Background and Rationale

The first day of my upper-level class entitled “Ethnography of Religion” someone said, “I don’t have any idea what ethnography is, but I need a 400-level course to complete my religious studies degree.” Seven weeks later, several students said the same thing either aloud, or in their journal assignments. Yet, at that point, they actually had learned a great deal about ethnography itself. Their frustration was related to the realization that there was no single way of doing ethnography, let alone defining it. Each week led to further complications related to the elusiveness of strictly defining the discipline. Meanwhile, they had been doing ethnography for nearly two months. When I shared this information with a colleague who teaches a similar course, he said that it often takes twelve weeks for everything to begin to gel in a course! It turned out that he was only off by one week: by week thirteen the whole class “got it.”
A central feature of this course is getting students out of the classroom in order to study religion in practice. My preference for the study of religion in practice is related to my graduate education. Although I was trained in religious studies, I had anthropology faculty members on my dissertation committee, and every committee member had spent numerous years “in the field.” Further, my wife and I had lived in India for several years as part of our graduate training. I am, therefore, fortunate to have the chance to bring my passion for field experience to bear on my teaching. An important lesson one learns in doing field research is that one’s topic takes shape — in many unanticipated ways — on the ground, so to speak. In teaching ethnography of religion, I have built into the course room for modification not just of student work, but of our learning as a community of co-learners. This notion of co-learners enables students more say in their learning experience. Rather than having an expert tell them what it is they ought to know, we begin by acknowledging what we each bring to the discussion. One very useful way to create such a community of co-learners is through the use of reflective journal writing.