The Tenth Anniversary of the AAR Excellence in Teaching Award

A Pedagogy of Incompleteness
Tina Pippin, Agnes Scott College

Literacy and Resistance: On Introducing Religion
Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College

The Pedagogical Value of Our Existential “Why?”
Timothy Renick, Georgia State University

Reaffirming Teaching as an Act of Composition
Patricia O’Connell Killen, Pacific Lutheran University

Cultivating a Pedagogy of Possibility: The Moral Wisdom and Ethical Practice of Teaching
Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Vanderbilt University

Ignatius, Dewey, and Me: How Ignatian and Experiential Pedagogies Have Transformed My Teaching
Fred Glennon, LeMoyne College

The Tenth Annual Meeting in Montréal, the AAR will celebrate the tenth anniversary of its teaching award. The idea for the award began in the late 1990s under the leadership of then-AAR executive director Barbara DeConcini, and the Teaching and Learning Committee (Chair Thomas Peterson, Michel Desjardins, Richard Freund, Fred Glennon, Yudit Greenberg, Barbara Patterson, and Kathleen Talvacchia). These leaders wanted to start a larger conversation about teaching by giving national recognition to a teacher in the field of religion or theology. The committee generated the criteria for excellence in teaching in order to shape an award of note. They asked nominees in different fields in religion and theology to articulate their pedagogical concerns, methods, theories, and practices. Nominees make a case for what they consider good teaching; they demonstrate what college, university, and theology school professors do to disseminate knowledge, engage in critical thinking, and formulate questions from the disciplines.

There is no detailed archival history of the beginnings of this award, but the basic idea was to raise up and honor the thing most of us in academic jobs do most of the time: teach.

The winners of the award are Tina Pippin (2000), Eugene Gallagher (2001), William Placher (2002), Janet Walton (2003), Timothy Renick (2004), Zayn Kassam (2005), Patricia O’Connell Killen (2006), Stacey Floyd-Thomas (2007), Fred Glennon (2008), and Kwok Pui Lan (2009). A representative group wrote articles for this Spotlight on Teaching issue, updating their teaching statements and sharing their influences and continued passion for teaching religion. The authors show that scholarship is not limited solely to the disciplines and that there are important intersections with what happens in the classroom. The conversations here are interdisciplinary — from different fields in religion and theology and across disciplines of education, community engagement, and others.

The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion is cosponsoring a workshop session with eight of the award recipients on Saturday morning at the Annual Meeting. Registration information is in the Program Book. Join the continued conversation about teaching and the tenth year celebration!

AAR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARD WINNERS
2000 — Tina Pippin
2001 — Eugene Gallagher
2002 — William Placher
2003 — Janet Walton
2004 — Timothy Renick
2005 — Zayn Kassam
2006 — Patricia O’Connell Killen
2007 — Stacey Floyd-Thomas
2008 — Fred Glennon
2009 — Kwok Pui Lan

In the Next Issue of Spotlight on Teaching:
Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies: Pedagogical Challenges and Strategies
I plines are interrelated for me and concretely. When anyone asks me what I teach, I usually reply, "religion and culture, women’s studies, and human rights." These three areas or disciplines are interrelated for me and concretely emerged in the form of a new major in our religious studies department. "Religion and Social Justice," in 2000. Through engagement with local community partners, my students and I are able to experience the theories we study in the classroom. There is a human rights framework to our social justice major, and an abundance of human rights issues in our nation, state, city, and campus. Ira Shor and Jamie Buratin (1996) point out that "the concept of transformation is not only the classroom but extends outside of it" (33). I teach in multiple contexts and the best moments for me are when the theories and practices of the classroom invade the outside community and vice versa. Maxine Greene believes "that teaching involves a creation of situations — learning situations — in which people are moved to release and ask their own questions, then move beyond and think in terms of the unexplored, of what is possible and not just what’s predictable." (Hatton, 61). I am finding out that the spaces and places of learning provide essential opportunities for liberatory education. The most transformative moments for me are in the intersections, when the conversational and community partners and justice issues connect with the lived experiences of my students and me. These crossings can be unpredictable, chaotic, disturbing, enlightening, and challenging. As an educator these are the spaces in which I best continue my education — as I listen to the insights and differing opinions and struggle to determine what is "just" and to find both the outside instigator and my students. What informs my teaching? I am including a "short list" of books and resources I must draw upon in the bibliography at the end of this article. I am an activist educator. What this means is that I strive for justice both in and outside the classroom. I am committed to working toward a liberal, democratic classroom environment in which we respect each other and are all engaged in taking risks in the learning process. This liberal process requires of my students and me open minds and hearts, a willingness to question and reflect. We are both teachers and students in this learning process, even though we have different roles. I believe the questions are most often more important than the answers. As a postmodernist I do not believe in capital “T” Truth, but rather in truths, plural, and that we each hold important truths. So I see no single right way to read a biblical text or determine a theoretical or ethical issue. I resist the "banking method" of teaching in which the expert professor holds all the Truth and dispenses it at will to passive students, opening their heads and pouring into it so that the latter can then be returned, with interest, on tests. I believe in the unity of mind/body and that we don’t learn from the "book up." I believe in embodied learning, and this sometimes requires that we get out of our seats and move in the classroom. I draw from the mundane, the mainstream, the radical educational theories and practices. My commitment is to popular community models of teaching and learning. I am concerned with the theater of the oppressed in problem-solving and delving deeper into the issues. I am happiest in my classes when I am able to focus on experiential learning, a way of learning based on experiencing different spaces, venues, hands-on issues. For example, in my first-year seminar, "The Bible and Human Rights in Atlanta," my students and I are travelers in the land of Atlanta, encountering and engaging with the marginalized and marginalized issues that face our city and culture. From this lens we look at our state, the nation, and the world. And we engage texts and traditions that speak in a variety of ways to these issues. The teen mothers in our co-mentoring group, STRONG Sistas (now in its thirteenth year), make these connections between the segregated school system and their own future possibilities in an exercise about personal introspection and empowerment (see Pollack). And the English as Second Language classes we began offering to staff two years ago discover ways to converse with an immigration lawyer in a communally written play for a Forum Theater exercise (see Boal). They are boundary-crossing moments for me that shake the core of my everyday classroom teaching and remind me that teaching is about building relationships — and, from there, a more just society.

My teachers have been my students and colleagues, especially the Wabash Center, but also the folk school movements, labor movements, and any movement for positive social transformation in society. The starting point for these movements is the knowledge and situation of the people who are oppressed, victimized, underrepresented, or marginalized. These community-based models of education make their main focus problem-solving and social change. They are all about creating a more just society. These movements struggle against racism, classism, sexism, gender oppression, and all the rest. They show us how the work is done over what Miles Horton has termed the “long haul” that is, they start with the “is” and move toward the “ought to be” (Jacobs, 144). Popular education models for teaching for change are the biggest influence on my teaching. Freire is cited as the founder of the theory and practice of popular education, which can be defined simply as follows: “popular education is political education for everybody.” Simply put, popular education is people coming together to discuss problems of power and inequality, and learning how to confront these problems collectively (“Project South, Nucleo Sur, South and South, et al.,” in Learning to Learn). Education is embodied, challenging, and most of all relational. Whether I am teaching a course in human rights or biblical studies or ethics or feminisms, I have found that pop ed theory and methods help create a framework of mutuality, accountability and transparency by engaging all in the room in the learning process. I glean from community groups such as Project South, United for a Fair Economy, INCFTE Women of Color Against Violence, the Highlander Center, and many others, and also K–12 educational materials, especially Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change. I continue to engage this work not only in the classroom but in our department work with our student leadership group (Safe Agnes Non-Sexist Agnes). I have found that community groups help me in my understanding of economic and social justice and in helping young people reach beyond where they are. And that’s the greatest gift you can get, it seems to me” (Hatton, 64). I am slowly learning to celebrate this incompleteness, that I now have a course completely “down” and that there are always cracks and crevices for the new to emerge, even in the harder, bumbling times. This incompleteness is greatest when I have spent years thinking, I know something and then find out that I really didn’t know much at all. My most recent education occurred right after graduation this year, when I organized another “alternative community” day to work with a group of friends and Debra Spurley, who has worked as a custodian at the college for almost forty-four years. I was able to get another friend of ours who chairs the English Department to join us in a morning of pulling trash and recycling from the dorm that Debra works in. Della was one of the founders of the union for facilities staff on campus, and has been the historian, wise woman, and persistent, creative force for our campus living wage campaigns. I have known Della for twenty years. I have also heard for years that Monday was her busiest day of the week. I thought I knew all this until I started pulling trash bags. All the teaching and reading I’d done in economic justice and the limit of the money I heard Della speak in my classes and at our living wage meetings and rallies, and all the popular education workshops I’d attended, even my own background of working in tobacco fields when I was younger — all this added up to incomplete knowledge. My faculty colleague and I were stunned by the experience; just a morning of pulling trash turned out to be one of my most important educational experiences. I learned the human cost of our campus “recyclemania” and the enormity and impossibility of the job when staff is on and when they are mandated. And I learned that I didn’t have such good humor and easy spirit as Della did about leaky bags and trash and recycling, We all have a certain know-ledge about economic (in)justice and about the effects of poverty wages and the under-valuing of (women’s) work (at a Christian-founded women’s college). How will this experience affect my teaching next semester? How can I better provide the spaces and experiences for this kind of knowledge and conversations about these issues to be a part of our teaching? And in what ways can this knowing lead to transformative action and move from the individual to the systemic? Perhaps this is the top agenda item for the next half of my teaching life.

Bibliography


See PIPPIN, page viii
Literacy and Resistance: On Introducing Religion

Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College

MY ORIGI NAL statement centered on the promotion of “religious literacy,” particularly among those students—by far the majority of those I teach—who are taking a single course in the study of religion to satisfy general education requirements. Stephen Prothero has now made a similar case much more fully and urgently in Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn’t. In my reading, Prothero’s book should begin a conversation rather than end it. He offers a lot of detail about what beginning college students do not know and sketches out a historical account of how that has come to be. But, aside from very broad suggestions that both high school students and college students need to take at least one course about religion, he does not venture very far into just what such courses should look like. So the question becomes how to design that one course that would give most college students their only opportunity to develop some minimal religious literacy. (On course design in general, the comprehensive treatment I find most helpful is by J. Dee Fink.) At several points, Prothero suggests that he has “found” knowledge that is “there” in the Bible and the history of Christianity, particularly in the United States, should definitely be part of such a course. It is not immediately clear, however, precisely how the transmission of such factual knowledge can become the animating principle of a college-level introductory course (see Fink; Gallagher 2009, 208–221).

Questions can be posed about the centrali- ty of factual knowledge from various angles. Jonathan Z. Smith, for example, has argued strongly against the very notion of “coverage,” and suggested that introductory courses should focus on arguments about the interpretations of specific issues or problems. Such a focus, he adds, will also help students develop their capacities for thinking, writing, and speaking. On that score, at least, Smith has lots of company. Barbara Walvoord’s recent survey of the teaching of introductory courses in religion and theology (2005) highlights how frequently faculty members mention the development of their students’ critical thinking skills as their primary goal in teaching (see also). However, that students more frequently mention other goals as primary for them, especially the development of their own religious or “spiritual” sensibilities.

Thus, there are multiple factors that complicate the translation of Prothero’s general imperative that college students need to develop some sort of religious literacy into the actual design of courses that are likely to accomplish this general goal for them, for example, are broad situational factors, such as institutional missions (not only at religiously affiliated colleges), that impose heavy burdens on introductory courses that fulfill general education requirements. Also, faculty members articulate a wide array of goals for introductory courses, ranging from the delivery of specific information to the cultivation of specific skills. In addition, it is not at all clear that students come to introductory courses on the expectations of religious traditions interested in improving their own religious literacy.

Thus, while I still think that encouraging religious literacy is a good way of capturing my own students as well as Prothero’s and Walvoord’s students, has deepened my appreciation for just how difficult that process is when specific syllabi have to be crafted to meet such general goals. The wide variety of ways in which teachers actually design introductory courses, made particularly evident in the syllabi assembled by the AAR’s Syllabus Project (see www.aarweb.org/Programs/Syllabus_Project) and in the series of workshops sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to follow up the Walvoord study, only underlines that difficulty. I would hope, then, that the AAR centers on the momentary popularizing of various ideas about how to introduce the study of religion and what it should accomplish by making a space for sustained consideration of such issues in its regular programming. For many of us, the introductory course is a central teaching responsibility. Walvoord and Prothero show that it can be a central object of reflection and even research.

Some of the classroom phenomena that I’ve become more perplexed about can be gathered under the general heading of student resistance. That resistance can take a variety of forms: reluctance to subject one’s own concepts or tradition to academic scrutiny; unwillingness to conceive that certain types of actions might even be considered religious, or an inclination to treat certain religious traditions as objects of humor or derision, for example. A relatively recent essay about student motives for participating in or withdrawing from class discussion cast light on the form of resistance: what light is. Those results would seem to stand in some tension with the findings of both Walvoord and a recent UCLA Higher Education Research Study, which tend to cast students as relatively open-minded seekers (see Astin, et al.’s HERI report). At the very least, Carol Trost’s findings indicate that some students may not be so much seeking to develop the traditional religious sensibilities as they are seeking simply to express and confirm them, and, if possible, to reinforce them by converting others to their point of view. She reports that in her study “the main reason students gave for wanting to discuss a particular topic was that they held strong views on the subject and wished to convince others” (Trost, 46). Compounding that perspective was students’ tendency to see personal experience as the “only” source of legitimate knowledge and to receive challenges to their views as personal affronts. If those attitudes are as widely held as Trost suspects, it certainly complicates any efforts to get students to take seriously religious commitments other than their own, let alone to discuss them in class with the goal of constructing knowledge and arguments about them.

A second type of resistance involves the refusal to see as religious certain practices that admittedly departed from the mainstream, no matter what their proponents aver. In my experience, this crops up most frequently in discussions about sex and violence. My students, for example, find both the celibacy of the Shakers and the plural marriages of the early Mormons and controversial, yet at least a couple of students underline this sort of resistance. First, students appear to hold an unarticulated, pretheoretical understanding of religion that equates religion with the cognitive concept of “good” behavior as they implicitly understand it; hence “bad” behavior cannot be associated with religion; it must be something else. Proximity to this position is the assertion that actors like Hill and the author of the “Spiritual Manual” of the September 11 hijackers, when they claim to be motivated by foundational, authoritative scriptural texts, have somehow “manipulated,” or “taken out of context” the texts on which they rely (see Kippenberg and Seidensticker). Underlying this position, again, is the pretheoretical notion that “such stuff just can’t be religious.” Such expressions of opinion are difficult to cope with in the classroom precisely because they do not rise to the level of arguments. That is, their fundamental assumptions and premises remain unarticulated; their persuasiveness depends solely on association rather than the assembly, analysis, and interpretation of evidence, and their conclusions are presented as self-evident. Dale Martel has critiqued the implicit unarticulation of texts that she calls “skeptical views.” Countering the metaphors that por- tray texts as boxes that contain meaning that the skillful exegete can unpack or ignore, Martel notes, “by the interrogative, evidentiary reader, he offers instead the bracing slogan that ‘texts don’t mean; people mean with texts” (Martin, 31). Taken seriously, Martin’s slogan opens up the possibility that people can “mean with texts” in a variety of ways, some of which others may find challenging, difficult, or just plain wrong. But the burden of classroom discussion is always to have students articulate why any reading of any evidence is preferable to another; that is, to engage in argument. Martin’s argument about the reading of texts can also lead to a revised understanding of “religion” itself. Precisely because the range of readings of texts is limited only by human ingenuity, it follows, in Bruce Lincoln’s formulation, that “religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred, reversing the hierarchies established and progressive to the murderous, oppressive, and banal” (Lincoln, 6). So, a form of resistance that refuses to acknowledge certain practices of belief to be religious, even when their proponents assert that they are, is “good to think with” in the classroom precisely because it raises fundamental issues about how texts acquire meaning and what the status of religiousness is.

A third form of resistance occurs when students reflexively reproduce negative judgments of religious traditions that lie outside their personal experience of the mainstream. According to the perceptions given voice in this category are the frequently encountered assertion that Roman Catholics are distinct from “Christians,” the notion that rituals in traditions other than the student’s own involve the worship of “idols,” and the verdict that members of small, minority, or alternative religions, known popularly as “cucks,” are “evil” and should not. More than representing a failure of imagination, I’d say, such judgments reproduce, largely unthinkingly, powerful social efforts at boundary maintenance. By speaking on behalf of an implicit status quo, students end up reinforcing a variety of strategies that separate an “us” to which they implicitly belong from at least a couple of groups outside this category are the frequently encountered assertion that Roman Catholics are distinct from “Christians,” the notion that rituals in traditions other than the student’s own involve the worship of “idols,” and the verdict that members of small, minority, or alternative religions, known popularly as “cucks,” are “evil” and should not. More than representing a failure of imagination, I’d say, such judgments reproduce, largely unthinkingly, powerful social efforts at boundary maintenance. By speaking on behalf of an implicit status quo, students end up reinforcing a variety of strategies that separate an “us” to which they implicitly belong from at least a couple of groups...

I AM NOTivetelieve in discussion, argument, and learning, So, the challenge in responding to various forms of resistance is how to create opportunities for students to undertake complex and nuanced comparisons that both recognize complex patterns of similarities and differences and attempt to account for them. Such comparisons are the gateways through which learning in the liberal arts takes place.

In my thinking about how to respond to student resistance I’ve found some suggestions from Peter Elbow to be particularly helpful. Elbow taught both English and writing at a number of institutions and has an important voice in discussions of teaching and learning. He suggests that through the pervasively academic employment of a...
The Pedagogical Value of Our Existential “Why?”

Timothy Renick, Georgia State University

DURING MY INITIAL years in academia, I often felt alone in my struggles to establish a toe-hold for religious studies on my campus. I thought that I was toiling in isolation — engaging in issues that were the product of a history unique to my institution. What subsequent years have revealed to me is that I was anything but alone within our discipline. In a very real sense, teaching religious studies entails, by its very nature, a difficult and challenging dimension not affiliated with the teaching of, for example, history, biology, or English. Of those fields, no one is faculty, student, or administrator — asks why the field exists. No one imagines a modern university without those endeavors. The discipline of religious studies has never been so blessed. The field faces — and in some senses is defined by — an existential challenge: Why religious studies?

Some of the challenges come from without. As clearly evidenced by a recent multyear, Teagle Foundation-funded AAR study of the religious studies major that I led, many of us face pockets of faculty at our home institutions who, believing religion to be an antiquated holdover of premodern ways of thought, fiercely oppose devoting university resources to studying an allegedly dying and false phenomenon (see articles by the Teagle Working Group and the AAR). Others of us face colleagues who see the addition of religious studies courses as a threat not to prosettingly in the classroom. (The Texas state system is just now reintroducing religious studies programs following faculty backlash after decades of reliance on “Bible” — clergypersons paid for by Christian denominations — who were, until the practice was declared unconstitutional in the 1980s, employed to teach courses on religion.) Still others see the discipline as a luxury. Amid the current economic crisis, a number of schools are looking to trim or to discontinue religious studies programs, with well-established departments at institutions such as the University of Florida and Arizona State University in peril. While the public rationales for these budgetary decisions are never as blunt as the attacks of some of our less tactful colleagues, a familiar question nonetheless is implicit in each administrative proposal to trim a program: Why religious studies?

Other challenges come from within the discipline. D. G. Hart, a professor of church history, has argued that religious studies tends to portray itself on an aca-demic field of critical inquiry but that its existence and methods are inextricably tied to the field’s origins in Protestant campus ministries during the first part of the twentieth century: “As much as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation,” he writes (Hart, 10). Duke’s Stanley Hauerwas argues that “the creation of religious studies departments can be understood as the ongoing development of universities to provide legitimating knowledge for the study of religion” (Hauerwas, 60). For Hauerwas, articulate faculty falsely attempt to unite inherently unrelated phenomena under the artificial construct of “religion” and, in the name of maintaining neutrality, abdicates responsibility for teaching students what is genuinely true about God’s ways.

While in what follows I will not explicitly attempt to refute the criticisms of either secular critics of religious studies or of scholars of religious studies such as Hart and Hauerwas, I would like to suggest some alternate answers to the question of Why religious studies? Moreover I will argue that, rather than feel embarrassed or disconcerted by the field’s inability to conclusively answer the central question of its existence, those of us who teach in religious studies might better embrace the existential question as an integral aspect of our classroom pedagogy.

Students care about the study of religion.

One of several interesting findings in Barbara Waloowood’s 2008 study of undergraduate students in introductory religion courses was that college students genuinely care about spiritual issues and are increasingly pursuing matters of personal religious development. A 2005 study of 112,000 students by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA came to a similar conclusion: “Today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement, many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring meaning and purpose in life. They are also very engaged and involved in religion, reporting considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices” (Waloowood, 11).

While both Waloowood and the HERI study found that college-age students are often frustrated by a lack of opportunities to explore spiritual matters in college classrooms (56 percent of students said that their professors had not presented the opportunity to discuss the meaning of life, according to HERI), the very deficiency can be seen as a pedagogical opportunity for those of us who teach in the field of religious studies (see Astin, et al.). In light of such findings and faced with the challenge of creating an introductory world religions course for the core curriculum at Georgia State University, my department elected to structure the course around a set of fundamental questions asked by most college-age students. Where do we come from? Why do we live and die? Why is there suffering? Is violence justifiable? For each question, we selected primary sources from various world religions that offer provocative insights representative of the traditions in question. The goal was not to script the students’ answers to these basic questions of meaning (although we were certainly cognizant of the ways that the material chosen inherently shapes the discussion) but rather to provide a structured setting — assisted not only by an instructor, but by readings, writing assignments, and classmates — in which students might pursue their own thinking on the issues. The resulting course most assuredly does not address Hauerwas’s concerns about our discipline, but it does engage genuinely important issues not explored by any other offerings in the general curriculum. Indeed, efforts to fit explicit explorations of diverse religious perspectives on life’s central questions into other core courses (the college curriculum — history, sociology, even the increasingly secular field of philosophy) — seem strained and ad hoc. In religious studies, it comes naturally.

By the way, the course we added already is among the most highly demanded offerings in the university’s core curriculum, which leads me to a second point….

Students who care about what they study tend to be better learners.

A study recently released by the National Board of Economic Research has found that choices undergraduates make in selecting their courses and majors, and at the impacts that these choices have on their later professional lives (DeGiorgi, et al.). What students researched found will not surprise any of us who work with students on a day-to-day basis: students often make poor choices. The study focused on two major influences on students’ selection of classes and majors. One was the influence of peers — students who take an elective, for instance, primarily because their friends are taking the class or because a parent tells them to do so. The second was ability — students who take a class because they have an interest in and aptitude for the matter.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that students very often take classes because of the influence of others. We’ve all dealt with the pre-med student who is convinced he’s going to be a doctor like his dad even though he has never gotten higher than a “C” in any science class, or the student who insists on following her friends into business classes but — small problem — she hates business. Such choices are not a recipe for student success, and the researchers found “clear evidence that peer-driven students perform worse than the ability-driven students in terms both of average and final grades” (DeGiorgi, et al.).

The researchers then followed the graduates into the work force for several years, finding that the students who selected jobs based on the joy of their work earned 13 percent less than those who let interest and ability drive their career decisions. More importantly, the first group was also much more likely to feel mismatched and unhappy in its positions and to encounter difficulties in the workplace (e.g., poor job performance, layoffs).

Combine Waloowood’s and HERI’s insights with these findings and one arrives at another important, if often underappreciated, rationale for the presence of religious studies on college campuses: religious studies contributes to the happiness and success of students. Students selected when they care about the subject, and many students care deeply about issues central to the field of religious studies.

Academic disciplines should constantly question the reason for their existence.

In the early stages of the Teagle project to study the religious studies major, I participated in an interesting exercise at a meeting of Teagle grant recipients from seven other disciplines. The Teagle Foundation Director, Robert Connor, asked each of us to prepare a report on the history of the efforts of a discipline to implement curricular innovation, common learning outcomes, assessment tools, and so forth. We surveyed not only the professional organization(s) but journals, proceedings, articles, and pedagogical resources.

Those around the table that day arrived at largely the same conclusion: most disciplines do not have a rich history of critical thought about these matters. Even disciplines guided by formal accrediting processes and boards often have little to say about the larger issues of what field is trying to impart to students and what students need beyond certain bodies of specific information — by pursuing the major. We may not often hear the question posed on college campuses, Why chemistry?, but this is not necessarily due to the fact that chemists have a unified, well-developed, and coherent answer to the question of their existence. Indeed, the most common complaint voiced by those who pursue issues of pedagogy within these other, established disciplines was that so many of their colleagues cared and thought so little about the topic.

In my experience, this has never been a problem for religious studies. Ours is a discipline that is constantly critical of what we do and why, and the result is that we tend to think a lot about pedagogy. In times of increased emphasis on assessment, this is a definite asset; as we all know, to assess how well you are accomplishing a goal, you must first think about what you are trying to attain. But it also is an important part of what we can model and impart to our students in the classroom. Most of our colleagues across the academy say that they want their students to not only know about the critical, but many of them (and, admittedly, more than a few of us) proceed to spend the semester assessing the essential, even unnecessary, significance of a part of their own enterprise. In few disciplines is self-criticism on display as publicly and as frequently as in religious studies, and perhaps we should do our best to acknowledge and make it one of the significant strengths of our field.

My home department’s BA and MA degree programs became markedly stronger when we started to require that students take a seminar course in pedagogy. In times of deepening understanding of the field. The students may experience some disorientation in encountering...
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OUR YEARS past writing my initial personal statement, I continue to think that teaching, at its core, is an act of composition. Not composition as note, but composition as ritual. Composition in an aesthetic sense — beauty intensified through arrangement, simplicity of line, even negative space.

Sometimes the classroom unfolds as planned. Sometimes attention to students, material, and classroom dynamics calls for improvisation. But always composition is at play. Teachers are with their students in the midst of the material. Pondering, puzzling, and probing, clarifying, criticizing and elaborating, drawing out assumptions, relationships, implications — these moves and many more make up essential elements in the repertoire of composing a context for intellectual insight. But currently, as a result of continued reflection on my own teaching and informed by interactions with students, peers, my field, and the larger context within which the project of university education takes place, I find myself exploring different dimensions of the art of composition.

Were I to write my personal statement today, I would title it borrowing a phrase broadcast by loudspeakers on the London Underground: “Mind the gap.” That reference to the space between the edge of the platform and the floor of the subway car, repeated for the purpose of safety, serves as an apt organizing metaphor for what I have been thinking about. I’ve become more interested in the measure, maintenance, and effective pedagogical use of gaps — from the known to the unknown, from the easy to the difficult, between the developmental and the disciplinary, pressuring the present to promising the future.

In my initial statement on teaching as a compositional act, “Composing Context for Insight,” I emphasized constructing scaffolding through tasks and questions that support students to cross the gaps. My emphasis was on the pedagogical product resulting from designing intellectual experience. And while I am less committed to designing courses and particular classes in ways that provide that scaffolding, I am increasingly convinced that noticing, enduring the discomfort of, pondering, and respecting gaps is equally and urgently important for learning. Why? Because gaps are essential to understanding, to incisive questions, to insight and originality, to acknowledging genuine mystery, and to the self-possessed required for attending to ambiguity, text, data, or problem.

I am increasingly convinced that the capacity to recognize and revel in gaps in knowledge grounds the habit of shaping and posing fruitful questions that is integral to students learning well and continuing to learn after they leave the classroom. Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck’s work comparing learning, in the modes of promoting accuracy and of students who focus primarily on being smart and those more engaged with the problem or task than with self-image, gave me insight here. Her work helped me frame a growing challenge, dealing with students so paralyzed by fear of not meeting their own self-perception that they cannot tolerate any gaps in their knowledge or skill. Hence, they cannot think, they are incapable of even low a-level question (www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazoonline/2007/magazine/features/dweck.html). Sharon Drakes’ book, Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World, showed me more about the relationship between attention to gaps, be they unknown, confusing or complex, and the capacity to grow questions and follow out a train of thought. Her subject matter, the teaching method of Ronald Heifetz, and even more the way Parks herself wrote about it, disclosed gaps as pedagogical well-springs.

Multiple conversations and interactions with other texts have also pushed me in attending to gaps. For one, I am alternately satisfied and frustrated with articles and books promoting active learning. Many are concerned with particular strategies and short on framing how and why a faculty member might choose to use those strategies. The nature of a discipline, particular matters, and purposes of particular approaches are integral to such decisions. One example of a useful but incomplete text in the active learning vein is Angela Provenza McGlynn’s Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging Your Students from the First Day. It is clear on topics to cover in a syllabus and during the first class sessions. It provides a range of activities that help students to learn about each other, the instructor, and the course. It has multiple suggestions for promoting participation and so increasing motivation. Absent, however, are considerations to which a professor should attend in determining whether, why, and how to use the techniques, other than to get students engaged. Elizabeth E. Barkle, Patricia O’Connell Killen, and Claire Howell Major in Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty outline precisely that in their first chapter, “The Case for Collaborative Learning.” Any reader considering incorporating more active learning techniques into pedagogy would benefit from reading that chapter.

I am increasingly uneasy with a tendency in the active learning literature to confuse activity with engagement. Activities that are not framed, that are seemingly lack purpose, that are experienced as disconnected and that fill space but are not situated within the flow of an entire course, quickly gain the appellation of “busy work.” Unframed, effective learning activities lose power.

Students also are uncomfortable sitting with questions not easily resolved and problems not easily solved. Teaching that leaves gaps in and the more difficult it is for my students to rest comfortably in gaps, the more difficult it is for them to think. While mulling over this issue I have been reading in the area of contemplative pedagogy, a field garnering growing attention and recently the focus of a three-year project by the AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning. John R. Miller’s Educating for Wisdom and Compassion: Creating Conditions for Timeless Learning provides one example and Sharon D. Finkel, “Buddhism in School” another. In some ways they echo a strand in one of my favorite writers on teaching, the late Donald L. Finkel, whose Teaching with Your Mouth Shut remains an artful presentation of how one creates constructive gaps for students to cross. While thinking on the contemplative pedagogy move much more fully formed and concerned about some ethical dimensions of it with regard to use and misuse of power in the classroom, I find helpful how it draws attention to the act of paying close and engaged attention to learning how to look, notice, and attend without grasping or pummeling into submission whatever the object of attention might be. The contemplative pedagogy literature is a conversation partner with whom and over against whom to further develop my own ways of inviting students to pause and ponder, to be still with whatever they are reading, exploring, and considering.


My current attention to gaps expands and complicates my thinking about the design of intellectual experience. It accepts a different convergence of the three themes that anchor my teaching — artful composition; alignment of students, material, and professor; and an asceticism that respectfully considers the other. My hunch is that the exploration of gaps as artful pedagogical resources, pivotal spaces for generating understanding, insight, and originality, offers a way into better design of intellectual experience and so more skillful teaching.

Bibliography


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Reaffirming Teaching as an Act of Composition

Patricia O’Connell Killen, Pacific Lutheran University

Spotlight on Teaching

October 2009 RSN • v

gious studies/church history with disci-

plined subjectivity and make more ade-
quate, nuanced meaning of course material

and the world.” I continue to be energized

by the challenge of aligning my students,

the material, and myself in ways that con-

tribute to learning. Teaching is to me, no

less than now four years ago, an ascetical

practice; one that, as I wrote then, “taking

on the discipline of being the fit-

ting companion for students on their in-

tellectual journeys, not demanding that they

be the companions I want on my intellec-

tual journey” (an idea I first saw in Robert

Kegan’s In Over Our Heads).

Currently my attention to gaps expands and complicates my thinking about the design of intellectual experience. It accepts a different convergence of the three themes that anchor my teaching — artful composition; alignment of students, material, and professor; and an asceticism that respectfully considers the other. My hunch is that the exploration of gaps as artful pedagogical resources, pivotal spaces for generating understanding, insight, and originality, offers a way into better design of intellectual experience and so more skillful teaching.

Bibliography


October 2009 RSN • v
T he Institutions where I have served as a member of the faculty have greatly influenced, shaped, and directed the development of my pedagogical trajectory. To me, the means to the end—"putting knowledge to work," "educating men and women of diverse backgrounds for ministry," "educating individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community," and "to encourage individuals in their spiritual and intellectual growth, to prepare leaders who will be agents of social justice, and to educate future scholars and teachers of religion"—were not mere taglines to handbooks, websites, or recruitment spiel given to prospective students during their visits to my office or classes. Rather, I employed, and continue to employ, these missions as teaching touchstones that articulate my understanding of the fundamental, vocational objectives of teaching religious studies and theological education.

However much my trajectory as a teacher has been influenced by the aforementioned missions, I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to the fount and source of some of the most formative and significant influences on my worldview. I must acknowledge in clear and certain terms that my teaching philosophy has been inspired by the moral wisdom imparted to me through the familial lessons of my youth—through the wisdom my sharecropping grandparents and military parents deemed necessary for me both to survive and to thrive as an African-American girl growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas. In particular, I would highlight my mother’s and grandmother’s narratives, colorful and instructive doses of wisdom and strength that for me were the quintessence of what it means to be critically self-reflective: “Practice what you preach.” “Remember that it’s a long line that has no end.” “Learn to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick.” My father’s words of wisdom were coupled with his military perspective (and insistence) that gave the imperative and urgent words to his theory that the “biggest room in the room was the room you occupied.” This level of commitment to moral instruction were contexts that cultivated confidence to pose questions and openness to reason with them about opinions or concerns of mine that differed from their strict discipline. They used every occasion to gently nurture an abiding desire in me to be both vigilant in my quest of knowledge and intrigued (as opposed to intimidated) by the challenges it presented, even if those challenges were manifested in powers, principalities, or people. At a rudimentary level, these maxims have shaped my approach and philosophy to the teaching profession.

On the first day of all of my classes, I introduce the study of ethics by stating: “Ethics begins where problems start. Our work together as ethical leaders will be to become the change we seek by naming, facing, and striving to resolve problems.” In this respect, my students learn at the outset that ethics is more than mere intellectual exercise; it is a social imperative that impacts their lives and those of others. That is, ethics is measured by real, tangible outcomes. However, facilitating real outcomes in an era of increased multiculturalism and rapid global transformation is the challenge of the field. This is not merely rectifying the case because race, gender, and money are frightening and distressing topics to most students. This, coupled with the fact that they have to confront my subject matter (which interrogates racist, sexist, classism, and xenophobia) under the tutelage of a Black female authority, an experience they have rarely, if ever encountered, is initially more scaryly for them than bearable. As a result, many at first are stunted in their ability to do the rigorous and reflective work needed to engage the subject and, in turn, for the subject to change them. This is the glass or brick wall that most faculty of color (particularly women) find themselves crashing against when they enter a new teaching environment that has yet to live up to the promise of diversity.

Discovering the power and necessity of embodied pedagogy is the outcome of a teaching career in which I have continued to be challenged by ideas and practices that transform the teaching-learning process. In my own quest for knowledge and classroom competency, I have also learned that, as a relatively young Black woman, I must negotiate the contested nature of the classroom environment and the presence causes dissonance in what is considered a Eurocentric, middle-aged space. My ability to overcome the teaching challenges encountered in such a context has been aided by those who have designed, implemented, and experienced the power of transformative pedagogy in their own regard. Writings such as Paul W. Woodson’s Mindsets, and Black, White, Teaching Black have become scripture in my sacred practice of teaching. In fact, their research and testimony have caused me to publish and share my own insights about teaching that transform process is one in which the theoretical lends itself to the practical; 5) The teaching moment must grapple with issues such as freedom of choice, conscious action, personal responsibility, and considerations of moral responsibility; 6) The link between the theory and practice of human relationships becomes more evident when we are attempts to understand why people do what they do in order to figure out what ought to be done; 7) My belief about teaching stems from the core of what I do and who I am; and most importantly, 8) The teacher’s main goal should be to meet students where they are, in order to take them where they need to go.

From the core of these eight tenets, I strive to create a teaching-learning context that is at once academically and intellectually relevant, and character-building. I approach the vocation of teaching with the goal of exposing students to worlds of ideas and beliefs, discursive realities they can enter freely and engage fearlessly, in order to cultivate sound character as well as to enlarge their capacity for critical thought, sound scholarship, ministerial leadership, and good citizenship. One of my primary goals is to elicit from students an active, intellectual investment in all aspects of the pedagogical process (e.g., assigned readings and evaluative exercises) throughout the term of each course. In so doing, I aim to introduce them to definitive inquiries, methods, and conceptual frameworks, thus equipping them not only with the tools they need to live with but also with disciplinary competency. I encourage students to view the field of theological education in immediate relationship to religious studies, as well as in cognate relationship with other disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences. I cannot guarantee that they all will ascribe to this philosophy of liberal arts education. Nevertheless, I work hard to establish an environment where students develop the intellectual courage and imagination to identify places of coherence and cross-fertilization across their core curriculum.

At the time I won the teaching award, many of my students were second-career professionals whose employment experiences ranged from working in the widely ranging fields of banking, medicine, social work, education, childcare, government, and engineering. At the research-based university divinity school where I am now employed, I teach not only Master’s level students in theological studies but also graduate students in the department of religion. In this context, I find myself teaching and shaping a younger demographic of students who are more geared towards social justice—who students who are generally theologically literate, but who often lack experiential understanding of the implications of their ministerial and social ambitions. In either context, however, my pedagogical imperatives are always designed to help students draw effectively from their individual expertise and experience. Experience has taught me how, in educational contexts, to create spaces that are anonymously and virtually discounted, emphasizing that each person in the classroom—teacher and student alike—and can and will achieve much more. I tend to view the most prized aspect of the learning process to be. By utilizing the level of personal investment and the willingness to encounter the discomforting,
Ignatius, Dewey, and Me: How Ignatian and Experiential Pedagogies Have Transformed My Teaching

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

While one may think that the teaching statement I provided as part of the dossier for the 2008 Excellence in Teaching Award less than two years ago might need little revision, the truth is that I have been engaged in a great deal of research and reflection since then for two papers I have written (Glennon, 2008, 2009). The basic outlines of that statement and the values underlying it still ring true: education is about much process about product, teachers and students are engaged in a communal enterprise in a search for truth... education as much about process as product, teachers and students are engaged in a communal enterprise in a search for truth... The third and fourth components of the Ignatian paradigm are reflection and action. The premise is that the quality experiences students have in the educational setting will foster deep reflection within the student on the meaning and value of what they are studying, in relationship to other dimensions of knowledge and the human search for truth, and generate internalized meanings and values that “impel the student to act, to do something consistent with this new conviction” (Ignatian Pedagogy, 19). At first look, this paradigm seemed to reverse my understanding of the praxis or action-reflection model common to the critical pedagogy of Freire and others, which has been foundational for my own efforts at educating about and involving students in the work of justice. According to Freire, “Knowledge is derived from action...to know an object is to act upon it and to transform it” (1979, 28–29). Similarly, Shor contends, “Action is essential to gain knowledge and develop intelligence” (1992, 17). My initial development of a social justice action project in my senior seminar assumed that significant learning about justice is best achieved through concrete actions on one’s own social justice, and reflection on that action, not through abstract reflection alone (Glennon, 2004). Upon further experimentation and reflection, however, I have realized that this is not fully the case. The social justice action project I required of students was an active learning experience upon which students would reflect. I hope that it would encourage students to engage my students in deeper reflection that includes attitudes, priorities, and actions for others — to get them to think about the ways in which their learning not only benefits themselves and the members of the class, but also the world around them. In conclusion, my exploration of other pedagogical models, particularly the Ignatian paradigm, has helped me to realize anew that one cannot rest on one’s laurels when it comes to teaching. The context and experiences of students, professors, and institutions keep changing in our increasingly complex, global world. Such changes call us to stay critically reflective and to find ways to adapt our approaches and methods to this new reality. Yet the Ignatian paradigm also reminds me that, while the methods may change, the underlying values that ground not only what I do but also what I am as a teacher have enduring value.

Bibliography


See Glennon, page viii

October 2009 RSN • viii
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GLENNON, from page vi


GALLAGHER, from page iii

hermeneutic of suspicion, or what he calls “methodological doubting,” having frequently yielded real insight, for fuller understanding it needs to be balanced by an equally rigorous process of “methodological believing” (see Elbow 1986, 254–304, and 2000, 76–80). He proposes that “thinking is not trustworthy unless it also includes methodological belief: the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem, to find virtues and strengths we might otherwise miss” (1986, 257). Elbow suggests that methodological belief can be employed “to find a valid sense in words . . . to transmit an experience, [to] enlarge a vision.” He refers to both methodological doubt and methodological belief as constituting “games,” emphasizing that both are propositional approaches that can be tried out on the material at hand or temporary stances that can be adopted to see what they might yield. In short, they can be played with. Both games invite their participants to entertain seriously, but for a limited time and without making a personal commitment, a range of possibilities for making meaning about a particular body of evidence (Elbow 1986, 278, 261; see my development of Elbow’s ideas in relation to a course I teach on new religious movements in Galligan, 2007). Elbow’s seriously playful approach to making sense and meaning of any kind of evidence could be particularly productive in the religious studies classroom. Rather than directly challenging students either to state and justify their own convictions and practices or to wrestle directly with the convictions of others that may initially challenge and frighten Elbow’s approach, as I would appropriate it, entices students to entertain a variety of “what if” questions that can provide multiple points of entry into the religious world. That process of entertaining seriously how others make meaning of the world through their religious acts and convictions, much more than the factual knowledge it yields, is the beginning of religious literacy.

Bibliography


RENNICK, from page v

Robert Orsi and Stephen Prothero debate the role that the investigator’s value judgments should play in what he or she studies, or in reading Diana Eck, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Mark Taylor in succession, but the discussions are inevitably lively and the disorientation is productive. Students begin to see how their own perspectives and choices — and those of their teachers — shape the nature of what they study and how they perceive it. And when one thinks about it, isn’t this itself a rather potent response to the question Why religious studies?

Bibliography


ENDNOTES


“The word ‘pedagogical’ or later ‘pedagogy’ is not used in this fashion to suggest that teaching revolves around ‘training or educating children.” Rather, I employ the word in reference to my intellectual design and identity which only the ability to practice what we believe and believethat inherent withineach roomsthatw eoccupymay become the biggest room for such improvements.