

Andrea Smith, University of Michigan



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I teach a broad range of classes at the University of Michigan, including “Introduction to Native American Studies,” “Native American Religious Traditions,” “Advanced Topics in Native American Religious Traditions,” and “Gender/Race and the Christian Right.” In teaching religious studies classes that also focus on the dynamics of race and gender, I have come across a number of challenges. These challenges are compounded by how I am also gendered and racialized in the classroom. The nature of these challenges was exemplified in my first experience teaching a lecture class, “Introduction to Native American Studies,” at UC–Davis. I thought that I explained the subject material in a very balanced fashion. However, I soon received a flood of hate mail from my students (one went so far as to send me a computer virus!) complaining about the political indoctrination of the class. I became very discouraged, and blamed the inchoate racism of the students for this experience. After reflecting on the pedagogical strategies that I had learned in my masters program, as well as through my experiences teaching popular education as a grassroots organizer, however, I decided to employ alternative approaches when teaching my next classes at UC–Santa Cruz. These students responded positively, and I received some of the highest course evaluations for those semesters.

The overall question that helps me guide my pedagogy is not what material do I want to teach to students, but what would enable students to learn and engage the material? The students I teach are quite diverse. In one class, the majority of my students were in engineering; in another class, the students were self-described evangelical Republicans; in another class, I had

a sizeable number of students training to be dental hygienists; in another class, I had all women of color. To do student-centered teaching, I am thus forced to engage in a considerable amount of experimentation because pedagogical approaches that work with one group of students will not work with another group. My commitment to experimentation means that some experiments work better than others, while some fail miserably. Ultimately, I am always open to trying new approaches, even radically changing my teaching direction during the course of a semester if my approach does not seem to be effective. Learning from my teaching mistakes enables me to teach even more effectively in the future. Every class poses new challenges for me, but I will describe just a few of them, along with the strategies I have employed to address them.

Student Performance Anxiety

My teaching goal is to inculcate into students a passion for learning. I feel that if they develop this passion, then they are more likely to have academic success throughout their career. However, I began to see that my process of grading students was actually interfering with their learning process. That is, students were starting to focus more on what they thought they needed to do to receive an “A” rather than on really learning and engaging the material in my classes. So I decided to take the risk of experimenting with my grading strategies. I now see grading not as a strategy to monitor what students have learned, but as a strategy to encourage them to learn. In some classes, where the work is organized around group projects, I have relied on student peer grading. In other classes, I have graded their work on effort and improvement. In other classes, I have relied on student grading contracts whereby the students contract to do a certain level of work for a certain grade.

I have noticed that very few academics, including those who see themselves as having radical politics, question the traditional system of grading. It is important, it is frequently argued, to grade strictly in order to ensure that students work hard. However, curved grading systems are structured such that, even if every student works hard, many will have to fail because not everyone can receive an A. In this respect, the grading system mirrors the system of capitalism. Everyone can get ahead we are told, if we just work hard enough. But in reality, a capitalist system requires that only a few people can become truly wealthy. Because of the fiction of meritocracy that structures both systems, those who do not become wealthy in the capitalist system are deemed the undeserving poor, just as those who do not reach the top of the curve, no matter how hard they work, are deemed academic failures. Those then who do not succeed become disqualified as subjects who can speak about its capitalist logics. The poor are complaining simply because they are “lazy” and want a “free ride.” Those who do not receive “A’s” are complaining because they are bad students.

In the end, however, it is not clear to me that grading promotes learning. I found that students actually worked much harder under nonpunitive evaluative structures than when they performed

for a grade. I set up individual meetings with all my students to ascertain their learning development. About 80 percent of my students in these meetings tell me that the most difficult challenge they face in my class is that this is the first class in which they were required to think! (And these students are often graduating seniors!). They inform me that even in humanities classes, they feel that they are not encouraged to develop their own analysis but merely to recite the instructor's analysis. Furthermore, their fear of receiving bad grades often inhibits students from exploring new ideas and analysis. I find students learn more when I emphasize process over product.

The Fear of Political Indoctrination

I often hear students complain that gender and ethnic studies classes are sites for political indoctrination. This complaint is particularly acute in classes that fulfill distribution requirements. When students fear indoctrination, they can become unwilling to entertain ideas and analysis that differ sharply from their own. My challenge then is to promote a learning experience where students become open to engaging with diverse intellectual and political viewpoints.

The first strategy I employ is to rely less on lecture-style teaching approaches and more on interactive strategies. I have frequently noticed that there is nothing more frustrating for students than to have to listen to political opinions with which they disagree for an extended period of time with no opportunity to speak their own minds. Students inwardly fume until such time when they have the opportunity to complain to administrators or write scathing evaluations. Thus, even in large lectures, I find it necessary to devote a significant portion of lecture time to student discussion. Using a variety of strategies, such as organizing debates, using small group discussion, in-class reflection papers, and skits, I try to create a space for students to express their views, particularly dissenting views, so as to minimize student frustration. In doing so, students remain more engaged with the material even if they disagree with it. In fact in one lecture class, I brought in a friend as a plant to start a disagreement with me. When students saw that it was okay to disagree with me, they started participating much more freely and complained much less about political "bias" in the lectures.

My second strategy that addresses this project is my previously described approach to grading. I have noticed that students will not freely express their opinions if they feel their potentially dissenting viewpoints might negatively impact their grade. When students are under a grading system where they can feel secure in voicing opinions that may be very different from my own, they feel freer to share what they really think. When they can make their voices public, it is possible for me and other students to converse with these views. It is only through conversation and debate that people can have true intellectual exchange.

As one example, during the course of a meeting of my “Christian Right” course, I focus on the topic of homosexuality. I had a significant number of evangelical students who all believed that homosexuality was a sin. The class also consisted of student leaders of campus LGBT organizations. This class could have been politically contentious, or some students could have felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions. But because the class structure had fostered an atmosphere in which people could express their viewpoints and respect the viewpoints of those with whom they disagreed, the students all had a group hug at the end. The evangelical students said that they were reconsidering their positions on this topic, and the nonevangelical students said that they had learned that Christians were not as closed-minded as they expected them to be. Of course, not all contentious conversations end this way, but I have found that they can be structured to promote open interaction for participants across political and religious differences.

Student Consumerism

A number of academic conferences I have attended recently have featured panels that address the academic culture of student as consumer. That is, students assert that since they are paying for education, they have the right to the education they want. The response to this trend by some is to assert that education should be less student-centered.

My experience suggests, however, that ironically this trend is really the natural consequence of complete lack of student power within the classroom. It is because they feel no real voice with which to disagree or to affect the classroom that they begin to insist on their rights as consumers. So I have thus employed the strategy of reconstructing classroom authority to address this issue.

My strategy is to build collectivity in the learning process itself. I tell students at the beginning of every course that the class is for them to learn; that they have both the collective right and responsibility to change the class if it does not meet their needs. Then, I conduct periodic evaluations of the class (oral and written). When an issue is brought to the table, I ask students what they think would be a good way to handle the issue rather than just address it directly myself. I found that students feel more empowered to make suggestions as the class goes on and assume responsibility for making appropriate changes.

Rather than position students as individual learners who have discrete relationships with me (and hence if the classroom interaction is unfavorable, I am the person they will blame), I attempt to position students as in relationship to each other. I frequently have them grade each other's work, and structure the learning around group processes.

I have noticed that students become less entangled in battles of authority with me when they recognize their own authority to shape the direction of the class.

Conclusion

There is no fail-safe method for teaching religious studies material that can be politically contentious. As I teach new groups, I find that I can never become pedagogically complacent. Generally speaking, however, these approaches have enabled me to teach to intellectually and politically diverse students.