

MEETING OTHERS, SEEING MYSELF

Experiential Pedagogies in Interfaith Studies

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A Muslim undergraduate chokes back tears as she tells a group of twenty classmates, faculty, and staff about being verbally and physically attacked while wearing a hijab. Her hair now falls around her shoulders because she feels unsafe covering it in public. She explains how painful it is to be afraid to do something that had felt to her like *home*, and how painful it is to face criticism within her Muslim community for *not* wearing the hijab.¹ She is heartbroken, and, as we listen quietly, our hearts break open in sympathy for her.

Experiences like these, alongside the escalation of religiously motivated hate crimes since the 2016 presidential election, fuel our sense of urgency to promote a culture of pluralism, in which social differences are not feared and hated but valued as resources for solving human problems.² Diversity is a fact of American life, and, as educators in religious studies, we believe that equipping young people to engage constructively and collaboratively with those who differ from them is the only realistic way forward.

When we began our teaching careers we adopted the traditional stance of our academic discipline: we focused on teaching *about* unfamiliar religious ideas, practices, objects, and stories, with a neutral attitude toward particular religious norms and truth claims. Students can develop this sort

of *religious literacy* at arm's length and from the neck up, within the confines of a classroom. But we changed our approach after we each completed a weeklong faculty-development seminar titled "Teaching Interfaith Understanding," cosponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core. We were inspired by the emerging field of interfaith studies, which promotes both religious and *interfaith literacy*. The latter involves not just knowledge but also *attitudes* necessary to engage positively with religious others. The basic difference between a religious studies approach and an interfaith studies approach is that the latter is more embodied, engaged, affective, and integrative. It asks students to encounter "others" directly, both individually and at unfamiliar religious sites; to be moved emotionally by these encounters; to strive not just to understand others on their own terms but also to use concepts and resources from other religions to think with; and to connect the world of the classroom with the worlds outside it, both on and off campus. Interfaith studies has the explicit goal of promoting pluralism as a social norm. Thus, in our classrooms, we profess that religious differences are not merely to be learned but also *appreciated* or *valued*.

GOALS OF THE INTERFAITH STUDIES CLASSROOM

Reflexivity, Empathy, and Humility

Interfaith studies promotes not merely "objective" knowledge but also the dispositions of reflexivity, empathy, and humility. In social research, "reflexivity" means recognizing that *who* does the research affects which questions are asked, how they are explored, and how results are interpreted. It is particularly salient in ethnography, where the researcher becomes closely involved in the society and culture studied.³ Our tacit assumptions usually go unnoticed until we encounter contexts in which they no longer apply. Reflexivity requires one first to describe one's "social location"—for example, race, sex, gender, age, socioeconomic class, education level, religious background (or lack thereof), ethnic and cultural heritages, and regional upbringing. Then one considers how these factors shape one's perceptions of others. Finally, reflexivity requires authentic encounters between researchers and informants, in which researchers share themselves and their findings with informants, who are considered valuable

collaborators in the research and writing process. We know, having been influenced by feminist and postcolonial studies, that there is no fully objective “view from nowhere” from which to study cultural phenomena such as religions.⁴ We are all situated somewhere, and we each approach our studies from particular perspectives. We know too that the personal is political, so our teaching praxis attends to the ways that different forms of power and privilege affect relationships within and between groups.

We ask students to reflect on their own social locations and the ways their backgrounds shape the perspectives and assumptions they bring to class. We demonstrate reflexivity by situating ourselves amid the complexities of postmodern religion in North America. Suárez was raised Catholic, ordained as a minister in the United Church of Christ, and later embraced Reform Judaism. Hickey was raised in mainline Protestant churches, briefly embraced fundamentalist Pentecostalism, and is now ordained as a priest of Sōtō Zen Buddhism, which she has practiced for more than thirty years. Our students are diverse in multiple ways (race, class, sexual orientation, and so on), though the majority are Christians of various denominations.

In addition to teaching reflexivity, we work to foster *empathy*. This entails imagining oneself in the place of others in order to understand them more fully, which first requires one to awaken to one’s tendency to assume that one’s own truths apply universally. Empathy enables us to understand accurately the viewpoints and reasoning of others, and, in the words of Linda Elder and Richard Paul, “to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own.”⁵ It is associated with humility: remembering and accepting that we can be wrong, even though we want to believe we are right.

Intellectual and cultural humility means recognizing that one’s own perspective or knowledge is limited: developing what Elder and Paul describe as “sensitivity to circumstances in which one’s native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively” and acknowledging honestly one’s own biases, prejudices, and limitations. “Intellectual humility depends on recognizing that one should not claim more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one’s beliefs.”⁶

Reflexivity, empathy, and humility must temper critical inquiry. We want students to challenge others' assumptions, to question biases in various sources of information, and to notice whose interests are being served in particular situations and whose are not. But critique can be destructive when it lacks self-awareness or is not modulated by kindness. At its best, interfaith studies can help us learn to "get over ourselves"—that is, to transcend our egocentricity and small-mindedness for the sake of meaningful relationships. A capacity for self-forgetting frees us to be more fully present with others and open to them.

Pluralism

These dispositions foster pluralism. In *Sacred Ground*, Eboo Patel, drawing on the work of Diana Eck and Harvard's Pluralism Project, observes, "Where diversity is a fact, pluralism is an achievement . . . it means building strong bonds between people from different backgrounds." A pluralistic society is one "characterized by respect for people's religious (and other) identities, positive relationships between people of different religious backgrounds, and common action for the common good."⁷ These goals seem to us consistent with the goals and values of education in the liberal arts and sciences. Yet liberal education and *liberating* education are not exactly the same. The liberal arts and sciences teach students how to think as historians, scientists, sociologists, and religionists. A liberating education trains students not only to be able to think within the frameworks of different disciplines but also to be transformed—by seeing the world from the perspectives of others, especially those who are marginalized.

Some of our students will begin and complete our courses holding exclusivist religious beliefs, and they are free to do so. But we hope to nudge all of our students toward the understanding that each person's position is but one position, not *the only possible position* one might adopt. We also want to persuade students that people who differ from us have something useful to teach: not just about themselves but about ourselves. We must allow ourselves to be changed by encounters with religious others, by hearing their stories, practicing dialogue, and being pragmatic about the fact that that we will encounter challenges and difficulties as we forge new relationships.

TOOLS FOR THE INTERFAITH STUDIES CLASSROOM

We used the following three activities to engage students in cultivating reflexivity, empathy, and humility as they also develop their capacity for critical analysis. The first is an individual, contemplative exercise involving a Buddhist moral precept; the second is a contemplative dialogue; the third involves one or more visits to an unfamiliar religious site.

Precept Exercise

The precept exercise is most appropriate for courses on Buddhism, but it could be adapted for any course in which the ethical systems of major Asian religions are discussed.⁸ Most forms of Buddhism emphasize five fundamental moral prohibitions against killing, taking what is not given (stealing), engaging in false speech, misusing sexuality, and using intoxicants. The number of precepts undertaken by ordained Buddhists varies by school, but these five are broadly applicable to ordained and lay people in most traditions. In the meditation-oriented schools, moral conduct (*śīla*) is considered the foundation for meditation (*samadhi*), which leads to liberating wisdom (*prajñā*).

Hickey introduces these precepts in the context of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, then invites the class to discuss both literal and metaphoric meanings they can have. For example, although the traditional meaning of "not killing" is to not murder, might there be other ways we "kill" people? Could one regard gossip as a form of stealing, as taking and sharing information not freely given? In what ways do people engage in false speech? Can video games and cell phones be considered intoxicants?

Students choose one of the five precepts and commit to observing their lives through the lens of that precept for a week. Hickey finds that sustained focus on a single precept prompts deeper inquiry and reflection than would be possible if trying to practice more than one.⁹ The assignment instructions say:

This is an exercise not just in thinking *about* Buddhist . . . ideas and practices; it is an exercise in using them to think *with*. You do not need to accept any Buddhist doctrine to do this exercise; you simply need to be aware of your own thoughts and actions. The goals . . . are to understand Buddhist ethical practices better, and to become more aware of your thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and their effects on other beings. You need not change your behavior,

but simply observe it. Increased awareness is part of liberal education, and you can achieve it whether or not you actually modify your conduct.

The instructions propose questions for students to consider. For example:

Avoid killing or harming sentient beings.

Have you harmed any sentient being, by aggressive behavior or avoidance? By things you say or your facial expressions or body language? Intentionally or unintentionally? By laughter? In the past 24 hours have you eaten anything? What? How did it get on your plate? Do you know or have you considered who planted or cultivated it, harvested or butchered it, cleaned and cooked it?

Students keep a daily journal and begin to notice their habits of mind, speech, and action more clearly and pay more attention to the consequences of their choices. They develop new insights about themselves and about Buddhist methods for cultivating the virtues of harmlessness, beneficence, and equanimity. In their reflection paper on this activity, they are asked to discuss the following: “How do meditation and moral conduct produce Buddhist wisdom? How have these practices helped you to understand how religious disciplines work in people’s lives? If [possible], say something about how these have helped you to understand or to think differently about your ‘self’ and your relationships with ‘others.’”

Some students, contemplating the precept of refraining from killing or harming sentient beings, reflect upon their perfectionism and habit of constantly criticizing themselves and others. Others grapple with their love of hunting or their impulses to squash insects found inside their homes. Some reflect on the origins of consumer products and food in ways they have not done before.

These reflections are confidential unless someone discloses something suggesting imminent harm to themselves or others. (This has occurred only once, thus far.) Hickey offers feedback but does not judge what authors say they did or didn’t do. She simply assigns a “check,” “check-plus,” or “check-minus,” according to how seriously students seem to take the assignment, how clearly and well they write about it, and how thoughtfully they engage with relevant course readings. These papers are enjoyable to read and open opportunities to communicate with students more personally than is typical in the classroom. The exercise also helps students use Buddhism to think with and to develop a more visceral and appreciative

understanding of religious ethics, important elements of an interfaith studies approach.

Careful Conversation

A “Careful Conversation” is a structured, contemplative dialogue of about one hour, between a student and someone who differs in religious orientation.¹⁰ The exercise, designed by Sid Brown of the University of the South (Sewanee), can be adapted for use in any comparative course, but conversation partners should identify with different religions, not different subgroups of the same religion. Those who are nonreligious should find partners who are devoutly religious, in order to emphasize the difference between them. Participants are frequently surprised by how much they have in common with people they perceive as religious others. Students write reflective papers before and after this encounter, which help them to both clarify and appreciate their own positions more deeply and to appreciate other possibilities.

Hickey sometimes invites students to find their own partners. In other cases she has paired English-speaking students in her university’s undergraduate college with international students in its English Language Institute. This gives international students an opportunity to practice conversation skills and builds relationships across the two academic units. Hickey’s students write a preliminary, two-page reflection addressing questions such as “What do you expect? What do you want to remember to do during the conversation? What are you most excited about? What are you most anxious about?” They are asked to review all their notes and identify something specific that “interests, intrigues, delights” them about any of the religions covered in the course to that point.

The Careful Conversation itself is an intensive, contemplative dyad. In an environment free of distractions, the partners read the instructions aloud to each other and take turns answering questions about early memories of their religion, worldview, or ethical system, both pleasant and painful; the first time they became aware of religious difference; what they appreciate most about their own tradition or values; something they appreciate in another religion or ethical system; and what they would like “never said again” about their religion or worldview. Participants are encouraged to give mindful attention to their breathing, physical sensations, and emotions; to maintain steady eye contact; to refrain from interrupting; to answer “*from*

your emotions, not your intellect” [emphasis in original]—usually with the first thing that comes to mind; to safeguard each other’s confidentiality; and to wait patiently through periods of silence, even awkward, extended ones. Each participant is free to answer in whatever way she wants and to decline to answer any question. “Whether you think what the person is saying is wrong, right, hateful, or weird, whether you think the person’s experience is just like yours or completely different from yours, whether you feel enthusiastic or saddened, *your whole job as listener is to listen deeply and seek to understand and empathize, without interrupting,*”¹¹

Directions for the four-page, post-conversation reflection paper ask students to discuss what made the exercise memorable and worthwhile and how it relates to other material we have been discussing in class.

In one case, a devout American Catholic woman met with a Muslim international student. The Catholic student had earlier made an in-class presentation about the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and the holiday Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice). During her research for that project, she found a survey by the Pew Research Center showing that “40% of Americans think that a great deal or a fair amount of Muslim Americans are extremists. In addition, while 48% of Muslims report that they feel Americans are friendly toward them, still 28% say that people act suspicious of them, and 22% have been called offensive names.” She reported that her conversation partner “made a point to keep telling me over and over” that

just because there are a few violent people does not mean that the whole religion is bad. . . . “Our religion is good, but there are bad people, too.” She then said that many people refer to Muslims as terrorists. What hurt my heart the most was the fact that she was struggling to find that word. . . . I had to aid her in saying “terrorist,” and as it came off of my tongue, I felt a pain in my chest. I did not want to say that word to her, because I did not want to bring her any of the pain that I knew must come from hearing it.¹²

The student’s attention to her own emotions and the physical sensations associated with them, as well as her intellectual understanding of research data about Islamophobia, is precisely the sort of integrative, embodied approach to learning that interfaith studies entails. Her willingness to remain emotionally present in the conversation despite her own discomfort, in order to forge a meaningful connection, is what makes this exercise a contemplative practice rather than a merely informational interview. The partners found agreement in wishing “people would understand that in our

respective traditions, women *are* honored and valued.”¹³ Months later, in a public forum, the Catholic student said the exercise helped her to appreciate Islam better but also her own Catholicism, by prompting her to think about what she loves best in it.

The Careful Conversation is similar to an exercise Suárez leads in Anthropology of Religion, called “Representing Others.” Its purposes are to help students learn to listen closely and ethically and to present their partners to others in such a way that the people being described can recognize themselves in the descriptions. “Honesty” and “responsibility” are the watchwords, as students interpret their partners’ spoken stories, translate them into writing, and evaluate what seems to be most important to relay to their classmates.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Suárez’s courses World Religions, Anthropology of Religion, and Women, Religion, and Ethnography all require some level of ethnographic field research. In introductory classes, Suárez wants students to get a taste of ethnography, so they must visit a religious site that is not their own. Suárez sets up all the field-site options in advance, engaging contacts who will answer students’ questions. Students consider the following points and write a “First Impressions” paper.

- What did you observe? What did you hear? What did you smell?
- How did you feel?
- How were your expectations different from what you actually experienced? What excited you? Made you anxious?
- As you walked in, what did you notice [about] the space: its decorations, art, interior design, furniture or lack thereof, religious symbols? Was it inviting? Off-putting? Neutral? Were you greeted as you entered? Were there signs to make it easy to find things? Did it feel that visitors were welcome? Or are only practitioners able to function in the space?
- What was the neighborhood like? (Race/class/ethnicity evident in the neighborhood)
- *If you are a visual art major:* What kind of architecture is the building/space? How did you feel about the space, before you entered

it? Was it inviting, off-putting, or neutral? Why do you think you felt this way?

- How did leave-taking occur? Was there a fellowship time after the ritual/worship? Were you easily able to introduce yourself to the leader(s)? How accessible did they appear to be? Can you make an appointment to meet with them?
- Was the worshiping community amiable or distant? Did you feel that returning would be welcomed? Resented? Received neutrally?
- What are you learning about this tradition's practices that you couldn't have gotten just from reading books about it?*
- What was the theme of the religious leader's talk/teaching/sermon?*(at least half a page)
- How did you decide to pick this religious tradition to study?*

Questions marked with an asterisk were required to be discussed in the paper.

In Anthropology of Religion, an undergraduate class, students make several visits to a religious site outside their own experience and write three papers. Each has a particular focus: rituals, teachings, and community-building practices in the chosen congregation. Each student decides which religious community she wants to visit and makes her own contacts before attending for the first time. The anthropologist Ruth Behar's work on being a "vulnerable observer" has most influenced Suárez's own ethnography and her creation of assignments that move students beyond *describing* "others" to *engaging* both themselves and others, seeking similarities, learning to respect differences, and learning about themselves through such encounters.¹⁵

Ethnographic work requires not only book learning but also active engagement with others. Studying textbooks can help students understand intellectually the specific requirements for participating in a particular ritual, for example, but it is through presence in a religious service—of any tradition—that student ethnographers truly begin to appreciate the power of religious experience. One can read about the Ummah (community of Muslims), but when one sees people standing shoulder to shoulder in a mosque, with no distinctions on the basis of race or socioeconomic status, and praying with their entire bodies, one gains a more visceral understanding of what the Ummah means to Muslims. It doesn't matter

whether one is able to join the prayer line or simply observes. After describing a particular ritual in detail, students compare it to another with which they are more familiar, either from their own religious tradition or from American civil religion (e.g., oaths of office, public memorial rites, military ceremonies).

For the second paper, students study the chosen community's ethical and philosophical or theological teachings and discuss them with religious leaders at the field site. Again, they compare these concepts to those that are more personally familiar. Through comparison, students often begin to see similar ethical imperatives across traditions. For example, the "greater jihad" of Islam—that is, the spiritual struggle against *shirk* (hubris)—can be compared to the expectation in Judaism that humans will live God's *mitzvot*.¹⁶ Both traditions stress human free will, the goodness of human nature, and our finitude and imperfection compared to God's eternality and perfection. Such comparisons help students to develop and demonstrate the key dispositions of intellectual humility and empathy.

In the third paper, students explain how the religious groups they are exploring understand the nature of community and how they create spaces in which community can flourish. How does a Buddhist sangha help its members to cultivate greater wisdom and compassion together? How is the Mormon practice of wearing sacred undergarments similar to the Sikh practice of wearing the "Five Ks"—*kesh* (uncut hair, sometimes wrapped in a turban), *kara* (a steel bracelet), *kanga* (a wooden comb), *kaccha* (cotton undergarment, also spelled "*kachh*" or "*kachera*"), and *kirpan* (a steel sword)? How do these physical practices reinforce communal identity and commitment?

Through these papers, students begin work on a final project in which they explain how this experiential approach to learning promotes pluralism and interfaith cooperation. The learning outcome, to "demonstrate appreciative understanding of religious others," is achieved holistically through a combination of textual study and ethnographic research. Reflexivity and humility help to form a vulnerable observer, who can see and appreciate parts of herself that she first perceived in others.

Assessment

One might wonder how to assess the dispositions of reflexivity, empathy, and humility. Which behaviors demonstrate these qualities? Three of the

“VALUE rubrics” (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities can be helpful. The Intercultural Knowledge and Competence rubric establishes benchmarks for cultural self-awareness, empathy, and openness. The Integrative Learning rubric measures how students connect experience and knowledge, make connections across disciplines or perspectives, and transfer learning from one context to another. The Global Learning rubric measures self-awareness, perspective-taking, and the application of knowledge to complex problems.¹⁷

Another way to assess these dispositions might be to create an initial survey with open-ended questions to measure “flexibility, open-mindedness, appreciation of difference, and a tolerance for ambiguity.”¹⁸ Students can then keep course blogs or journals, in which they reflect upon their changing dispositions, their challenges, and new discoveries. Student participation in interfaith organizations and activities can be observed directly. Case studies, used effectively in most business schools, can enable interfaith studies instructors to see how students reason, develop solutions to problems, and demonstrate the qualities we want them to cultivate. Richard Paul and Linda Elder’s work on “critical thinking competency standards” suggests ways to develop learning outcomes that measure both intellectual humility and empathy.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Liberal arts education has come under attack in recent years by those who argue that colleges should provide practical training in skills that will net graduates high-paying jobs. Whatever jobs our students do assume, they will work alongside people whose cultures, values, and assumptions differ from their own, and they must be able to forge productive working relationships amid such differences. We have seen the integrative, embodied pedagogical strategies we describe here transform students not just into better thinkers and writers but also into more compassionate, wise human beings. We believe this is what business-minded people would call a “value-added” approach to learning. We do want our students to be able to demonstrate basic religious literacy and to understand and apply the theories and methods of our academic discipline. Because the majority of our students do not go on to become religious studies majors, however, we

want even more for them to become better citizens: to question religious rhetoric, to challenge toxic theologies, to forge meaningful connections across lines of difference, to stand in solidarity with minorities when they are targeted, to interrupt hate speech and violence. We hope the interfaith studies classrooms we are creating will empower students to uphold our country's founding principle of liberty and justice for all.