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This essay describes and analyzes two pedagogical usages of site visits as part of the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College (PPCC), an integrated teaching, research, and service project affiliated with the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. PPHU has begun to map the new religious landscape of the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century, with particular focus initially on the newer Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities. PPCC has contributed towards the larger Pluralism Project in two ways: by articulating an integrated methodology, at the heart of which lies the use of site visits, and by using more inclusive approach to the contemporary religious landscape of New London, possible because of its small population concentrated within five square miles. In an effort to include a broader religious diversity, PPCC extended into the neighboring towns of Groton (where the only local mosque is now located), Waterford (where the second largest synagogue is located), and Middletown (where the only Hindu temple in Connecticut is located). Site visits were central to PPCC's two phases of development over the last five years (1999–2004): they were first incorporated into “Religion 101” courses and then made integral to an advanced course entitled “Religions in New London.”

The Introductory Religion Course

Although site visits had been used at one time in Connecticut College's introductory “Religion 101” course, they had been dropped by the time of my arrival in 1998. Site visits were reintroduced the second semester I team-taught the course with my departmental colleague Lindsey Harlan. Our aims were not only pedagogical, that is, to introduce students to a religious community of their choice so as to bring alive the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic historical and contemporary descriptive information about contemporary religious communities in New London.

The site visits assignment included attending two consecutive weekly services at one of over forty different religious communities in New London. Due to the large size of this class (over eighty students), each student was assigned to a group of four students and each group was assigned to a specific site. Multiple class site visits over the course of the semester created a sense of equality between students, because everyone experienced at least once a visit to a religious community radically different from their own, if they had any. For example, an American Muslim student brought up locally had never visited a church, nor had most of her nonreligious, agnostic, Christian, or Jewish classmates visited a mosque.

The first year, students covered half of New London's religious communities. Over the next two semesters, all religious sites in New London were covered, as well as several others in neighboring towns. To consolidate the collected research information, each group was given a binder that was clearly labeled by number and site name. This binder included several items: four copies of a one-page description of PPCC on letterhead; one leaflet about PPHU; six sets of PPHU's basic survey questions (one to keep blank, one to be filled out by each member of the group, and one to give back to me with a compilation of the group's answers); the two-sided American Anthropology Association ethnography code of ethics; and eight blank sheets for note-taking during the visit. Each binder was to be returned within one month, and one class session was devoted to discussing the results of the students' research. This discussion revealed the diversity of sites and experiences the students encountered within only one small town such as New London.

The next academic year, I coordinated the PPCC site visits segment of the "Religion 101" course (taught by other colleagues). Although these site visits were different in destination, their tasks were the same as the previous year. After the spring 2000 semester, I gathered the results of the three collections of data and created the [PPCC Web site](#), with descriptions of the 40+ New London-area religious communities. The public availability of this Web site has provided a useful service not only to the religious communities of New London but to other agencies too, public and private, answering their needs to communicate with part or all of these religious communities for one reason or another — for example, from zoning to health to education. It has also helped the Connecticut College Office of Religious and Spiritual Life strengthen its links with a broader spectrum of religious communities. The first phase of the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College was thus completed within two years.

The Advanced Undergraduate Research Seminar

The second PPCC phase also aimed to integrate research, teaching, and service, this time through the creation of a 300-level interdisciplinary research seminar entitled "Religions in New

London.” The course has focused on service learning, the ethnographic approach to site visits, and active learning created through a tangible research agenda. The PPCC site visits of “Religions in New London” took on new dimensions after September 11, 2001, the second time I taught this course. The service-learning approach initially used in the fall 1999 semester suddenly became of immediate practical purpose two years later. After September 11, my students and I chose to investigate one single question: How do the events of September 11, 2001, affect your community? We explored six religious communities and compared site visit results in a public academic conference held in late December 2001.¹ One unexpected post-September 11 finding from our site visits that year was that the few small, lower-class, evangelical African-American and Latino religious communities did not seem to be affected by the terrorist events. This gap clearly raised questions about the nature of American identity across the spectrum of this small sample of six very different New London religious communities.

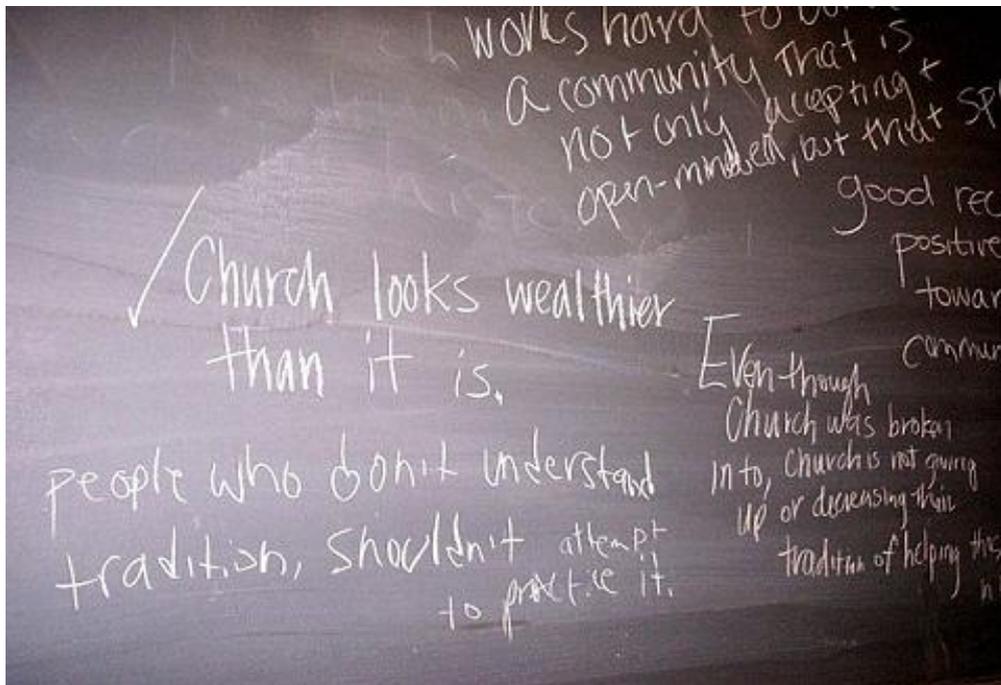
Two years later, the third edition of “Religions in New London” included a completely new goal: to map the religious diversity of nine religious communities in New London using the powerful GIS (Geographical Information Systems) software that allows for a two-dimensional visual representation of different kinds of data. After sociological census data (income, language, and race/ethnic distribution) had been downloaded to the GIS New London map prior to the beginning of the course, the students’ first-week assignment was to map the religious diversity of New London from the PPCC Web site data. The next week, from this new GIS map combining different layers of data, the students were able to deduce two important conclusions: first, older communities were closer to the old historical section of the city, despite the changing nature of that section of town over the centuries; second, African-American and recent Latino immigrant communities were found almost exclusively in poorer neighborhoods. This quick demonstration of the power of GIS to help us interpret data launched a discussion of what was important to learn about religious diversity in New London. This helped hook the students psychologically to GIS despite its many later challenges. Because of its steep learning curve, I recommend practicing teaching with site visits several times before adding a GIS component: then the use of site visits as a research tool to input religious data into GIS format is not only possible but highly useful to help complement missing information from U.S. census data, for example.

In addition to GIS, three other aspects of the use of site visits in this advanced research seminar are worth discussing for potential adaptation in a broader variety of religious studies courses: the degree of faculty and student identity self-disclosure, the organization and choice of site visits, and the class vs. team site visit methodology.

Within the academic study of religion, insider/outsider questions are literally embodied, rather than simply intellectualized, when conducting a site visit. The students and teacher must learn

to what degree they want to disclose their own subjectivities, by way of religious and ideological identities in particular, prior to, during, and upon return from site visits. The degree to which this self-disclosure is carried out on the part of the teacher influences how comfortable the students will be with their own degree of self-disclosure. For example, I used my own set of identities to exemplify several identity construction processes and the politics of identity at play in site visits.

Site visits in which the entire class went every week were selected based on four pedagogical criteria: student familiarity (making the familiar unfamiliar before introducing the more minority traditions); chronology (oldest to most recent communities); size (largest to smallest); and geography (closest to furthest away). Team site visits — that is, where the students had a choice — were guided by three principles: history, diversity, and progressive acquisition. The principle of history refers to the need to include at least two of the oldest New London religious communities in order to ensure that the students take history seriously in their search for understanding contemporary religious life. The principle of diversity calls for the need to select site visits that collectively reflect the diversity of the religious life of New London. The principle of progressive acquisition means that, because students progressively acquire their ethnographic skills through firsthand experience in the class site visits before they embark on their own team site visits, their choices cannot be finalized until the end of the first third of the course.



This first third of the seminar focused exclusively on teaching students how to distinguish between description, analysis, and interpretation, the three sections into which I divided the blackboard after returning from each class site visit. Through an inductive process of trial and error, which I guided every step of the way, the students developed their descriptive, analytical, and interpretative skills collectively. During the second third, they continued honing their skills not only through the collective process developed around the class site visits, but also through

their new team site visits. Upon their return from class site visits, I allowed more and more time for the teams to share their own site visit stories. Discussion of both class and team site visits strengthened the acquisition and quality of the students' ethnographic skills. During the last third of the course, each team collected their survey results, discussed them in class, and finally presented them during the final public academic conference.

Conclusion

The PPCC integrated site visit methodology is not only fun to teach, it results in higher research output as the quality of ethnographic skills increases exponentially over the course of one semester. By using a progressive collective reflection process, students become aware of how fine the line is between commodification of superficial relationships with religious communities for research purposes only and, on the other hand, legitimate production of knowledge that serves some of the needs of the religious communities engaged in reciprocal relationship with Connecticut College. The challenges of a service-learning methodology, let alone one embedded in a serious research agenda that also aims to serve community needs, are not easy to carry out satisfactorily. The PPCC integrated approach requires a great deal of time to build personal relationships with each religious community leader, subsequently allowing for the development of a mutually beneficial research agenda. In the second PPCC phase, in particular, I came to discover how much the site visits were embedded in a complex set of relationships that included overlapping political circles, from the classroom to the college to the city to broader national and international historical and contemporary contexts. These multiple circles have constantly influenced, in ways positive and negative, known and yet unknown, the results of PPCC's two phases as an integrated research, teaching, and service project.

Endnotes

¹ Video clips of these and other student presentations during the symposiums of 2000, 2001, and 2004 are available on the [PPCC Web site](#) under the section 'Resources'.