience involves classrooms with different levels of language proficiency or mixed classrooms in which second language learners, heritage learners, and native speakers share the learning experience. I also teach in the heritage speakers' track of my department. These are courses uniquely fitted to the needs of students who have an affective connection with the Spanish language expressed at different levels of language proficiency. The objective of this toolkit is to enhance student involvement in classroom experiences that promote lasting learning.

The organization of the material relies on the notion of *imaginative learning*. This is a concept that I propose inspired by the notion of “imaginative prayer” from Ignatian spirituality. Imaginative prayer is a scaffolded method of prayer that relies on attentive consideration of any given scriptural passage by doing what St. Ignatius terms “applying the senses.” This method of prayer allows for use of the imagination and the senses with the goal of reaching a deeper state of contemplation. When applied to the classroom, this approach allows for situated teaching and learning as an experience rooted, first and foremost, in the inner emotional landscapes of learners.

The resources that follow are grounded in the Ignatian understanding of the importance of place for the spiritual experience. Inspired by Ignatian spirituality's notion of “composition of place” or “imagining the scene,” I rely on the notion of “landscapes” to stress the importance of place for holistic teaching and learning embedded in body, heart, and mind, in that order! In my experience, the adventure of learning is brought to life more fully and lastingly when it begins with the heart and with a clear awareness of bodily experience as doorway to the emotional life of learners.



The following *landscapes* of teaching and learning from the heart can be revolutionary modes of being in the classroom. In his famous TED Talk, Pope Francis makes an exhortation for those in power to embrace a “revolution of tenderness” ([see TED Talk here](#)). As teachers and mentors, we are called to help young people learn to recognize and actualize their potential. The revolution of tenderness is one that begins and ends with the heart. In the classroom, that hopefully will translate into a learning experience that fosters values of intellectual and social humility as well as training in a self-discipline of high reasoning rooted in the heart.

Body landscapes

- ❖ The role of the breath – It all begins with the body. Breath is essential to fully inhabit an awareness of the body. The classroom is a space inhabited by bodies. There's the body of the teacher as facilitator of the learning experience and the bodies of the learners. We can also talk of a collective body of students present in the classroom, one that displays a distinct “personality” and emotional identity. There are no two classes that are alike in this sense, as is well known by those who teach. Allowing for the presence of conscious, deep breath in the classroom is key to embodied learning. As is well known, stress can effectively separate our awareness from our physical bodies. Noticing the body language of our students is essential to establishing a learning climate anchored in the physicality of our shared experience as human beings.

Breathing exercise – Ask students to breathe deeply several times as they slowly and deliberately roll their shoulders in circles back and forth. This simple exercise has the potential to calm their emotions and bring back student awareness to the classroom. It can also help students regulate their own anxieties about performance in a test or when contributing to class discussions.

- ❖ Applying the senses to the learning experience – Our senses connect our body awareness with our innermost emotional experience. In the same manner, when applied to the learning experience, they can be powerful vectors connecting the body to the emotional experience entailed by learning. Multi-sensorial learning is an embodied type of lasting learning.

Exercise: What color is your reading experience of this book? – Ask students to attribute color to their reading experience of a book. This exercise is especially suited for challenging books that ask students to step out of their comfort zones as readers. For instance, after students finished reading the *Popol Vuh* in a course of mine on religion and literature in the Spanish language, I asked them what the cultural relevance and appeal of this millenary sacred text from the Maya Quiche people is. Once we were done with the discussion, I asked students to attribute a color to their reading experience of the *Popol Vuh*. After a rapid-fire session in which they named their respective colors without further explanation, I gave them the opportunity to elaborate on why they picked the colors they picked. This exercise not only allowed them to connect at the

sensorial level with their own experience as readers but also at the emotional level, as it was revealed in their explanations for the colors they picked.

Heart landscapes

- ❖ Remind students that the classroom is a safe space for exploration of ideas, for the use of the imagination, and for vulnerably and boldly connecting with their own selves and with their teacher and classmates – The simple assertion of the safety of the space of the classroom makes an enormous difference in students' sense of confidence and their willingness to take risks. This practice can be a lifeline for classes on the heritage learners' track. I've had students share painful migration familial stories and their impact in their relationship with the Spanish language only because they felt safe in doing so! I always make sure to thank students who risk being vulnerable in the classroom.

Exercise: Ask students to describe with an image in nature their own emotional experience during a courageous and difficult classroom conversation – Have students pick an image in nature that best expresses what they are feeling during a classroom conversation fraught with difficult feelings (for example, after a discussion on issues of racial justice). Coach students who express resistance in the form of “not knowing” what their image is or in using statements such as “I think...” to get back to the realm of emotion. You can do this by kindly stating that you will get back to them at the end of the round and/ or by coaching them into awareness that “I think...” is a statement from the mind rather than from the heart. This simple exercise can function as an education in awareness of one's emotional experience.

Spiritual landscapes

- ❖ By inviting the whole of the person into the adventure of learning, we can promote education as a humanizing process that makes us more attuned with the complexity, beauty, and pain of the world – In a 1973 address, Pedro Arrupe, S.J., powerfully stated that the “prime educational objective” of Jesuit education “must be to form men-and-women-for-others” ([see address here](#)). Educating young people “for others” is inviting the spiritual realm into the learning experience. This is expressed as a yearning for connectedness with others and the world irrespective of a student's religious or non-religious background. Being for and with others implies standing up to injustice and promoting values of generosity and equity in everything we do. Additionally, teaching from the heart fosters educational equity by creating an opening for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to come to their own and find their voices and their sense of place in the university setting. It also does so by creating classrooms that are safe spaces for vulnerable and courageous engagements between students from different backgrounds and levels of privilege.

Exercise: Hold a colloquy that functions as a temporal interruption of the normal academic compass in your class – These colloquies are intentional conversations inspired by the model of Ignatian Conversation. They aim at

encouraging participants to pause, reflect, and deeply connect with each other from a place of vulnerability. This highly structured method of communal engagement offers a powerful tool for approaching classroom conversations on difficult topics. For colloquies to be successful, it is important to lay out clear instructions in advance (including the main topic of the conversation, prereading materials, and ground rules for engagement). The main attributes of Ignatian Conversation provide the ground rules for this type of engagement: attentive listening, finding the good in what others are saying, handling disagreements respectfully, and giving the conversation the necessary time ([click here for more on Ignatian Conversation.](#)) Assigning a reflective post-colloquy assignment can be helpful in terms of focusing student attention. The teacher acts as facilitator and vulnerable participant who guides students through moments of discomfort, emotional difficulty, or simply allows for shared silence when needed.