

Jan Briel, Red Rocks Community College



Jan Briel holds an MA in Religious Studies, with an emphasis on Native American Mythology, from the University of Denver, and an MA in Guidance Counseling from the University of Northern Colorado. She has taught religion in grades 6-12, and has served as a high school counselor. She now, blessedly, finds herself working as an adjunct instructor at Red Rocks Community College in Lakewood, Colorado. The classes that she has been privileged to teach include Comparative Religion, Religion and Film, Psychology of Religion, and Religion and American Culture.

I love my teaching job. Because of it, I am able to attend appearances by the Dalai Lama, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Elie Wiesel, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I have seen priestly ordinations, demonstrations of Navajo sand painting, and Sufis in ecstatic trance. I have toured temples dedicated to Hindu gods, Jewish synagogues, and Roman Catholic cathedrals.

I am an adjunct instructor at a local community college, in the Philosophy department; my area of expertise is Religious Studies. My particular classes are scheduled in what is called the "weekend-college" format. In a practical sense, this means that my classes take place during the time in which people usually "recreate" (or in some cases, worship), i.e. Friday evening, all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Forty hours of instruction: a complete semester telescoped into six class sessions over three weekends.

Demographic

The weekend format has characteristics and needs that differ markedly from a "traditional" class. Class sizes range from ten to twenty students. Sixty to Seventy percent of these students are women, in ages from mid-20s to mid-40s. Many of these women already have a Bachelor's degree, and are returning to school to enter a new field or to revamp an existing career. Some of them are entering college for the first time, having delayed their education to marry and raise

children. Their reasons for pursuing an education vary; a few are fulfilling a personal dream, more are looking for financial independence or security.

The male students tend to cluster in two age groups: most are early to mid-30s, intending to complete their Bachelor's at a University; some are late teens to early 20s, more recent high school graduates, a very few are older and changing careers.

The majority of the students are juggling the demands of family, career, and continuing education, leaving work on Friday afternoon to spend the weekend in class. These students are hard-working, high-achieving, and intellectually curious, with backgrounds as diverse as would be expected in a large city.

Because of the differences in age and education, there will be little commonality in class experience. The teacher needs to accept each student for where they are in their life, and strive to move them forward. How far forward is their personal issue. They are about to be hit by an explosion of information and sensory input. And if the aim is true, some insight will result. Remember the Golden Rule; teach as you would wish to be taught. A good class will be as stimulating, challenging and painless as possible for everyone involved. And a good teacher will set up the class for the students' maximum success.

Text

To design a weekend format class, the realities of the demographic and the time factor will determine most of the instructor's choices. In choosing a text, it is advisable to look for the most approachable and concise presentation of the material available. Textual material that can be supplemented with illuminating lecture will allow the most effective use of the students out-of-class study time. A text that the students don't ever need to refer to is a waste of their money. If all of the pertinent lectures may be given without corroborating text, why ask them to buy the book? Luckily, Religious Studies is "trendy" in the publishing world at the moment and there has been a great deal of research and writing recently, making the options in texts abundant. The real choice is between most effective text and cost. College textbooks are notoriously pricey, and a book should be the main resource for the class. If a text's price is high, it should be vital to the mastery of the material, not merely supplemental to the course itself.

By the same token, if all of the material comes exclusively from the text, why should the student bother to attend class? Which raises the issue of attendance. It is most fair to count attendance

and participation as major percentages of the grade, and to encourage students that will have attendance issues to take the class when they actually have the time; human beings tend to overestimate what they are able to accomplish in finite space and time.

Assignments

The next decision that the instructor must make involves the amount, length and depth of the assignments that are required of the students. One of the realities of the weekend college is how little time occurs between the first session and the last: two weeks. This is not long enough to allow for a full semester's worth of written work, or extended research. The opportunities for rumination are few, and short. The rule that "human beings tend to overestimate..." applies to the instructor as well. Indeed, much of the processing that the students will do with regard to the class material will take place, a little at a time, after the class is over.

Factoring in the students' need to have information on their academic progress before the class ends, it is wise to give some type of "mid-term"(test, paper, presentation) that the instructor will be able to grade and return to the students before they begin work on their final assignment. A final assignment is useful in keeping the students on track for the full three weekends. Giving the students all of the assignment, and their deadlines, at the first session, allows them to schedule their time most effectively.

Experience has shown that writing is better when required in smaller increments rather than a long research paper. For instance, the text used for Religion in American Culture consists of selected essays on the development of different American religious traditions. It is very effective to lecture on the historical background while asking the students to write four short papers (2-3 pages) reacting to the text. These papers served as an ongoing source of feedback for the student, and allowed an objective final to be given based on the lecture, supplemented by the outside reading.

It is also helpful if the assignments can be made personally relevant to the student. One of the benefits of teaching Religious Studies is the possible opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth on the part of the student. It is an implied responsibility on the part of the teacher to create access to this opportunity, should the student be interested. In Psychology of Religion, a very successful assignment has been to ask the students to write a religious autobiography as a final, instructing them to apply some of the research that they had studied to their own background.

Another technique that has been found to be useful is to assign the students to make presentations of research to the class. For Religion and Film, the students each choose a single director, and prepare a thirty-minute presentation on that directors work, using at least three film clips, with emphasis on the religious and mythic symbolism found in the films. This enables the class to cover a wider scope of material than any student could accomplish alone, and gives the students excellent discussion possibilities, as each of the presentations is open to response.

Above all, show reasonable compassion. Don't make the work too easy; that will insult the students and defeat any good purpose. But don't pile on the work with some mistaken notion that quantity equals or surpasses quality.

What does matter is that the students leave each class with an increased respect for, and understanding of, the depth and beauty of religion as a field of study.

Lecture and Activities

The pacing of a weekend class is the real art. The key is to keep track of the time, and to break it down into workable increments: sixty to ninety minutes are the outer edges of complete concentration. When the average attention span of teenager is fifteen minutes, don't expect adults to sit still for eight hours at a time. The occasional exception? Showing a two hour movie; half the class will need to leave during the film, half won't. One rule of thumb is to keep the students moving.

One of the most enriching activities is a field experience. Luckily, teaching in a large metropolitan area offers a genuine diversity of religious denominations. Classes have attended a Roman Catholic high Mass, services at the Synagogue, chanting sessions at the Buddhist Temple, vegetarian lunch at the Hare Krishna temple, and a tour of a Latter Day Saints Temple before consecration. Recently, a connection was made to attend a discussion group at a Ba'Hai meeting, and the option has presented itself of contacting a practitioner of Santeria. Response to these field experiences has been overwhelmingly positive; it seems that students have an empathetic breakthrough by physically taking part in new form of religious expression, reacting spontaneously and immediately to an increased understanding of a different perspective.

The second activity that works well is the presentation. It is best that these be assigned either to individuals or, at most, pairs. Generally, the students don't have similar schedules, and to assemble a group of them would be very difficult. These presentations may cover portions of

the text that need emphasis, or outside research on topics suggested by the reading, or supplemental information that will enhance the students' comprehension of the material.

Thirdly, there are several well-done film series, with topics ranging from exegesis of the Book of Genesis to travelogues of Buddhist temples, that have become available to a widespread audience. In addition, the great number of mainstream (read: Hollywood) films that are concerned with religious themes or issues are now readily available on video/DVD. Drama evolved from ancient, ritualized, expressions of mythology. The creative joining of word and image may reveal the profound, even today.

Students tell me that, without instructor contact, Religion and Philosophy classes are very difficult. Many have a limited background in these studies, and choose not to take the self-paced or online classes specifically in order to someone to explicate the material. Consequently, some investigation of their understanding of the text is necessary. That can take many forms; instructor lecture with open question and answer, discussion questions based on previous reading, group-work in class. The forms of instruction should attempt to accommodate as many learning styles as possible. To rely exclusively on lecture is to overlook half of the people in the room. Many good students have to talk about material to fully understand it, others have a need to experience, or interact, with the material to appreciate it.

Conclusion

Teaching is a craft. Once the basics of the craft are mastered, usually through years of practice, matching the subject matter and teaching approach to the maturity level of the students is the only variable. I've had the great good fortune to teach the subject of Religion across a wide age span — from sixth-graders to junior college students — and in a variety of parochial and nondenominational settings.

By far, the most satisfying classes that I've worked with are the weekend students at the community college. The classes are the perfect combination of subject matter and student maturity. I am privileged to discuss the most challenging and profound ideas with the most open and diverse selection of students possible. Often, they are at a point in life where they are most able to make use of the course content. These people lead me to think in new ways, and to analyze the material more deeply, because that's what they are doing. They have the interest and the courage to look at their own backgrounds, expectations, fears and needs.

As I said, I love my teaching job.