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Crafting crosswords: A cruciverbalist approach to Paul's letters

A successful classroom teaching tactic that can be replicated by other instructors

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The context: This activity is deployed in an intro course on the Pauline Epistles in a secular state university, near the end of the semester. It is applicable in a variety of contexts and for multiple topics in religion, theology, and biblical studies.

The pedagogical purpose: My goal in designing this project is to encourage students to think thematically about a critical issue in the Pauline corpus and to learn to communicate their depth of research in a medium beyond the argumentative essay. Poetic, terse, and creative communication of a complex set of issues is a key analytical skill that this assignment inculcates by constraining students' mode of expression to particular poetic form: the crossword puzzle. The tactic requires students to accomplish the research that stand behind most essays, but also to carefully consider the form of their mode of communication, the aesthetics of their presentations, and connections between Paul, other ancient literatures, and the modern world.

Description of the strategy: The assignment asks students to prepare a crossword puzzle of twenty clues, each related to a theme native to Paul's letters or critical discourse on them. Each clue is accompanied by a footnote that cites either a specific Pauline text, a scholarly resource, or another relevant piece of information that contributes to the narrative of the puzzle. Students are required to take two main factors into consideration when crafting their projects: they must (a) demonstrate familiarity with the rhetoric, design, and poetics of

crosswords; and (b) demonstrate through their clues, answers, and puzzle design a deep knowledge of Paul's letters, his life, ancient epistolography, relevant historical issues, other characters in Paul's letters and their reception, and/or relevant secondary literature, based around a specific pre-negotiated theme. Students are not given a template for designing the form of the crossword (although this could be done), but are encouraged to experiment with online crossword generating software, Microsoft Excel, or forms of manually produced puzzles. (See: <https://bit.ly/XpPIMd>, <https://bit.ly/2ID5TSa>, <https://bit.ly/2w9mnJB>). I include links to tutorial videos and essays on the poetics of crossword by Will Shortz and others. In the future, I will ask students to write a paragraph summarizing the narrative of their puzzle and reflecting upon the experience of its production.

Why it is effective: This assignment requires that students both undertake the classic forms of research and investigation central to humanities learning and to learn to communicate in a new and pliable medium, forcing them to consider the presentation of their knowledge in an organised, creative, and engaging manner. Crosswords are complex thematic and creative poetic forms of narrative communication; working with a new medium obliges students to approach their research on Paul's letters from new directions and to carefully consider their ability to communicate their research in appropriate ways prescribed by the medium.

Crosswords are multimodal objects that require design in terms of semiotic content and visual aesthetics, providing students a hands-on assignment in a literary discipline. I have found that the cruciformity of Paul's theology lends itself to cruciverbalist expression.