



Empathy by John Edward Marin

Empathy and the Religious Studies Classroom

Spotlight on Teaching

Jessica L. Tinklenberg, Editor

Spotlight on Teaching is a major teaching and learning initiative of the AAR and its Committee on Teaching and Learning. Over the last several years, it has become a principal venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in teaching and learning about religions. *Spotlight* appears in *Religious Studies News* twice a year as a member benefit. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, concern, or setting.

Copyright © 2020 by the American Academy of Religion

CONTENTS

Contributors	iii
Editor's Introduction <i>Jessica L. Tinklenberg</i>	1
Can We Teach Empathy? Lessons from the "Heretics" <i>Christopher J. Richmann</i>	4
Cultivating Informational Empathy <i>Ann Hidalgo and Drew Baker</i>	9
Dismantling the Seat of Power to Enable Reflexive Inquiry <i>Jade E. Davis</i>	15
Imagining the Lives of Others in the High School Ethics Classroom <i>Christine Ortega Gaurkee</i>	22
Finding a Way into Empathy through Story Exercises in a Religious Studies Classroom <i>Mary E. Hess</i>	29
Beyond Empathy in Prison Education <i>Erin Runions</i>	40
Reading List	49

CONTRIBUTORS

Drew Baker is assistant library director, head of technical services, and adjunct professor of religion at Claremont School of Theology. He holds a PhD in religious studies from Claremont School of Theology and an MLIS from San Jose State University. He specializes in Buddhism, US religious history, postcolonialism, and religion and family life.

Jade E. Davis is the director of digital project management at Columbia University Libraries. She holds a PhD from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in communication studies with a focus on digital media, emerging technologies, culture, and performance studies. Her research interests center on decolonization, technological equity, emerging technologies, ethics, morality, and history. Her most recent research has focused on decolonization, empathy, and emerging technology.

Mary E. Hess is professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, where she has taught since 2000. During the 2016–17 academic year, she held the Patrick and Barbara Keenan Visiting Chair in Religious Education at the University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto. Hess publishes regularly in academic journals and is a past president of the Religious Education Association. Her most recent writing includes a chapter in *Teaching Race: How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge Racism* (edited by Stephen Brookfield, Jossey-Bass, 2018) and a chapter in *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools, Volume II* (edited by Michael T. Buchanan and Adrian-Mario Gellel, Springer, 2019). You can access her writing via her website (meh.religioused.org), and she also curates the website storyingfaith.org.

Ann Hidalgo specializes in Latin American theology and feminist and decolonial theory. She earned a PhD in religion, ethics, and society from Claremont School of Theology. She studies liberation theology liturgies and musical practices that empower marginalized communities. Hidalgo previously worked as the acquisitions librarian and an adjunct professor at Claremont School of Theology. She is currently the Mary P. Key Diversity Resident Librarian for Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University.

Christine Ortega Gaurkee teaches religious studies and serves as the diversity coordinator at Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa, Florida, where she has been for the last seventeen years. While earning a master of theology degree at Emory University, she worked as a researcher for the Center of Ecumenical and Multicultural Studies at Candler Theology School. With a love for learning, Christine has earned over forty hours of graduate credit in educational psychology. In 2012, Christine coauthored *All You Want to Know But Didn't Think You Could Ask: Religions, Cults and Popular Beliefs* (Thomas Nelson, 2012), a reference text for teen and young adults about world faiths.

Christopher Richmann is assistant director for the Academy for Teaching and Learning and affiliate faculty in the Department of Religion at Baylor University, teaching courses in history of Christianity and world cultures. His research focuses on the pentecostal-charismatic tradition and Lutheran spirituality. Richmann's articles have appeared in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, *Pneuma*, *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference*, *Word & World*, and *Lutheran Quarterly*. His book, *Living in Bible Times: F. F. Bosworth and the Pentecostal Pursuit of the Supernatural*, is forthcoming with Pickwick. In the areas of teaching and learning, Richmann has special interests in academic authority in the classroom, teaching as vocation, and how theories of human development influence teaching. He is currently co-editing *Called to Teach: Excellence, Commitment, and Community in Christian Higher Education* (under contract).

Erin Runions is professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Pomona College. She explores how biblical teaching and citation shapes political subjectivity, gender, sexuality, US national sovereignty, war, and biopolitics. Her most recent book is *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex and Sovereignty* (Fordham University Press, 2014). Her next book, *The American Prison as Secular Hell* traces the influence of biblical teaching and popularized discourse about hell on the prison-industrial complex. She has been teaching in prisons since 2005 and is also involved in the struggle for environmental justice in the city of Pomona.

Jessica Tinklenberg is the program director for the Center for Teaching and Learning. Since 1998, Jessica has been an award-winning teacher for students in K-12 through graduate studies and is passionate about the potential of students to change the world for good. Throughout her career, Tinklenberg has published and presented nationally and internationally on active learning, student-centered course design, reflection, first-year writing, and assessment.

Editor's Introduction

Jessica L. Tinklenberg, Claremont Colleges

In 2011, Sara Konrath and her colleagues published a study indicating that college students' empathy skills seemed to be in steep decline.¹ By reviewing the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) scores of college students between 1979 and 2009, researchers concluded that "Empathic Concern was most sharply dropping, followed by Perspective-Taking" and that much of the decline in these two subcategories of dispositional empathy had taken place in the previous decade.² Konrath et al.'s meta-analysis launched a thousand Higher Ed think pieces and spawned a bevy of initiatives to introduce empathy into the college learning environment. Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, for example, developed what it called "The Empathy Experiment," an eight-week no-credit course to see if empathy could be taught through immersive experiences of poverty and disability.³ First-year seminar courses, pharmacy schools, and environmental educators added "empathy" to their list of desired learning outcomes⁴; institutions embedded service learning or community engagement general education requirements into their curricula with "developing empathy" as an explicit goal.

Teachers in religious studies and moral philosophy have long had to wrestle with what role empathy (and other emotions and dispositions) should play in our classrooms, but with recent trends and initiatives in education, we find ourselves addressing these questions anew. Is it enough to teach about the ways in which empathy has been historically evident in religious traditions, or do we have an obligation to teach students how to be empathetic *toward* other traditions, too? Can empathy be measured, and should it? Are efforts to teach empathy necessary in building human relationships in

¹ Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing, "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 2 (May 2011): 180–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>.

² *Ibid.*, 180.

³ Allie Grasgreen, "Empathizing 101," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 24, 2010, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/11/24/empathizing-101>.

⁴ See Stephanie Mangino, "Empathy in the Classroom," *Shenandoah Magazine* (Spring 2017). <https://www.su.edu/magazine/empathy-in-the-classroom/>.

Cassandra A. Tamayo, Mireille N. Rizkalla, and Kyle K Henderson, "Cognitive, Behavioral and Emotional Empathy in Pharmacy Students: Targeting Programs for Curriculum Modification," *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 7 (April 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2016.00096>.

Sally Jensen, "Empathy and Imagination in Education for Sustainability," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 21 (2016): 89–105, available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1151868>.

fraught times, or could they actually distract us from attending to the deeper, systemic disparities that allow some to ignore and demonize others? What role should empathy play in the religious studies classroom?

The authors in this volume teach in a wide variety of religious studies contexts, and their answers to these important questions vary accordingly. Christopher Richmann, who teaches traditional undergraduate students at Baylor University, suggests that focusing on historical empathy, rather than interpersonal empathy, can help educators introduce and measure the development of empathy in religious studies classrooms and curricula. In his essay, “Can We Teach Empathy? Lessons from the ‘Heretics,’” Richmann describes an intervention in which students used role-play and research on Christian heresies to develop a better understanding of both the historical context and values of nonorthodox Christians in history, concluding that students who were exposed to these interventions were less likely to offer judgmental or misinformed descriptions of various Christian groups on subsequent assessments.

Drew Baker at Claremont School of Theology and Ann Hidalgo at The Ohio State University also shift their definition of empathy away from the strictly interpersonal to focus on *informational empathy*, although the consequences of their work certainly have an interpersonal component. These teaching librarians note that metadata, the keywords or other descriptors used to search for resources, can be a valuable tool in developing empathy. By gamifying their instruction with a focus on metadata, the instructors were able to get their students to consider the ways their colleagues might interact with or search for sources—an act of informational empathy. Their essay, “Cultivating Informational Empathy and the Religious Studies Classroom,” also suggests ways religious studies educators can use hashtags, annotated bibliographies, and databases to improve student outcomes related to informational empathy.

In her essay “Dismantling the ‘Seat of Power’ to Enable Reflexive Inquiry,” Jade Davis of Columbia University critiques the power dynamics behind efforts to produce empathy in our students. She notes that, often, an educator’s position of authority (what she calls the “seat of power”) disciplines students to defer to that authority rather than thoughtfully interrogate the students’ own values and dispositions. In other words, empathy in the classroom becomes entirely or mostly focused on empathizing with the instructor’s values, rather than deeply evaluating one’s own. Davis argues that dismantling the hierarchy of the classroom is critical to student reflexivity, and offers several suggestions as to how to accomplish this task including first-day activities, student-led discussion and instruction, and “pop quizzes” which invite collaboration and co-teaching.

As a private high school ethics teacher, Christine Ortega Gaurkee has the opportunity to invite her students into the lives and feelings of others through various imaginative, empathy-oriented activities. Beginning with the moral dilemma in *Euthyphro*, Ortega Gaurkee constructs her classes at Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa, Florida, to offer opportunities for building emotional literacy, defining individual moral identity, and enhancing perspective-taking. In this essay, “Imagining the Lives of Others in the High School Ethics Classroom,” Ortega Gaurkee argues that practicing these empathy skills are

particularly important for high school students' development as they begin to differentiate their values from their parents' and home contexts.

Mary Hess of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, finds digital storytelling to be another promising practice for encouraging empathy. She notes that in our current technological climate, it can be challenging to get seminary students to “slow down enough to hear their own stories” and become curious about the stories of others—both of which she argues are necessary to developing empathy. In her essay “Finding a Way into Empathy Through Story Exercises in a Religious Studies Classroom,” Hess describes multiple speaking, listening, and digital translation exercises she uses in her courses including story circles, a story titling exercise, and a comprehensive digital storytelling project. Throughout the essay, she argues for the potential of assignments such as these to address neuropsychological, religious, and communal aspects of empathy.

Finally, Erin Runions of Pomona College invites us to consider the limitations of empathy-oriented approaches in her essay “Beyond Empathy in Prison Education.” Runions teaches religious studies courses in two prisons in Southern California as a part of the Claremont Colleges's Inside-Out initiative. Runions argues that discussions of “empathy” in prison education privilege the (white, outside) observer and dismiss important structural elements of race, class, and gender that intersect with instruction in the religious studies classroom. Instead of focusing on potentially fraught ideologies that emphasize this problematic view of empathy, Runions argues for a classroom that values mutual engagement, community building, and collective thinking toward change. She offers her colleagues several suggestions for building such assignments into the classroom, whether they teach inside prisons or not.

Taken together, the scholars here represent a wide variety of perspectives on empathy in religious studies instruction. Their essays indicate that (at a minimum) the role of empathy in our classrooms is not yet decided; therefore, we can and must continue to interrogate the values and limitations of this disposition in the work that we do. For their contributions and thoughts I am grateful, and I hope it aides our AAR colleagues in their work.

Can We Teach Empathy? Lessons from the “Heretics”

Christopher J. Richmann, Baylor University

Empathy: Demanding, Significant, Definable, Measurable

A few semesters ago, I was facilitating a faculty learning group focused on adapting and improving courses for our recently revised common core curriculum. For context and inspiration, we read together the “vision document” that accompanied the recent changes to the core. As an educational developer and a teacher at heart, I couldn’t help but poke my colleagues with the document’s claim that students “will gain a deeper...empathy for people from other societies, races, genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic status.” It didn’t take long to get a reaction.

“You can’t teach empathy,” opined a faculty member. “It’s a wonderful, aspirational ideal, but you just can’t *teach* it.” This instructor went on to explain that, of course, we *hope* empathy develops out of the cumulative experiences of learning and exposure to new ideas that characterize liberal arts education. But true empathy needs time to foment, probably more than four years.

As you might suspect, I was not convinced. Instructors can—and should—do more than “hope,” especially if your institution publicly commits itself to particular outcomes. Empathy entails a transformation, which admittedly seems daunting. But all education is transformation. Perhaps empathy is a particularly demanding transformation, since it is entangled with *how we think* as much as *what we know*. Perhaps empathy is a peculiarly significant transformation, since it shapes not only the way we engage with scholarly subjects but also with friends, family, co-workers, and strangers on social media. But being demanding or significant are—it seems to me—arguments in favor of trying to teach empathy, rather than justifications for stopping at hope.

I suspect as well that the aversion to trying to teach empathy is wrapped up in the enormity and nebulousness of the phenomenon. But these are just different ways of saying empathy is demanding and significant. It is laziness, not wisdom, to appeal to Justice Stewart’s obscenity rubric: *I know it when I see it, but I don’t know how to define it or measure it*. I believe we can do both—indeed, we are obligated to do both if empathy is to be meaningful at all—even if my suggestions below ultimately fall short.

Certainly, much rests on how one defines “empathy.” And while many (often-contradictory) definitions exist, I prefer to define empathy as *the capacity to know the internal state of another*. This differentiates empathy from *sympathy*, which is sharing the feelings of another reflexively. In contrast, *empathy* requires an intentional effort to take the perspective of another, combining contextual information with

charitable imagination based on common human traits. In short, it rests at the intersection of self and other. It seems self-evident to me that this capacity is central to the study of religion. As a teacher of religious history, I am particularly interested in the species of “historical empathy,” which aims at understanding and explaining the probable motivations of historical actors.

Complete empathy (whatever that may mean) is impossible to develop in four, or six, years. But who among us is *fully* transformed on any meaningful rubric on the day we receive our diploma? College educators aim rather to set students on a trajectory that, even if incomplete, nevertheless can be measured. Empathy, like its cousin, critical thinking, is not a “mastery” skill; new situations challenge our empathetic skills, and there is always room for growth.

I am convinced, however, that we can identify some markers of empathy and assess how students display empathy in discrete situations. Although researchers have developed valid and reliable quantitative measures of empathy, these tools are narrowly focused on *interpersonal empathy*, inhibiting their usefulness in measuring attitudes towards subjects that are not immediately present—such as historical figures. More applicable to my work is the qualitative study of empathy in students, especially the decades of work on historical empathy, including the levels of empathy described by Rosalyn Ashby and Peter J. Lee.¹ According to these researchers, students exhibit five levels of empathy when attempting to make sense of historical behavior which researchers expected to appear strange to students. In Level 1, students regard the behavior of historical actors as unintelligible, explainable only by mental or moral deficiency. On the other end of the scale at Level 5, students contextualize historical behavior as much as the information available to them allows, speculate charitably based on supposed common human traits only when crucial information is missing, and clearly differentiate their own perspectives from that of the historical actors.

Teaching Empathy: One Attempt

At an institution with a Christian identity and mission, my freshman-level course on Christian history and thought is required of nearly all students (part of the common core mentioned above). Along with its sister course on Christian scriptures, this course pulls the double duty of rounding out the required humanities curriculum and giving students explicit instruction in Christian foundations, practices, and teachings. While it is not indoctrination, students are expected to critically integrate this learning into their own religious, spiritual, and ethical development.

An immediate complication for teaching empathy in this course is its focus on a single religious tradition. If empathy is demonstrated in encounter with the “other,” what people or groups would qualify as “other” *enough* when all our subjects regard themselves as Christian? How much easier is it to find an “other” when teaching world religions! Of course, “otherness” is a matter of degree and combination, not order, so with intentionality and structure, any human subject can be “other” for the purposes of developing and displaying empathy. Additionally, research shows that if the “other” is *too* dissimilar, people have exceeding difficulty displaying empathy. Therefore, I confidently enlisted those groups

¹ Rosalyn Ashby and Peter J. Lee, “Children's Concepts of Empathy and Understanding in History,” in *The History Curriculum for Teachers*, ed. Christopher Portal (London: Falmer, 1987), 62–88.

regarded as “heretics” by the dominant strand of Christianity in its first five centuries to fill this role, since these groups exist on the margins, rather than completely outside, my students’ religious identities (93 percent of whom identify with historically orthodox Christianity).²

From the beginning, this experiment bore fruit in pushing me to take more seriously the contributions of the “religious outsiders” (in R. Laurence Moore’s term³) in my teaching. I expected students’ empathy could be enhanced with extended time learning about heresies (framed in political and social terms rather than “incorrect” theology or practice), role-playing exercises, and a research assignment that included group discussion and writing in the persona of a “heretic.”

Role-Playing

Many scholars recommend role-play and reflection on role-play as ways to develop empathy. I opted for a public presentation and shared experience in which two students, in front of the rest of the class, acted out scripted roles, which I composed, of a particular heretic and an orthodox believer, discussing their key theological difference. For instance, a portion of the dialogue between an orthodox Christian (Marcus) and an Arian (Tertius) reads:

M: So you don’t think Christ is divine?

T: That’s not exactly right. We *do* believe Christ is divine. But “divine” doesn’t necessarily mean eternal.

M: It sounds like you are splitting hairs. Why do you resist the notion of Christ being fully divine, with *all* the qualities of God?

T: Let me ask you this: how many Gods do Christians worship?

M: One, of course. We are not pagans or barbarians. We worship the one God who is revealed in the Hebrew scriptures: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Moses and Elijah.

T: Well, that’s just it. If we Christians worship only one God, we have to be able to say what the One God *is*. And as you say, this one God, fully divine, is eternal. We can’t have two beings who are eternal, can we? Wouldn’t that mean we worship two Gods?

All students then reflected on the exchange by explaining what they thought was the most important issue for the “heretic” in the conversation, whether they believed the “heretic” got his points across, and imagining—in the place of the “heretic”—how they felt at the end of the conversation. We repeated this exercise with eight heresies, spread out through the first month of class.

² Non-orthodox students are those who on a campus-wide survey indicated their religious affiliation was non-Christian, Unitarian, Mormon, or Jehovah’s Witness.

³ R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987.

Research Assignment

The role-playing exercise was meant, in part, to help students decide what heresy they wanted to focus on for their research assignment. Students were asked to study a single heresy in depth and answer four questions, in the persona of the “heretic”:

1. What theological problem are you trying to address?
2. What is your solution?
3. Why is this solution attractive to you and other people you know?
4. Why do you think this position was rejected by others?

After exposure to the basics of the heresies in primary- and secondary-source readings, lectures, and the role-playing exercises, students wrote an outline as a first attempt to answer these questions. During a research work day in class, students shared their outlines while also discussing (with others who chose the same heresy) why they chose to study the heresy, the theological commitments or assumptions of the heretical group, and what they believed was the central teaching of the heresy—described in the most charitable, yet accurate, way possible. Each group summarized their discussion on poster board and presented it to me or my teaching assistant. Based on further insights from these discussions, students revised their outlines and submitted them. I or my teaching assistant gave feedback on the outlines, and the students were asked to incorporate this feedback into a final draft of their answers to the four questions, in prose amounting to 1,000-1,500 words.

Assessing Empathy

To analyze student historical empathy, I rated students’ written answers to the four questions using a modified version of Ashby and Lee’s levels of empathy. In Level 1, students regard the behavior of their subjects as stupid or unintelligible. In Level 2, students misrepresent context and use stereotypes to explain people’s actions. For instance, one student wrote, “Most early Christians were not very intelligent due to lack of education, so Docetism was convenient for many.” In Level 3, students use evidence to explain their subjects’ behavior but leave context implicit or incomplete. For example, one student wrote in the persona of a Pelagian, “By believing in our ability to keep the commandments, we ascribe to the command[’s] fairness.” In Level 4, students use evidence, making context explicit but not well connected to subjects’ behaviors. One student, for example, asserted, without further explanation, that “Marcion’s teachings provided a reason for Gentile Christians to break from the Jewish roots of Christianity.” In Level 5, students use more subtle contextual clues and attempt to integrate opposing stances and connect multiple relevant contexts. As one student wrote,

Ebionism is a broad stroke for mitigating conflicting theologies. There are a lot of differences to be found between Jesus’ teachings and what is written in the Old Testament that are resolved in this way of thinking, as well as the issue of monotheism is addressed directly in this wonderful sect. The greatest strength of this religion is that it solves multiple theological problems that have been the topic of debate for some time now.

Of my fifty students, none scored Level 1; 18 percent scored Level 2; 60 percent scored Level 3; 18 percent scored Level 4; and 4 percent scored Level 5. This rating system allowed me to make crucial distinctions between students' displays of empathy and provided many examples of the characteristics of each level. Additionally, this rating allowed me to see that most of my students display evidence-based empathy when writing about heresies, and many of them exhibit advanced, complex, or nuanced empathy. I did not, however, have a pre- and post-test or control group to compare this data to, since this written exercise was part of the "intervention" itself.

Most enlightening—and most heartening—was a comparison of students' responses from a control group and the experiment group on this simple question at the end of the semester: "How would you describe what a 'Christian heretic' is to someone who has not taken this class?" After reading through the responses, three categories that could account for all the responses inductively emerged: "Descriptive" (heresy as a social construct, not inherently positive or negative), "Non-understanding" (left blank, inaccurate, irredeemably vague, etc.), and "Judgmental" (negative view of heresy, no attempt to contextualize). Compared to the control group, students in the experiment group were more than eight times more likely to give a descriptive response, and about ten times less likely to give a non-understanding response and over three times less likely to give a judgmental response. In short, students who engaged in the empathy-building exercises of my class had a clearer notion of the concept of heresy and a more charitable attitude toward those regarded as heretics, at least in the abstract.

Conclusion

This quasi-experiment (the full results of which are currently in peer-review) provides evidence that when given a nonjudgmental framework, encouraged to combine context and imaginative insight in analyzing human motivations, and allowed to develop their responses in dialogue, most students can approach Christian heretics with empathy. Whether students can translate this empathy to other scholarly subjects or their interpersonal attitudes is another question—a question I believe is worth trying to answer.

Cultivating Informational Empathy

Ann Hidalgo, The Ohio State University
Drew Baker, Claremont School of Theology

Framing Information Empathy

Prior to jumping straight into the classroom with the goal of encouraging students to cultivate empathy, instructors need to be clear about the precise nature of their goal. What is empathy? We understand empathy to be a collective term for a set of complex capabilities that share at least one feature: understanding something from another's perspective. In the context of religious studies, teaching empathy might include myriad topics ranging from the historical (like helping students understand the Peoples Temple through the eyes of practitioners) to the practical (like helping students develop effective skills for successful interreligious dialogue sensitive to multiple perspectives). Being clear about one's goals is an essential element in effective teaching practice.

As instructors, one of the goals we have set in our classes is informational empathy. We understand informational empathy to be a subset within the broader concept of empathy that focuses specifically on encouraging students to consider the actual practice of learning from others' perspectives in addition to their own. Informational empathy is grounded on the idea that there are always multiple ways of understanding particular information. Teaching informational empathy involves helping students to understand that their methods for accessing information are not the only ways to access that information. For example, in a classroom discussion on the topic of microaggressions, some students might reach an understanding of the term primarily through a formal definition, while others might grasp it through example video clips using ordinary conversational dialogue, and still others might understand by reflecting on their personal experiences of microaggressions.

In our experience, most instructors understand that informational empathy is an essential characteristic for successful teaching. Because students access learning differently in different contexts and through different experiences, providing a variety of access points to material helps more students successfully engage with it. Less common is the idea that informational empathy is a worthwhile skill to teach to students. In particular, instructors who employ a transmissional pedagogy see students as passive receptacles of information rather than agents in their own learning. For these instructors, the *process* of understanding the material does not really matter as long as the student understands the material in some form. This teaching style, however, is ultimately ineffective because students who fail to understand multiple access points to information fail to have command of the material beyond the shallowest of terms. Without an understanding of multiple ways of accessing material, students cannot

truly communicate those concepts to others outside the artificial terms of the classroom. They often cannot even engage each other within the classroom to help each other learn. In our experience, students who understand that there are multiple ways to comprehend material have a deeper understanding of the material. We have noted that they appear both to retain information more effectively and to strengthen their skills in information-seeking. In short, cultivating informational empathy is essential for successful learning.

Understanding the importance of informational empathy as a pedagogical concept is the first step toward integrating the concept into the classroom experience. The next step: how does one successfully teach informational empathy? How does one integrate informational empathy into learning experiences in the religious studies classroom in ways that enhance content learning rather than distracting from it?

Metadata and Informational Empathy

As many have noted, one of the markers of our current academic era is the rise of academic positions that involve increasingly more varied responsibilities. As both professors and librarians at a relatively small, graduate-level seminary, we fall within this trend. Our experiences as librarians and religious studies professors have simultaneously enriched our perspectives on effective teaching and librarianship. When it comes to informational empathy, our experience as librarians provided helpful strategies for teaching informational empathy in the religious studies classroom.

In our roles as librarians, we are responsible for metadata generation and curation. Metadata is the description of information (including everything from title to subject keywords and beyond) to enable the discovery of that information. While few are familiar with the formal term, in our information age, everyone engages metadata on a day-to-day basis. Every time someone types into the Amazon search box, every time someone uses a map app to get from point A to point B, and even every time someone searches for the perfect *.gif* to tease a friend, metadata is put to use. Anyone involved in metadata generation and curation has to consider likely strategies people will employ in order to find specific information so that they can include such description. In short, anyone involved in metadata work needs informational empathy.

Librarians are no strangers to this phenomenon. When librarians add books, videos, archival material, and anything else to the library catalog, they reflect on what searchable description will be most helpful for library users in the discovery of those items. Librarians know that users do not search for the same items in the same ways; they must anticipate this fact and develop robust and diverse description in order to be helpful to as many library users as possible.

We came to realize the potential pedagogical applications of metadata work when we developed training materials for our library student workers on effective strategies for metadata generation and curation. Through this training, we realized that our students had to cultivate informational empathy in order to succeed; they could not simply provide the descriptions of information that they found relevant, but had to consider the diverse avenues different people might use to search for that information. As we witnessed our students recognize that there is more than one way to search for

information in the library, we began to wonder: could metadata work be used to help students learn that there is more than one way to learn in the classroom?

A few years ago, we began to experiment with integrating metadata generation and curation into our religious studies courses. We rebuilt traditional assignments like annotated bibliographies in order to focus more explicitly on communal learning and informational empathy through metadata work. We created metadata games to encourage our students to reflect on informational empathy in new and fun ways. With continued refinement, these exercises have been very successful so far. We can report that students appeared to retain information more effectively in these courses; they strengthened their skills in information-seeking; and they often seemed to discover the concept of informational empathy for the first time in a classroom environment.

While metadata exercises can be valuably incorporated into classes on any topic, we have found metadata exercises particularly helpful in the religious studies classroom. Given that many students consider their own religious background a core aspect of their identity and that our students' religious identities are widely diverse, conversations in the religious studies classroom have the potential to be very powerful, yet also run the risk of alienating students who feel their closely held traditions are not treated respectfully. By asking students to reflect on the many different ways someone might describe particular information about religion, students are encouraged to engage classmates with respect, thought, and care. Metadata exercises highlight the social construction of knowledge—an important perspective for all humanities fields—not through inaccessible theory, but rather through active practice. There are many ways to describe information; these descriptions are not set in stone; and these descriptions not only reflect the cultural context of their creators, but also include fault lines that help some access material while necessarily limiting access for others. Students also come to realize that there is no substitute for learning the language particular communities use to describe themselves. By encouraging students to be attentive to diversity and inclusivity, metadata exercises also emphasize the importance of highlighting marginalized voices in descriptive work. Students are invited to reflect on how different language can be either oppressive or liberating for marginalized groups. Wrong words can truly cause harm. Words selected with care can help.

In a field traditionally defined by solitary work and single authors, metadata exercises encourage collaboration in religious studies in new ways. Specifically, the prosocial dynamics of metadata exercises compensate well for the shortcomings of the traditional solitary nature of religious studies scholarship. Many metadata exercises work best as team-based assignments, and yet, these exercises avoid many of the common problems with group assignments because they are interactive, creative, and fun. Metadata assignments are inherently social because description is only meaningful in community. Collaboration leads to deeper, networked thinking and thoughtful innovation. By training tomorrow's scholars to engage each other more collaboratively, instructors set the foundation for a creative and exciting future for the field of religious studies.

Metadata assignments also model the idea that the best learning is learning that helps others. In our context at a seminary working with graduate students—many of whom are already involved in professional work as pastors, teachers, chaplains, and activists—some students immediately see the

advantage of being able to communicate using language that invites others into the conversation. They recognize that developing the skill of informational empathy will improve their ability to engage with others and enable them to be more effective leaders. We believe that the same benefits exist in the undergraduate classroom. Although undergraduates may not yet perceive themselves as scholars and leaders, part of claiming this identity is developing the skills and competencies needed to communicate well with others, especially those of different social and cultural backgrounds.

Sample Exercises

There are many possibilities for integrating metadata generation and curation into class assignments in order to support informational empathy as a learning outcome. Depending on context and pedagogical goals, metadata assignments can be carefully tailored to the educators' needs. Metadata assignments can be simple or complex; they can be used in brief information literacy sessions taught by librarians or fully integrated into religious studies courses taught by instructors; they can be adapted from existing assignments or built from scratch following the latest insights into effective pedagogy. We include two of many possible exercises below.

Hashtag the Catalog!

In the age of Twitter, most people are familiar with hashtags. Far fewer know that their local library catalogs often support tagging as well. Since hashtags (and "tagging" generally) are basic forms of metadata, there is a real opportunity for instructors and librarians to take advantage of students' knowledge and common practice by bringing tagging into the classroom. Prior to integrating any tagging into assignments, instructors should confirm that their library catalog supports user tagging. Unfortunately, in many library catalogs, librarians have turned off user tagging; in many library systems, however, turning on user tagging can be as simple as one click.

Tagging is not just about personal expression; by providing additional description for all users, the tagger has provided additional access points for the material. By inviting students to engage in the practice using course readings or research, students are naturally invited to cultivate informational empathy. In this way, the student's role changes from consumer or beneficiary of someone else's knowledge to contributor of knowledge in a community of collaborative learning.

Library catalog tagging in the classroom can range from simple to complex. Instructors might ask students to provide a few additional tags for each of their course readings or for all of the sources in their research papers. Even for this simple assignment, students will need to think creatively to describe sources using more than the basic bibliographic information. Or instead, instructors might layer the assignment, by asking students to find other sources that share their initial tags and identify if they are relevant for the particular course topic or research paper. Students can even be called to reflect on the process of tagging materials: Why did they select the tags that they did? Why do they think the tags will be effective in helping others find the source? While tagging appears to be a simple exercise, integrating tagging into classroom assignments in more complex, layered ways can promote deep, empathic learning.

Metadata with Taboo!

What do Pictionary, Catch Phrase, Charades, Cranium, Telestrations, Awkward Turtle, Blurt, Word Slam, Password, Guesstures, and Taboo all have in common? They are all games that ask players to describe something in order to get other players to guess what it is. In short, they are all metadata games.

With the rise of gamification in education, it is somewhat surprising that metadata generation and curation have not been used more in classrooms. From Taboo to Charades, millions have played what effectively amount to metadata games in their living rooms for decades. All of these games clearly demonstrate that the art of description and discovery can be quite fun. Why keep the fun from the classroom?

While many of these games can be adapted for the classroom, one obvious possibility is the game Taboo. Taboo is a game in which players take turns trying to get their teammates to guess particular phrases as quickly as possible; they can describe the phrases using any words except words in the phrase or special “taboo” words that would make the guessing experience too easy. For example, the word “red” might be one of the “taboo” words for the phrase “stop sign.”

Taboo can be adapted for the classroom by asking students to describe course relevant works, concepts, and people to each other in teams. Adapting Taboo for the classroom works best as a cumulative assignment after students have engaged a significant amount of the course material because the game is more challenging when there are more options for taboo words. Playing Taboo works particularly well as a test-prep activity because the exercise asks students to think creatively about all the works, concepts, and people studied in the class up to that point. Taboo words for the phrases can be created by the instructor or, for additional reflection, by competing teams prior to playing the game.

As one example, imagine an instructor adapting this exercise to her introductory class on Buddhism. Prior to class, the instructor would select key terms important to the course that might appear on the final exam, such as karma, dharma, vinaya, nirvana, samsara, Theravada, and Mahayana. The class would be divided into two teams. Each team would be given half of the words and asked to identify taboo phrases for their words. The number of taboo phrases should be set by the instructor and can vary based on intended difficulty, but four-to-six taboo phrases typically maximizes creativity and challenge without becoming too frustrating. Some sample taboo phrases students might select for the term vinaya might include monks, rules, or sangha. Once each team has selected taboo phrases for all of the terms, the teams will swap terms. Turning up one card at a time, individuals from each team will take turns trying to get their team members to guess as many of the terms as possible in a certain period of time. After a certain number of rounds, the game ends.

While simply asking students to describe concepts to each other can promote learning, playing Taboo is particularly helpful for learning because it encourages all students to participate and think creatively, engage each other collaboratively, reflect on course concepts in more complex ways than rote memorization, and consider informational empathy in providing multiple access points to course material. (And, it has the added benefit of being fun!) If students are asked to select taboo phrases before playing the game, the creative engagement with course material is deepened even further. While

both sample exercises in this paper come with the advantages of using metadata for pedagogical purposes, adapting games like Taboo for the classroom also offers the benefits of gamifying the learning experience.

Concluding Thoughts

Through metadata exercises, students cultivate informational empathy as they learn the material. Students also learn that the creation and discovery of information is a communal process. They are invited to think critically about the dynamics that support—and limit—the access to information in addition to learning how to better evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of sources. In this process, students develop more effective strategies for future pursuit of information.

Perhaps the greatest benefit metadata exercises offer is that they ask students to practice the best kind of learning—learning that helps others. Instead of traditional exercises destined to see only two sets of eyes before ending up in the waste bin, metadata exercises inherently ask students to not only consider others as they work on the assignments, but also give students final products that help others learn. By reflecting on the ways in which identity and privilege influence the social construction of knowledge, students develop skills for engaging others with respect and care, and by discovering information and describing it empathetically, students help others to discover it.

Further Reading

Adler, Melissa. “Transcending Library Catalogs: A Comparative Study of Controlled Terms in Library of Congress Subject Headings and User-Generated Tags in LibraryThing for Transgender Books.” *Journal of Web Librarianship* 3, no. 4 (2009): 309–331.

Barkley, Elizabeth F., K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major. *Collaborative Learning Techniques*. San Francisco: Wiley, 2005.

Case, Donald O., and Lisa M. Given. *Looking for Information*. 4th ed. Bingley: Emerald, 2016.

Kapp, Karl M. *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Method and Strategies for Training and Education*. San Francisco: Wiley, 2012.

Løkse, Mariann, Låg Torstein, Mariann Solberg, Helene N Andreassen, and Mark Stenersen. *Teaching Information Literacy in Higher Education*. Cambridge: Elsevier, 2017.

Wilson, Emma Annette and Mary Alexander. “When Metadata Becomes Outreach: Indexing, Describing, and Encoding for DH,” *dh+lib* special issue (2016). <https://acrl.ala.org/dh/2016/07/29/when-metadata-becomes-outreach/>.

Dismantling the Seat of Power to Enable Reflexive Inquiry

Jade E. Davis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Empathy, as I understand it, is the internalization by the less powerful of the feelings and perspectives of people who hold power. In all institutions, then, empathy exists in relation to power structures that define the organization and its bureaucratic relationships. Universities and classrooms are institutions with power structures.

In higher education, the power structures of courses, disciplines, and majors become sites where this definition of empathy can be explored and interrogated. At the institutional level, students may take classes in disciplines that do not interest them but serve the institutional curriculum. They may read books and articles by people who have been granted the position of authority by virtue of their work being memorialized in writing and brought into the classroom. And students must work with their professors who will pass judgement on them at the end of the term through grading. The act of grading implies that in order for a student to be successful, they must continually expose their inner thinking to a person who will determine their “worth.” Put another way, the professor occupies an institutional seat of power that demands student empathy, that is, for the student to align their inner processes and feelings with what they think the professor wants them to present for success.

By the time a student is in a higher education classroom, they will likely know what the relationship between student and instructor should be. They will have had more than a decade of formal education experiences where they have learned to push down their own emotions to ensure that the professor remains “objective” with them. The power structures at play will encourage an environment in which they never openly question the professor’s perspective nor the course materials. They may not even think the professor has a perspective that is worth interrogating, as the professor is the authority in the classroom. The student internalizes the empathetic feelings they should have towards the person, the curriculum, and the institution they are trying to please. This has significant consequences for all courses, but it is particularly disquieting in religious studies courses which interrogate ethical, moral, and philosophical thought. To maintain our moral bearings to the profession and to our students, then, it is imperative to break down the classroom’s seat of power to enable true exploration of the self for the student. By doing so, the student can engage in reflexive inquiry that allows them to understand the roots of their perspective, and place that perspective in conversation with others, such as their fellow students and texts they are engaging, to create new knowledge and lines of inquiry.

There are two concepts that should be better understood in order to dismantle what I refer to as the “seat of power”: first, what I mean by the seat of power itself and, second, the implications of this concept to my definition of empathy.

The Seat of Power and Empathy

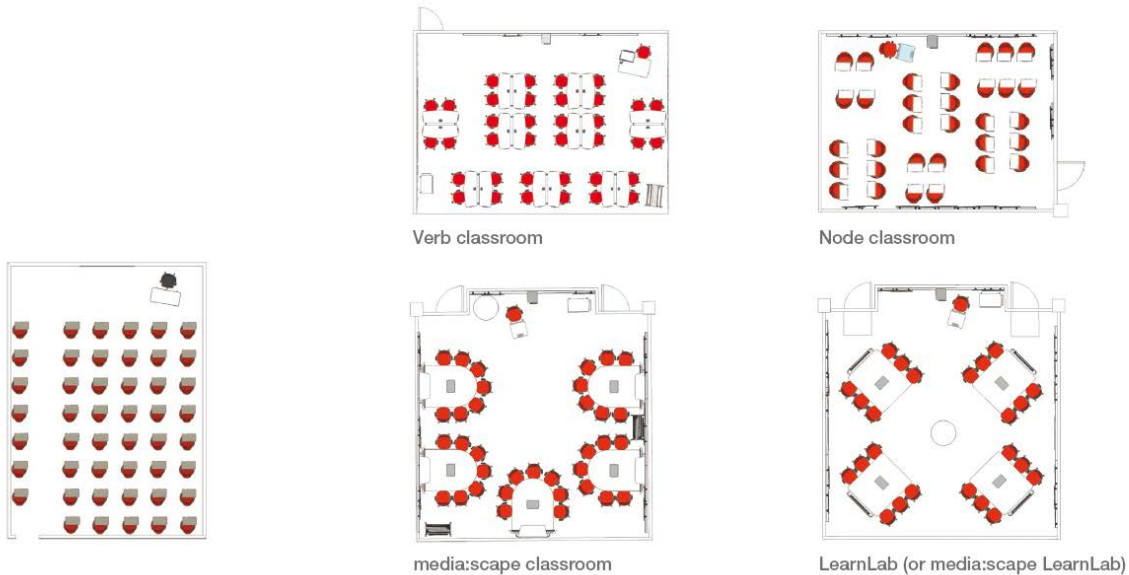


Figure 1: Standard Classroom

Figure 2: Steelcase Advanced Learning Environments – 4 Scenarios

Steelcase, a furniture vendor that works with many institutions of higher education, produced a white paper on increasing engagement through classroom layout, advocating for flexible furniture which will allow a classroom to shift in design. They provide a map of five different classroom configurations, one being a standard classroom, the others being “Advanced Learning Environments.”¹ Despite the flexibility of the advanced learning environments, there is still a seat outside of the group that is designated for the professor. I call this “the seat of power.” Its existence makes physical the ideological baggage of the classroom by placing the professor as the focal point. Regardless of how a classroom is set up, the focal point is, most of the time, the professor who is functionally interchangeable. That is, the professor can have a substitute who will occupy the seat and hold the same role regardless of being a different person. Likewise, the professor always assumes that the student will look towards them and defer to their interpretation rather than the student’s own.

¹ Steelcase, *How Classroom Design Affects Engagement*, June 2014, <https://www.steelcase.com/research/articles/topics/active-learning/how-classroom-design-affects-student-engagement/>.

From the viewpoint of the zero point of orientation gained in empathy, I must no longer consider my own zero point as the zero point, but as a spatial point among many.

– Edith Stein²

In his essay “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” Roland Barthes argues that occupying *that* seat, rather than a position of power, actually creates a position of vulnerability. Though it seems on the surface the professor analyzes their students, in reality it is the other way around. The students listen astutely to the professor, take notes the professor does not see, and then give back what they think will be most well received ideas to the person they have analyzed. “In the exposé, more aptly named than we tend to think, it is not knowledge which is exposed, it is the subject (who exposes himself to all sorts of painful adventures). The mirror is empty, reflecting back to me no more than the falling away of my language as it gradually unrolls.”³ The knowledge and deference students reflect back to the professor in the seat of power often does not accurately depict them as a person. Rather, students reflect their internalized role in the learning space.

To better reflect actual student lives and voices, it is important to play with the space of learning and seat of power. Even in the standard classroom design, it is imperative that the configuration of students and seat of power be challenged or allowed to shift so that the students—especially those engaged in classrooms that are designed around ethical, moral, and philosophical thought—understand that it is possible for power to have multiple perspectives, and that their own perspectives are just as powerful. Below, I will make some practical suggestions for how to accomplish this. Before we do, however, empathy must be understood in terms of the seat of power.

But what is empathy? There are many definitions and very little consensus.⁴ For the past twenty years or so, there has been exploration into the neurological basis for empathy, which has led to dead ends and almost-connections. While there is evidence of physical mirroring (when someone unconsciously copies the movement of another), there has not been a study that conclusively proves that people are able to feel the emotions of another. Instead, bias, familiarity, and experience work together to create an emotion that is *similar* but not the same; the emotion remains grounded in the experience of the empathizer.

Further, given that biases, familiarity, and experience are not universal, the more distance a person has from another creates a deficit in the ability to make a model of another person’s emotions.⁵ Rather than doing a review of all versions of empathy, I will explore a brief definition from Theodor Lipps, one that is also used in the work of Derek Matravers. Lipps states that empathy is the “satisfaction in an object,

² Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 63.

³ Roland Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 194.

⁴ Derek Matravers, *Empathy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017).

⁵ See Jean Decety and William Ickes, eds., *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

which yet, just so far as it is an object of satisfaction, is not an object but myself; or it is satisfaction in a self which yet, just so far as it is aesthetically enjoyed, is not myself but something objective.”⁶ For students, professors are often an object of the classroom that contains the knowledge and power to determine if a student can pass or fail. The position of a professor is the baseline for objectiveness, and they are the object that provides the cues for what a student should mirror in terms of work and actions. The professor serves as Stein’s zero point.

In Practice

To be a student is to be in a vulnerable position. A student enters a space tacitly saying, “There is something I do not know and, given that you are leading the course, we are entering an agreement where you get to re-program me, and I won’t know any better.” The best method I have integrated into formal classroom learning spaces to break the spell of students over-identifying with me is to find meaningful ways to hand the seat of power to students and have them work with their fellow classmates to understand the material and its relevance. Doing this in an intentional way allows the students to show up as themselves, be vulnerable, and learn from each other just as much, if not more, than they learn from me.

In the first week of any course, students decide if it is safe to be vulnerable with a professor and their fellow classmates. To help students make that decision, I offer a class period near the beginning of the semester dedicated to learning about me, the course, and our roles in this space. I let them ask questions about me that they think might influence how I approach the material or subject of the course (within reason). Often these questions are about my age, where I grew up, if I have kids, why I was teaching the course, etc. I also create a very short introduction lesson that highlights the arc of the course, discussing my hope that they should be able to make connections across material in their own language by the end of the term. The purpose of this is so that we are reminded that everyone in the room is a whole person, including myself. My goal is not to hold my knowledge over them, but rather to help guide them through material. This allows them to have an expanded sense of the different things I am balancing, just as they are balancing other courses and parts of their life.

The last part of this day, however, is always explaining the seat of power. I have the students tell me about the very first day of class. I ask them if there is anything noteworthy they remember about how I started the course. They always remember me being late and us not doing much. They never remember that I did not introduce myself. Inevitably, even in the questions they asked, they do not ask me my name. This is the point where I would introduce myself with my name and role in the course. I point out that the spot in the front of the room that everyone looks towards is the seat of power, which is why they never questioned me once when I went to that seat and began speaking as though I had authority over the course. I let them know that they will all occupy the seat of power at some point during the semester. While it may seem daunting, the funny thing about cultural power structures, such as the

⁶ Theodor Lipps, “Empathy, Inward Imitation, and Sense Feelings,” (1903) in *Philosophies of Beauty: From Socrates to Robert Bridges being the Sources of Aesthetic Theory*, ed E.F. Carritt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 253.

classroom, are that people have been inevitably trained by cultural reproduction to believe the person at the front of the room; that person is rarely questioned. But if a course is an ethical and moral thought course, it is imperative that they do just that.

Regardless of the level of a course, it is important to allow students to shape part of it by occupying the seat of power. For a 100-level course, it is safe to assume that many of them do not have the fluency in the subject matter to be enlisted as co-teachers. However, students do have many years of experiencing the world and other classrooms, and thus, they come into a classroom with many ideas about how learning works. There are two things I do to dismantle the power structures and give students the opportunity to think through their own perspectives, even in a 100-level classroom. The first is having a “show and tell” at the end of every class session. Show and tell consists of a student sharing something they are interested in, they read, or they engaged with that is in some way related to the course material. My goal is getting students to articulate why they have brought it to the course and how it is related. Through this exercise, I learn what is of interest to the students so I am better able to connect course material and give them some control over course content, essentially granting them some access to the seat of power.

The other exercise I do to reorient the seat of power is changing my model for pop quizzes. Rather than giving quizzes where the individual student repeats rote facts they’ve encountered in the readings, I create group “pop quizzes.” These take up either half or all of a session and occur at points in the semester where I feel students are struggling. In these quizzes, students work in groups to create a short presentation on an assigned theme in a format that is related to the course material (e.g., if we are learning about advertising, they create an ad; if we are learning about digital cultural reproduction, they create memes). While they work in their groups, I am available for questions if they are stuck or unsure about their understanding which allows them to engage with me outside of the seat of power and instead as a consultant to their own knowledge production. After the group work is finished, students present their work to the class. In this way, the students create their own study guides, learn the structure of the material, and have a chance to speak with their classmates around common points of understanding or misunderstanding, and they occupy the seat of power with other classmates. Students know that traditional pop quizzes are given without any notice for the purpose of demonstrating knowledge and retention of course concepts. The group pop quizzes are designed to do the same. The anxiety of the announcement enables a moment of reflexivity that, due to the cultural norm of quizzes, allows them to be more productive in their groups. Additionally, once they realize that they don’t have to do it alone, they have a shared experience of relief, creating psychological space to speak to each other about before they dive into the work.

These practices happen in 100- and 400-level courses. The 100-level courses are foundational for media studies. They require that I lead the discussion to ensure that once students move on, they have the knowledge they need to be successful. The 400-level courses are co-led by myself and the students. At this level, students should be able to apply and create new knowledge grounded in media and culture. These courses are designated as philosophical and ethical thought. As the course level increases, I work towards having students lead the first session of major units within the course. Working in pairs, they are given half of a class session to present an introduction to the new topic and lead the initial

discussion. On the days where students present, regardless of how the class is set-up, I sit in a location where I am not in their direct line of sight. This means if they look towards me for confirmation that they are doing a good job or request reassurance, it is very obvious to the class. I do this because students need to speak to and with each other. In this way, the experience of discussion leadership comes from both the professor as well as x number of students depending on the size of the course. This creates a community of practice where students become accountable not just to the professor but to each other. It enables each student to experience leading a portion of the course, ensuring their viewpoint is represented and reflexively interrogated so they are able to articulate the connections they are making to the course material. This activity, combined with being open at the beginning of the course about who I am, forces the students to listen to and expect perspectives other than my own. It takes time to cultivate this classroom into a dialogic space, but it shows potential in creating a dynamic in which each is mutually respectful of everyone's unique positionality without feeling the need to see the world or feel the world exactly as others do. In my experience, this practice is significantly more empowering than the "empathy" we normally expect of students toward power-players in traditional classes.

The balancing of this activity can be tricky, and sometimes students do not deliver what needs to be delivered or are disrespectful towards others in the space. In cases of misinformation, I step in and take over, reminding them that regardless of how much I hand the seat of power over to them, it is still my assigned seat. The resulting discussion allows students a chance to interrogate the concept in a meaningful way with authoritative information. I also revisit the misunderstood idea a few days later, speaking to the group that presented first to make sure I have a clear understanding of their perspective and justification for what they presented as well as to make sure they were okay with how the discussion went and are still comfortable in the course. In instances of disrespect, I take a more assertive role and tell the student who was being questioned in an inappropriate way to not respond, and then announce that I would be taking advantage of my permanent role in the seat of power. In this case, rather than focusing on the one-on-one interactions with the students, I have students raise their hands to find the point where the interrogation needs to start. I invite an initial response at the time where I bring to the surface the cultural learning that led to their belief and provided counter-evidence so they understood how and why their perspective, while a valid perspective, is biased. I then spend the next two class periods in that unit delving into the topic starting from the point of discontent we identified.

The benefit of this assignment is students stop trying to please the seat of power and instead think through what the course can be for them. They do not focus on saying what is right or what will make me happy as the professor, in the way we think of power-based classroom empathy. They become open to asking about misunderstandings and bring up things that they think are related but are unable to articulate fully. More than that, as students stop trying to adjust to me and my feelings, or how they think I see them, they become open to playing with their own perspective and beliefs. I, in turn, am able to provide feedback, present constraints, and give clarity at points where students may be stuck. This role, outside but connected to the seat of power, deepens their own learning and helps them produce better work. They understand that who they are, independent of how I may feel about them or their own moral and ethical stances, will have no bearing on their grade. I make sure to reiterate this any time we encounter a touchy topic, at times stopping the course if there is likely a counter-perspective that

can enter into conversation. The goal of the course is not for them to adopt my stance towards things (in the way we traditionally think of empathy in the classroom), but instead to be able to articulate their perspective through a critical engagement with materials from the course and their everyday lives. The course design ensures they are successful and that their voices are not lost. Given that there is only one of me and many students, if they have to fall into empathy, I would rather it be with each other in a space of communal knowledge-making.

Towards Learning

The goal of teaching for me has never been about giving “correct” knowledge to my students. It is instead about co-learning through exploration. By letting go of empathy (defined as understanding the feelings and beliefs of those in the seat of power), I am able to remove some of the barriers that exist around the seat of power in the classroom. I am still the authority in the classroom space. However, by acknowledging that reality regularly, and pointing it out when I have to enact that role, students are aware of what's happening in a way they normally are not. The more radical turn, then, is to see students as people who likely have a perspective that the professor might not just learn about, but also, will watch evolve into something delightful, especially when they are given the seat of power in their learning. Additionally, professors reflexively looking at ways they enact power in their courses can play with ways of dismantling the tendency of students to anticipate what they think a professor wants to hear. By creating a space that is centered on the shared humanity of everyone in the room instead of the power of a professor over their students, students are able to ask for what they need to succeed without fear of upsetting or disappointing “the person in power.”

Imagining the Lives of Others in the High School Ethics Classroom

Christine Ortega Gaurkee, Berkeley Preparatory School, Tampa, Florida

The very first scene of the *Trial and Death of Socrates* takes place on the steps of the King Archon's court when Socrates runs into Euthyphro, who one may imagine sauntering out of the courthouse proudly. The men exchange initial pleasantries, and through those simple hellos, Euthyphro discloses that he is at the courthouse prosecuting his own father for murder because he believes it is the pious thing to do. This news immediately shocks my students, and, frankly, it appears to be of great surprise to Socrates as well. After twenty years of exploring this dialogue with my students, I imagine their outrage comes from Euthyphro's lack of empathy for his father's accidental situation. How could he possibly believe that the righteous or faithful thing to do is to prosecute his own father?

My class, which I have taught many times over the years, is a moral philosophy and ethics course required for all students to graduate from high school. It is a semester-long course that meets four times a week at our affluent PreK-12 independent day school in Tampa, Florida. Moral philosophy, or ethics, strives to guide our ideas about, and behaviors in, society and the world. This course, in particular, encourages students to synthesize and apply what has already been established throughout their educational journey to hone decision-making skills in contemporary life by consistently looking through the perspectives of others. Imagining what life may be like for someone else is one of the most effective ways for students to increase empathy, and so, in our class, students engage avidly in class discussions to learn how to articulate their moral ideals. Over our time together, they are encouraged to engage in the consistent and intentional application of philosophical ideals while also defending the moral worth of those ideas to their colleagues. Together, these activities promote an empathetic and critical approach to the world beyond their previous experience.

Traditionally, I begin the course with Plato's *Trial and Death of Socrates* because it provides the scaffolding to some important parts of the study of ethics. For example, it introduces the great Western thinkers Socrates and Plato. It further demonstrates the Socratic Method, the search for meaning, and a bit of radical questioning of religious authority in Socrates in trial. For many of my students, it is the first time they have also questioned the authority of religion, of God, or of faith. The *Trial and Death* also allows my students to engage with conversations about justice in *Crito* and the afterlife in *Phaedo*. All these conversations help my students consider the cornerstone question to my ethics course: "How do we live a good life?"

Ethics courses utilize moral dilemmas with the goal of creating an authentic opportunity for students to consider how to respond in various situations and to use the moral principles they've studied to

consider potential best outcomes. It is this process of putting themselves in the shoes of others that I would call “empathy,” and in my course students do this by attempting to understand why Euthyphro has chosen to prosecute his father. Engaging in the moral dilemma presented in *Euthyphro* shows my students that, for centuries, humans have been on a quest to understand the other. It is in our very nature to attempt to discern why humans behave as they do, at first perhaps for survival purposes, but now for the social and emotional survival of navigating the modern world.

Education in ethics and morals offers the unique opportunity for learners to bolster their understanding of themselves so they can become the best version of themselves. However, it also offers students an opportunity to develop skills of relating to the world around them. These skills are exactly what Daniel Goleman, in the *Harvard Business Review*, identified as a fundamental element for leaders to adopt in order to create collaborative, safe environments that directly impact overall success. Empathetic leaders establish inclusive environments in which each individual is valued, and this produces higher levels of productivity and engagement among workers.¹ In other words, ethical education provides an opportunity to become more empathetic.

I have identified three key principles from Michele Borba’s *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* that I believe are essential for my ethics courses.² I hope to have my students 1) establish emotional literacy which will lead to better communication skills; 2) clarify a deeper sense of moral identity by constructing their understanding of inner values and perspective taking, and 3) take into account another individual’s journey in order to understand others and boost pro-social action. These practices have also resulted in higher academic success which is critical to self-esteem and greater desire to positively impact the community at large.

Emotional Literacy

In my courses, we discuss moral dilemmas and ethical theories spanning from religious ideologies, to Greek philosophy, to modern philosophical concepts in the hopes of providing an adequate ethical foundation for developing the skills necessary for a student to develop emotional literacy. For example, I attempt to illustrate to my students that ethical decision-making can be messy. There isn’t always a clear “right” answer. I share with them the story of Joe Jackson, a father and truck driver that has to make the decision between trafficking methamphetamine across state lines in an effort to provide expensive medical treatment to his child or letting his child die. We listen to his real story on NPR’s *Snap Judgment*, “The Ultimate Sacrifice”.³ After listening to Joe Jackson’s story, we discuss issues with our healthcare system, the severity of the punishment by the courts and the impact of drug trafficking. These dilemmas offer students a chance to evaluate the ideas developed in civilizations while also developing the analytical skills necessary to navigate a complex modern world. I encourage independent thinking with all students and required them to support their ethical reasoning through written analysis and reflection in the form of a weekly current-event philosophy journal, collaborative group work often

¹ Daniel Goleman, “What Makes a Leader?” *Harvard Business Review* (January 2004).

² Michele Borba, *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-about-Me World* (New York: Touchstone, 2017).

³ Listen online: <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/15/340632144/the-ultimate-sacrifice>.

resulting in class presentations, and informal debate (also considered the art of dialogue). In many ways, this last skill is the most important skill that I hope my students develop throughout their journey in the course, and empathy is at the heart of it.

A recent study conducted on groups of middle school students made a clear correlation between “children who were away from screens for five days with many opportunities for in-person interaction improved significantly in reading facial emotion, compared to those in the control group, who experienced their normal media exposure during an equivalent five-day period.”⁴ The UCLA study claims that children’s social skills are diminishing due to fewer face-to-face interactions. One of the researchers of the study stated, “decreased sensitivity to emotional cues—losing the ability to understand the emotions of other people—is one of the costs. The displacement of in-person social interaction by screen interaction seems to be reducing social skills.”⁵ At the same time, we are currently living in a more “connected” society, more so than ever before in history. New studies are telling us that there is a direct correlation between social media and an increase in the diagnosis of mood and anxiety disorders as well.⁶ Another recent study showed a correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the increased feeling of social isolation.⁷ With this being the current social reality for many students and their parents, there has also been a noted decline in the capacity to engage in intellectual dialogue that may have multiple points of view. My students struggle with being able to articulate what they think, not always because they aren’t able to do the analysis, but rather because they fear push back. They fear upsetting someone in person and having to sit in the discomfort of not having a tidy solution to our society’s greatest ethical quandaries such as abortion, death penalty, euthanasia, and gun control. Students aren’t aware of what that looks like or feels like. Their emotional literacy seems to have atrophied with limited face-to-face interaction.

One way that I have seen for students to increase their emotional literacy, aside from moral dilemmas, is in the pedagogical practice of graded discussions of ethical texts. My community of learners is very driven by grades, and that is, at times, at the heart of their understanding of academic success. As we explore ethical concepts such as justice, morality, and the social contract, students are asked to find current event articles that connect the central idea that we are studying at the time. For example, after we have analyzed Plato’s *Crito*, we evaluate Dr. King’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail and then consider John Rawls’s “Veil of Ignorance” from his work *Theory of Justice*, as three unique perspectives on the

⁴ Yalda T. Uhls et al., “Five Days at Outdoor Education Camp without Screens Improves Preteen Skills with Nonverbal Emotion Cues,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 39 (October 2014): 387–392, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563214003227>.

⁵ Stuart Wolpert, “In Our Digital World, Are Young People Losing the Ability to Read Emotions?,” *UCLA Newsroom*, August 21, 2014, last accessed January 3, 2020, <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/in-our-digital-world-are-young-people-losing-the-ability-to-read-emotions>. Reprinted on August 22, 2014 in *ScienceDaily*, last accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140822094240.htm>.

⁶ Jean M. Twenge et al., “Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among US Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time,” *Clinical Psychological Science* 6 no. 1 (2018): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702617723376>.

⁷ Brian A. Primack et al., “Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation among Young Adults in the US,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53, no. 1 (2017): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010>.

meaning of justice. Then, students are asked to look for instances in our modern world that connect to what they have discerned to be justice. I have created a format for the graded discussions that stems from students finding and analyzing a current news article that they perceive has to do with justice—whether it is justice as fairness, justice as a break in the social contract, or even retributive justice. Students are graded on several levels, first on their level of analysis, then on their contributions to the discussion. Do they make specific references to the article and a concept of justice that we have learned without simply restating what someone else said? Are they attempting to contribute consistently and effectively, by staying on topic, but also by not attempting to dominate conversation? Are they showing respect for the speaker by actively listening, not multitasking? Do the students' comments take the conversation further, or do they repeat the same idea over and over?

On the day of the graded discussion, students sit in a Harkness format and begin to share summaries of their articles. The “Harkness format” is the term given to an approach in which students work as a learning community wrestling with materials, exercising their voices, and collaborating to make meaning curriculum materials whether those be a primary source text, a science experiment, or a math problem. The role of the teacher is redefined as a curriculum planner and, in the classroom, a co-learner. The role of the student is equally redefined to be an active participant in class discussions, engaging with peers to create meaning from materials. This approach promotes equity, and it values the contribution of all voices in the classroom; it is grounded in the belief that “none of us is as smart as all of us”.⁸ This definition by Katherine Cadwell makes the Harkness format the ideal structure for the graded discussion in my course. Students pose two questions regarding the theme of justice, and then they discuss. Similar to most Socratic seminars, students ask questions of each other as they explore, evaluate, and examine the issue presented.

The conversation sometimes gets heated and at times loud, but my role as an educator is to facilitate students to lean into the discomfort. Prior to our first graded discussion, I show them a clip from a BBC program called *Big Questions*. The clip shows several bad practices of group discussions. The moderator is extremely biased, only a few people are able to speak, and at times, some of the people demean the ideas of others. My students watch the clip and identify the practices that they think didn't work well. We then as a class establish norms for discussions. Since they take ownership of how the flow of conversation should look, my role often is to keep the pace. I make sure that students who would like to add their ideas but are struggling to jump in are heard, and I ensure that in their excitement, students are not devolving into side conversations. It is my practice to not add my own perspective to the discussion. I have found that once students think they know my point of view, they are reluctant to continue to iron out their own. Depending on the flow of the discussion, learners share information about their families, parents' occupations or illnesses, struggles of cousins with addiction, or grandparents with Alzheimer's; what may begin as a simply-posed question leads to complex conversation in which each student strengthens their capacity for empathy. It is my objective through

⁸ Katherine Cadwell, “Transforming the Classroom,” *Strategies for Classroom Dialogue*, last accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.katherinecadwell.com/transforming-the-classroom>.

the repeated exercise of graded discussions that we see the beginnings of the evolution of students' moral identity and the growth of their emotional intelligence.

In their paper, "The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Building Interpersonal Communication Skills," Amalia Petrovici and Tatiana Dobrescu outline the following regarding emotional literacy:

Interpersonal intelligence involves verbal and nonverbal communication skills, relating and collaboration skills, conflict management skills, promoting team spirit, respecting others and being respected. On a complex level, this type of intelligence translates into the individual's ability to distinguish among the various interpersonal relationships and the ability to respond efficiently to the respective situations, as well as to guess and interpret the hidden reactions of others.⁹

Iterative opportunities to engage others where they are, regardless of what they believe about how we should live in the world and why they believe it, allows for students to become deeply aware of their emotional understandings and those of others. This is critical to the development of empathy.

Moral Identity

As educators, we must recognize that humans are not fully formed beings. We learn as we grow. We never arrive at a moment of time when we finished, complete, or defined. With this in mind, the educator has the moral obligation to assist students in their moral-identity development. This is achieved through exposure to a variety of different ideas. Just as an English teacher might select William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Toni Morrison works as required reading to represent very different styles, voices, and intentions, as an ethics teacher, I must do the same. It is important for students to read ancient texts such as pieces from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Principles of Political Rights*, but it is of equal importance for them to read bell hooks or Ayn Rand.

Students must engage the voices of the *other* in order to create new and multifaceted questions about their own value systems. The more variety of in the points of view they engage as authorities, the greater their aptitude for empathy. For example, my students read a chapter from Trevor Noah's book, *Born a Crime*, entitled "Go Hitler!" In this piece, Noah tells the story of being a DJ in South Africa and having a friend named Hitler. He explains that there was very little teaching of western history, and as the story unfolds, the reader learns shockingly the truth of that. My students deeply empathize with Noah even as they are shocked by the outcome. We discuss cultural differences and how they may shape the way others see the world. As this occurs, topics of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economics and ethnicity come up.

We also read an excerpt from Cornell West's *Race Matters*, and another from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Both provide insight into ethical questions and demand an empathetic response. As a class,

⁹ Amalia Petrovici and Tatiana Dobrescu, "The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Building Interpersonal Communication Skills," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 116 (2014): 1405–1410, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.406>.

we consider whether we believe society has changed much since these publications and what role we believe they have in our understanding of morality. It is in these discussions that students construct their own moral identity; developing moral identity is about process. Consequently, students are asked to engage in various metacognitive strategies. For example, students are asked to consider what they already think about a concept such as “justice” and who or what has informed that thinking. In my classroom, learners are also asked to consider what they do not understand, whether it is in a discussion or lecture, which allows them to become more self-aware.¹⁰ Self-awareness is one of the fundamental elements to possessing a deeper sense of moral identity and, ultimately, empathy.

Perspective-Taking

In addition to the traditional and often more esoteric pursuits of this ethics course, students also engage in various simulations such as *Spent*.¹¹ *Spent* is an online simulation created by the Urban Ministries of Durham that allows students to see how the practicalities of life can lead to extremely difficult and stressful life choices for the majority of Americans today. It walks students through making various life events such as obtaining a job, paying monthly expenses, and choosing health care. The simulation invites students to consider potential food and/or housing insecurity and unexpected occurrences that can negatively impact an individual's ability to work and live. These types of simulations allow for students to understand others in different life circumstances. This is especially important for my students because they come from a very affluent population. The idea of having food insecurity, housing insecurity, or lacking proper access to healthcare are not concerns for any of my students. Therefore, this type of simulation allows for them to manipulate possible choices, some circumstances, and potentially intellectually understand the experiences of others whose reality is very different from their own.

Whether through the *Spent* simulation, the classic Heinz dilemma posed by Lawrence Kohlberg, or more modern-life scenarios, students in my classes are asked repeatedly to consider what it may be like to be in someone else's shoes through perspective-taking exercises. As with *Euthyphro*, many of these exercises take the form of moral dilemmas that invite students to imagine the inner struggles of others. For example, one dilemma in their textbooks tells the story of a father who euthanizes his own daughter because she is in constant pain from Cerebral Palsy. She was a twelve-year-old girl with the capacity of a three-month-old, and after years of surgeries and medications didn't improve her condition, her father took it upon himself to end her life. The mother's response appears to be relief, and when he is taken to court the initial jury believing this was an act of mercy sentences the father to only one year in prison. The Canadian Supreme Court intercedes, stating the minimum sentence must be at least ten years.¹² This true story usually shakes the students in my class to their core.

¹⁰ Nathaniel S. Eckland et al., “A Multi-Method Investigation of the Association between Emotional Clarity and Empathy,” *Emotion* 18, no. 5 (2018): 638–645, <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000377>.

¹¹ <https://umdurham.org/spent.html>

¹² Stuart Rachels and James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019).

I always start our conversation with a series of survey-style questions, looking at the case piece-by-piece in hopes of giving them an opportunity to organize their feelings. I begin by asking for a show of hands: how many of you understand what the father did?; How many of you agree with what the father did?; How many of you agree it was an act of mercy? And so on. We define certain terms such as Cerebral Palsy. We discuss the range of effect of the disease on the brain and a person's ability. We discuss how a typical three-month-old communicates. I try to paint the picture so we can sincerely imagine why this father would have committed such an act. We empathize. We may not agree. But we empathize.

This moment also allows me to remind my students that the study of ethics isn't filled with millions of perfect answers so we can all live correct lives, but rather it provides small glimpses into the lives of many so we can each be a little bit better. Most things in life are not black or white, this or that, right or wrong. Instead, they are filled with ambiguity and discomfort and at the very heart of that is the true human experience. Helping our students be more empathetic people directly connects with our purpose as educators, which is to create a better future for us all.

Socrates does not walk away with an ideal definition of piety, but he does walk away with a better understanding of Euthyphro. He knows that Euthyphro believes he is being fair because prosecuting the wrongdoer regardless of your relationship is the right thing to do. Socrates learns that Euthyphro frames his understanding of right conduct based on what all the gods love and, whether that may be confusing or questionable to Socrates, it seems to make sense to Euthyphro. Similarly, my students engage in moral dilemmas and other exercises to clarify their own emotional literacy, moral identity, and perspective-taking so that they might understand the other —so that they might develop empathy.

Finding a Way into Empathy through Story Exercises in a Religious Studies Classroom

Mary E. Hess, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

I am thoroughly aware, as I sit down to write this piece, of the vastly differing settings in which members of the AAR teach and learn. Digital media scholars have noted that we are living in a time of context collapse, yet as religion scholars, we know that context matters a great deal.¹ Contexts have a huge impact on the ways in which learning unfolds, as well as any content we seek to teach. This essay is, then, a situated piece that I offer from my specific setting. I hope that it will prove evocative for you, igniting your interest in the ways in which story exercises can prove useful in a religious studies classroom. I hope readers will share both how these ideas resonate with, and how they contest, their own practices.

I write as a Roman Catholic scholar of religious education who has served on the faculty of an ELCA Lutheran seminary in Minnesota for nearly twenty years. I am a white cisgender female, married to a white cisgender male, the parent of two adult sons, and thoroughly immersed in all sorts of intersectional privilege. Additionally, I have been a media educator since high school, and I have continued to seek—through my undergraduate degree in American studies, my master’s in theological studies, and ultimately my doctoral program in religion and education—ways to engage digital media that are creative, participatory, and grounded in relevant scholarship. I am keenly aware of how little value the academy often places on such work within tenure and promotion decisions, and that is yet another arena in which I’ve tried to encourage engagement with digital storytelling.

I share these elements not only to situate and circumscribe what I say here, but also to note that it is precisely because so many of my teachers over the years have sought to deepen and develop my empathy that I have even agreed to take on the writing of this essay. Further, I would note that there

¹ Michael Wesch, “Context Collapse,” *Digital Ethnography*, July 31, 2008, available via Internet Archive WayBack Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191022102902/http://mediatedcultures.net/youtube/context-collapse/>.

Mary E. Hess, “Storying Faith: The Promises and Contradictions of New Media in Catholic Religious Education,” in *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*, ed. Michael T. Buchanan and Adrian-Mario Gelle (New York: Springer, 2015).

Mary E. Hess, “Using Digital Media and Storytelling to Unearth Racism and Galvanize Action,” in *Teaching Race: How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge Racism*, ed. Stephen D. Brookfield (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2018).

has been such an explosion in neuroscience and neuropsychology, that new insights offer us additional pragmatic ways into this work—about which I’ll have more to say in a moment.

Back in 2008, William Safire wrote this about empathy in the *New York Times*:

If you think *empathy* is the synonym of sympathy, I’m sorry for your confusion. Back to the Greeks: *pathos* is “emotion.” *Sympathy* feels pity for another person’s troubles, secondarily a sense of allegiance; *empathy* identifies with whatever is going on in another’s mind or in a work of art—visual, dramatic, musical—whether merry or morose, hanging loose or uptight. The Greek prefix *sym* means “together with, alongside”; the verbal prefix *em* goes deeper, meaning “within, inside.” When you’re sympathetic, your arm goes around the shoulders of others; when you’re *empathetic*, your mind lines up with what’s going on inside their heads. Big difference...²

When you develop empathy with someone or something, you are reaching beyond your own experience, you are seeking to “feel with” and to step into compassion (*com-passio* “suffer- with”). Such a standpoint is not about pity or sorrow for another’s experience, and can often require an acknowledgement that we do not know, perhaps can never know, what the other is experiencing, yet we can still seek to be present, to listen carefully, and to receive without judgement. In a time of rampant polarization and ideological pressure to make and fear “others,” empathy is a key capacity we need to develop. This form of listening, this kind of experiential attention, is a vital element of transformative learning in religious studies.³

But how can we do this? Educators are keen to point out that human beings are storytellers: we tell stories to make sense of ourselves, to make sense of the world around us, and to build shared realities. The challenge right now is that we are immersed in vast oceans of stories, and increasingly our efforts to make sense of them cluster around the dynamics of authenticity and agency.⁴ In the past a story might have had authority because it came to us from an authoritative figure—a teacher, a religious leader, and so on—but today in the midst of the vast ocean of digital information, a story often has power and credibility only to the extent that we deem it authentic. Further, we may find ourselves giving it only as much attention as is required to act upon it in some way. Thus, authority develops both via elements of authenticity and via elements of agency.⁵

² William Safire, “Nuance,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2008, MM24. Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07wwln-safire-t.html?searchResultPosition=37>.

³ Mary E. Hess, “Teaching and Learning Comparative Theology with Millennial Students,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016): 50–60.

⁴ Mary E. Hess, “Responding to the Challenges of Religious Storying in a Digital Age: Building New Opportunities through Feautor.org,” in *Erzählen - Reflexionen im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung / Storytelling – Reflections in the Age of Digitalization*, eds. Yvonne Gächter et al. (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2008): 112–126.

⁵ Mary E. Hess, 2017. “Exploring the Epistemological Challenges Underlying Civic Engagement by Religious Communities,” *The Good Society Special Issue: On Reintegrating Facts, Values, Strategies* 26 nos. 2-3 (2017): 305–322.

Already you can see that developing empathy through story requires the ability to hear and speak one's own story in more complex terms, as well as the capacity to engage other stories—particularly those which might challenge, confront, or even counter our personal stories. Teachers can support this process if we are clear about what it means to expand students' capacities in the midst of context collapse. We need to nurture their abilities to see and engage complexity, alongside supporting their creative communication skills.

Digital social media function via algorithms that more and more put in front of us stories which confirm and support our existing biases, causing us to develop what Merlyna Lim has labelled “algorithmic enclaves,” which are “formed whenever a group of individuals, aided by their constant interactions with algorithms, attempt to create a (perceived) shared identity online for sharing with each other, defending their beliefs and protecting their resources from both real and perceived threats.”⁶

Further, because the economic engine which drives social media is attention – that is, the longer you “pay” attention to a given site, the more the ads will pay the advertiser – and because human attention has evolved over eons to focus on threat assessment, these algorithms serve up ever more intense stories which provoke our fear and our anger, rather than evoking calm, peaceful presence, awe, and so on. Indeed, neurological studies have demonstrated that one of the most effective ways to counter the “fight, flight, or freeze” pattern that is our primitive response to threat is to evoke wonder.⁷ Clearly, it is not in the economic best interests of advertisers to ease our fear or dampen our anger by engaging our wonder. Instead, we need to grow empathy by modeling a different set of responses, what Anita Farber-Robertson has called specific social virtues:

- Helpfully support people (this means help individuals to become aware of the reasoning processes; help them become aware of gaps and inconsistencies)
- Respect people (this means human beings are capable of and interested in learning)
- Be strong (this means behavior reflects a high capacity for advocacy coupled with a high capacity for inquiry and vulnerability without feeling threatened)

⁶ Merlyna Lim, “Beyond Fake News: Social Media and Market-driven Political Campaigns,” *The Conversation*, September 5, 2017, retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/beyond-fake-news-social-media-and-market-driven-political-campaigns-78346>. This piece is an edited excerpt from Merlyna Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411-427.

⁷ Kate Murphy, “Outsmarting our Primitive Responses to Fear,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2017, last accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>.

Harvard Health Publishing, “Understanding the Stress Response,” 2018, last accessed on January 3, 2020, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>.

- Maintain integrity (this means advocate and act on your point of view in such a way as to encourage confrontation and inquiry into it)⁸

Hearing Our Own Stories with Complexity

The learning challenge here is two-fold: how to help our students to slow down enough to hear their own stories, and then how to provoke them to curiosity about other stories while in a state of wonder rather than fear. There are myriad ways to do this, and scholars of education such as Parker Palmer, Stephen Brookfield and Alison James, and Cathy Davidson have written extensively exploring these dynamics.⁹ Here I simply want to lift up an exercise that I've found particularly relevant and powerful in the study of religion (either from an insider's view, through theology, or from a more distanced view in religious studies), and that is digital storytelling.

I want to emphasize that this is a very specific process which emerged first in community theater as an improvisational form of story creation, and was then infused with digital tools. StoryCenter (previously the Center for Digital Storytelling) developed what Sonja Vivienne concisely defines as "a workshop-based participatory media practice focused on self-representation."¹⁰ This mode of learning asks, first, that participants tell their own story in the context of several different kinds of story exercises aimed at helping participants to attend carefully to the meaning which emerges, and then helps participants to embed those stories in digital media which can be widely shared. Here are two examples of the narrative exercises that I have used with my own classes.

In general, I have used these as opening exercises, early in a course, to build shared context and to assess student readiness for more complexity. In a world permeated by digital media we endure many competing and often conflicting claims on our attention. Students have little experience with the kind of careful listening which invites awareness of, let alone engagement with, complexity. If we give our students a simple set of "rules" with which to listen to each other, they can begin to develop the neurological "muscle memory" necessary for engaging complexity and leaning into empathy.

⁸ Anita Farber-Robertson, *Learning while Leading: Increasing Your Effectiveness in Ministry* (The Alban Institute, 2000), 27.

⁹ See Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

Alison James and Stephen D. Brookfield, *Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

Cathy N. Davidson, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (New York: Viking, 2011).

¹⁰ Sonja Vivienne, *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism: Sharing Private Stories with Networked Publics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 1.

<https://www.storycenter.org/>

I know that faculty can feel anxious at the thought of devoting class time to such exercises, worrying that doing so detracts from what may already feel like limited space for specific content, but in my experience these kinds of exercises actually lay the groundwork for accomplishing more with various kinds of content, because they offer an enjoyable way for teachers to assess where students are, and give students an enjoyable invitation to bring their voices into the classroom.

Basic Four-Role Story Circle

Begin by placing people into groups of four. Doing so is obviously logistically easier if you have a small class, but even a very large class can do this exercise if you have sufficient room for people to spread out and have enough space in which to listen to each other.

Explain that each group will do four rounds of storytelling, in each round one person is invited to tell a story with a time limit (usually three minutes), and then the other three participants listen to that story in a specific way. You might, for example, invite people tell a story such as:

- A moment in which you questioned what religion is
- A moment in which you experienced a glimpse of transcendence (or the divine)
- A moment in which you encountered a different faith and wondered about it

After the storyteller finishes, the other three people reflect on what they heard from their role as a specific listener:

- Factual Listener – this person listens for the facts or actions of the story
- Feelings Listener – this person listens for the feelings expressed or embodied in the story
- Values Listener – this person listens for the values embedded in the story

Once a round has concluded, the roles rotate one person to the next, and the process is repeated. If you offer people three minutes to tell a story, and then roughly ten minutes for the other three people to share what they heard, you can complete all four rounds in approximately an hour.

Story Titling Exercise

This exercise does not require a specific number of people per group, although three to five people is optimum.

Here one person tells a brief story while the other members of the group listen carefully. Prompts similar to the ones above are useful. Once the storyteller is finished, they turn their back to the other circle participants and listen as the circle participants offer potential titles for the story. After all possible titles are suggested the storyteller turns back around and chooses one, explaining why it appeals to them. If none of the titles “work” for them, the storyteller can offer a different title.

The process of turning away from the other group members invites the storyteller to focus on what they are hearing, rather than the person who is sharing the title. It also embodies a form of distancing oneself and then turning back into the group. As noted earlier, empathy requires moving beyond mere “feeling with” to a deeper kind of listening and engagement.

Neuropsychologists have pointed out that how we process facial information differs from how we process other forms of visual information, because facial information is so crucial to communication.¹¹ Turning away as we listen, so that we are not looking directly at the faces of people offering titles, perhaps paradoxically helps us to listen more carefully to what we are hearing, rather than processing what we see. Of course, we then must turn back directly. It is this rhythm of shifting our focus back and forth that is also important as we move from our own stories to other people’s stories.

Here again it helps to suggest that stories be limited to no more than three minutes, and to make sure that there is a time limit on the discussion of titles. If you’re doing this exercise with lots of small groups, then you can also collect the set of titles from each group as a “table of contents” and offer them to the wider group to ignite curiosity about the stories.

Each of these exercises offers a basic introduction to listening carefully. Because the story circles are shaped with an explicit set of ground rules, a space is created in which a story can be “held” rather than having the storyteller “be held” by it. This practice in careful listening is generally experienced as both powerful and engaging by participants and can be useful in many parts of a class, although I would suggest that it is a good exercise for early in a semester or workshop, as it helps to create an engaged and productive atmosphere.

In digital storytelling, this first set of exercises tills the ground for the next steps in which the student/participant will hone in on a kernel of the story with which they want to work further. Then the digital aspect becomes more present, as students take their story, audio record it, and then add images, music, and in some cases video excerpts from other productions, into a short (generally three minutes long) digital story which can then be uploaded to Vimeo or some other cloud storage platform to be shared.

In the research literature on digital storytelling as a learning modality, scholars describe experiences of empowerment, connection, even transcendence. Caleb Nathaniel Paull, for instance, investigated the experiences of participants in a digital storytelling workshop in the context of his doctoral program in adult education. Among other observations, he noted that:

In the process of creating their digital stories, both Shannon and Arne came to feel validated and empowered both as the subjects they portrayed through story and as the “authors” of story. In reflecting on experiences they deemed important, then having to make conscious choices about how to represent these experiences, what to include and what to leave out, the digital

¹¹ Joel Z. Leibo et al., “Why the Brain Separates Face Recognition from Object Recognition,” *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 24, NIPS Proceedings* (2011), <https://papers.nips.cc/paper/4318-why-the-brain-separates-face-recognition-from-object-recognition>.

storytellers were expressing experience to themselves in particular ways, objectifying their stories and shaping them around certain perspectives. The conscious construction of a point of view in the digital stories involved interpreting and repurposing the past from a present context.¹²

Roger McQuiston engaged in a participatory action project for his doctor of ministry degree that utilized a confirmation program in a Lutheran church as its foundation. He writes that:

As our students and parents have demonstrated, digital technology has something to teach us. It can make the study of the Bible and our traditions fun and entertaining, deeply immersive and engaging, but it can do much more. It can enable us to return to a kind of secondary orality that has at its core an experiential component that the written word yearns to teach us. The Word oftentimes lies captive, inert and lifeless on the written page. Yet as the story is creatively told and embodied, the Word can break free of its paper prison and breathe again. Digital technology can help the Word, the teller and the hearer, interact on a deeper level. An ancient way of experiencing the text can be recovered, if not completely, then in part. The recovery is well worth the effort and risk.¹³

Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg noted that the youth with whom they worked in digital story projects found a venue for sharing their understanding of their faith in a way that their environment had previously suppressed:

Because of its accessibility and ease of use, digital storytelling has come to be of interest among religious groups, particularly among communities that wish to counter misinformation or stereotypes that might lead others to make false assumptions about who they are or what they stand for. Participating in such processes of story creation can help members of misunderstood communities to recognize their agency and claim their right to tell their own story, first within the story circle and later, advocates hope, within broader circles of influence.¹⁴

I quote these scholars at length because I want to emphasize the ways in which taking a story and focusing sustained attention on it through the development of a digital version of that story—a version which is then deliberately made available in wider contexts—creates an experiential process in which participants work at intentionally crafting context for their own story, and then in sharing it, learn something of the challenges involved in moving across contextual boundaries.

¹² Paull, Caleb Nathaniel Paull, "Self-perceptions and Social Connections: Empowerment through Digital Storytelling in Adult Education" (EdD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 217.

¹³ Roger McQuiston, "Digital Disciples: Reconceptualizing Adolescent Confirmation Instruction by Combining Biblical Storytelling and Digital Media" (DMin thesis, United Theological School, Dayton, Ohio, 2007), 99–100.

¹⁴ Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg, "Digital Storytelling and Collective Religious Identity in a Moderate to Progressive Youth Group," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 150.

But why is the experience of this process so engaging? I think it's possible that somewhere in the middle of the context collapse we live within, creating and publishing a digital story helps persons to develop a more robust array of mirror neurons, the underlying neurological structures at the heart of building empathy. There appears to be a resonance, an alignment, between the experiences media educators and digital storytellers speak of in their work, with the kinds of practices that therapists investigating the function of mirror neurons describe.¹⁵ Mirror neurons are a particular element in our brains that appear to be deeply implicated in the process of empathy development. Here is Daniel Stern's description of mirror neurons:

Mirror neurons sit adjacent to motor neurons. They fire in an observer who is doing nothing but watching another person behave (e.g., reaching for a glass). And the pattern of firing in the observer mimics the pattern that the observer would use if he were reaching for that glass, himself. In brief, the visual information received when watching another act gets mapped on to the equivalent motor representation in our own brain by the activity of these mirror neurons. It permits us to directly participate in another's actions, without having to imitate them. This "participation" in another's mental life creates a sense of feeling/sharing with/understanding them, and in particular their intentions and feelings.¹⁶

I think it is possible that the mechanisms being explored in the research on mirror neurons and the experiences being reported within digital storytelling may be similar if not the same phenomena viewed through different lenses. I am not a neuropsychologist, and sometimes that literature feels as opaque to me as the literature on theology no doubt feels to religious studies scholars. At the same time, however, I am the parent of a child who is not typical in neurological terms, and over the years, I have found that the ways in which our medical professionals have helped me to parent are remarkably similar to the ways in which education scholars have invited me to think about supporting learning complexity.

One example that strikes me afresh every year has to do with what I've learned about implicit biases. Neuropsychologists have helped us to see how we bring unconscious and/or subconscious biases to our experiences. Until I was invited to see how my unconscious assumptions about parenting were preventing me from really seeing and hearing my child, I was caught up in very painful interpretations of his behavior which short-circuited any attempts on my part to support his development. I have

¹⁵ Stein Bråten, ed., *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2007).

Alan K. Davis, "Co-authoring Identity: Digital Storytelling in an Urban Middle School," *Then* (an online journal). Retrieved from <http://sim.soe.umich.edu/then/index.php/then/article/view/32/31> on 1 September 2019.

Davis, Alan K. (2004). "Co-authoring Identity: Digital Storytelling in an Urban Middle School," *THEN: Technology, Humanities, Education, & Narrative* 1 (2004). Made available by the author at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288938876_Co-authoring_identity_Digital_storytelling_in_an_urban_middle_school.

¹⁶ Daniel N. Stern, 2007. "Applying Developmental and Neuroscience Findings on Other-centered Participation to the Process of Change in Psychotherapy," in Bråten, *On Being Moved*, 37.

experienced something that feels very resonant with that experience in my classrooms around race. Growing up as a white person in a society dominated by white supremacy and white nationalism here in the United States, I absorbed racism so deeply that my biases often short-circuit my ability to be present to my students—particularly those who have been minoritized in this country—in ways that support their growth and learning. This is yet another place in which I believe the distinctions between sympathy and empathy are very pertinent. I cannot “feel with” my students of color—and my not neurotypical child—because I will never inhabit their spaces. But I can learn to listen deeply, respond with humility, and grow my capacity to inhabit complexity. I can deepen my empathy—both in recognizing my own limits, and in leaning into embracing with delight the differences each of us brings to our relationships.

In my experience, helping students to uncover and express their own stories about religion and religious experience is only an initial starting point in building an opportunity to engage and learn other religious stories. If we cannot help students claim their own religious stories (or for that matter, the lack of one, which is increasingly the case), it is virtually impossible to help them engage another that is quite outside their default contexts.

Thus far, I have described ways in which storytelling exercises can support deepening of students’ awareness of the complexity of their own stories. The second half of this process has to do with supporting their engagement with stories from quite different traditions, stories which in effect provoke cognitive dissonance for them.

Hearing Each Others’ Stories, and the Stories of Communities through Time

Religious traditions are a vast repository of stories. But the challenge of determining which stories are authentic, and in what ways they might have authority, is a critical learning challenge. Helping our students to discern the distinctions between what their familiar personal experiences deem as authentic, and what a very different religious experience would claim, requires helping them first to perceive and “hold” their experiences, rather than “being held” by them. That is, they need to find ways to have enough distance from their immediate experience to see it with clarity and empathy, and then they need the scaffolding which can help them to take that experience and draw from it a capacity to encounter a very different experience with a similar degree of openness and curiosity.

Here is where the element of agency becomes particularly relevant. We need to help our students experience the process of cognitive dissonance, of a conflict between what they think they know and what we want them to explore and experience in new ways. We also need them to experience cognitive dissonance as an invitation to wonder, rather than as a prompt for fear. Giving them agency in a creative process, inviting them into an exercise which they have considerable choice in terms of which of their own stories to tell, and how to tell them, offers robust opportunities for doing so.

Far too many of our students have been immersed in a set of dominant or stock stories¹⁷ which invite them to encounter difference either as something to fear or perhaps as something simply to accept—but not as in any way relevant to them; a form of relativist “you believe this, I believe that, and both are fine,” response. Helping our students learn how to speak from their own experiences with authenticity and authority, and then recognize that doing so frees them to encounter difference in such a way that they are vulnerable to new ideas, is a key element of what transformative learning entails. It is precisely what we intend when we seek to support them in developing greater empathy.

There are vast repositories of digital media which document and explore religious experiences in myriad ways (the Pluralism Project is one such source¹⁸). We can use these materials in supporting students to engage traditions quite different from their own by igniting their curiosity about such a tradition, and then curating appropriate materials with which they can engage in learning.

I mentioned earlier in this essay that we need to attend to authenticity, authority, and agency. Here I would add a second trio of actions—ignite, curate, and practice. The practice we need to give our students as we seek to develop their empathy is practice in being present in nonjudgmental ways to their own discomfort when engaging difference.

More and more of us in the higher education setting are teaching in spaces that are thoroughly permeated by digital media. This is a double-edged reality—it is both full of opportunities to build shared context, to invite wonder, to support transformative learning—and it is all too easy to ignore our students’ needs and simply throw material at them that is largely decontextualized (other than within the rather arcane languages of scholarship). I fear that we then tend to blame students themselves when they don’t transform their patterns. We need to step outside of our own comfort zones, let go of the need to “cover” a field, and instead focus on helping our students to “discover” and “recover” religious practices and religious meaning-making in specific contexts. This work is at the center of confronting context collapse, and once it is learned within religious studies, it is transferrable to other content areas.

The key is to focus on the enduring understandings you seek to support.¹⁹ In my classrooms, I am interested in supporting an enduring ability to ask good questions, to honor and respect difference, and to have thoughtful, critically responsible research habits. I use the specific content of a given course to create assignments that give students practice in these elements.

Using a digital storytelling process in its fullness is not a one-session process. Linda Buturian’s significant and profound book *The Changing Story: Digital Stories that Participate in Transforming Teaching and Learning* explores how faculty in higher education can offer that kind of scaffolding throughout an entire

¹⁷ Lee Anne Bell et al., *The Storytelling Curriculum Project: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts* (New York: Storytelling Project, Barnard College, 2008), 8–9. Last accessed January 3, 2020, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/education/stp/stp_curriculum.pdf.

¹⁸ <http://pluralism.org>

¹⁹ Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD Publishing, 2003).

semester.²⁰ Her book offers substantial support for this kind of teaching/learning design, including multiple examples of specific assignments, as well as pieces created by students across many different semesters. In my setting, I have used tools such as Animoto and MoodleCloud (both of which have free educator accounts), SoundCloud, and indeed many of the same platforms and tools with which students are already familiar. You can see some of the assignments my students have made, in the specific contexts in which I teach, at my website: <http://meh.religioused.org/web/studentprojects/>.

Studying one's own religion (through critical philosophical and theological engagement) and studying someone else's religion (through rigorous religious studies frameworks) offers rich opportunities to learn precisely how to inhabit this kind of perspective-taking standpoint. The skills learned in that process deepen empathy, and invite precisely the kind of nuanced and thoughtful engagement with difference that are so necessary in the worlds we inhabit today.

²⁰ Linda Buturian, *The Changing Story: Digital Stories that Participate in Transforming Teaching and Learning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016). Available open access at <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/267>.

Beyond Empathy in Prison Education

Erin Runions, Pomona College

We pass the commissary as we walk across the prison yard to our writing workshop. It's a small trailer, with ramps zig-zagging up to the window where purchases are made. Women wait in line on the ramps, while others linger below, leaning or sitting on concrete. As we pass, they call out, "What class is this?" "That one looks like my daughter." "Why are you here?" "What are you looking at?" "I like that outfit!"

This walk has become familiar over the past fourteen years. I look forward to hearing these comments and the brief conversations they provoke. On their first visit though, my college students report that they feel uncomfortable. What is their role here? How should they respond? Course readings and their own social awareness have prepared them for the deep injustices of prison, but not necessarily for the actual feeling of being inside a prison and themselves being scrutinized.

I take students from the Claremont Colleges to be co-learners with students incarcerated in two minimum-security facilities. I do so because I believe it can contribute to dismantling the deep injustices of the prison-industrial complex, and because it offers support and attentiveness to people inside. Undergraduate students from outside the prison wrestle with their positionality and role throughout the semester. But by the end of our classes in the prison, they are far less anxious because they have entered into relationships, conversations, collective analysis, and shared work. These exercises fundamentally change how they think about prisons, who is held there, and how to engage the systems that sustain the prison-industrial complex.

Is it empathy that I am trying to cultivate? I do want outside students to have an experience that changes how they act; for many this includes changing how they feel and making connections between their own lives and the lives of the people they meet inside. But empathy can be a vexed aspiration, especially in the context of incarceration, which has been fully shaped by histories and present practices of racism. Saidiya Hartman has written about the "precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator" in her discussion of racialized relations between abolitionists and slaves.¹ Given this thin line, and the very real possibility of a voyeuristic encounter, the students are right to interrogate their presence in the prison and the women are right to question their gaze.

¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

Indeed, empathy often relies on hierarchical subject/object relations, with a privileged subject pityingly looking at a disadvantaged “object,” as Carolyn Pedwell explains.² Worse, if empathy is an attempt to see through the eyes of the other, “the object of identification threatens to disappear,” as Hartman analyzes it.³ Empathy, on its own, can be little more than a reinforcement of the privileged subject position of the empathizer.

Frank Wilderson goes further in speaking of empathy in race relations, analyzing it as an impossibility. He stresses the need for structural analysis rather than empathy. In a conversation with Hartman, he says, “Subjects just can’t make common cause with objects.”⁴ Elsewhere, Wilderson speaks of anti-blackness as a structural position that utterly precludes empathy because “civic life requires social death so as not to implode from the pressure of incoherence. Blackness is the space and time of social death.”⁵ This obliterating structure of relations is central to the social order and forecloses empathy for Black people. Wilderson’s description of the position of Blackness could well be applied to prisons: they embody “the gratuitous violence which accrues to Black people...as the repetition compulsion of a world which requires such violence for its sense of self and peace of mind.”⁶ Wilderson, Hartman, and Pedwell raise extremely important questions for prison education and what it can accomplish.

Certainly, if the prison system is to change in any meaningful way, drastically more than empathy is needed. As the above critiques of empathy indicate, there are serious pitfalls to consider. Yet without face-to-face meetings with incarcerated people, many people would continue in an understanding of prisons as containing threat and producing peace of mind, rather than as structures enacting racist, classist, and sexist/trans/homophobic violence. Conversely, I think that students can have intellectual and affective encounters with incarcerated people in ways that can build common cause. For this to happen, the encounter cannot be a paternalistic relation of subject to object, or of inhabiting the shoes of another. In my view, the encounter must be accompanied by systemic analysis, awareness of difference and positionality, community building and mutual engagement, and collective creative thinking toward change.

Teaching for Change

I teach two prison education courses. Both are religious studies courses that interrogate the relation of religion—mostly Christianity—to the practice of punishment and to status quo notions of social redemption, as well as more radical ideas of transformative and restorative justice. One course involves

² Carolyn Pedwell, “De-Colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally” *Samyukta: A Journal of Women’s Studies, Special Issue, Decolonizing Theories of the Emotions* 16, no. 1 (2016): 27–49. Made available by the author at https://www.academia.edu/25905125/De-colonising_empathy_Thinking_affect_transnationally.

³ Hartman, 17.

⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.183>.

⁵ Frank B. Wilderson III, “‘Raw Life’ and the Ruse of Empathy,” in *Performance, Politics and Activism*, ed. Peter Lichtenfels and John Rouse (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 181–206. Quote on p. 185.

⁶ *Ibid.*

travel to a women's prison for a writing workshop, where inside and outside students learn together. The inside students get a certificate and time toward release, but unfortunately no college credit. This interdisciplinary class and workshop have been developed over many years with three colleagues who are longtime advocates for incarcerated women, Valorie Thomas, a scholar of African Diaspora studies in the English Department at Pomona College, Sue Castagnetto, director of the Intercollegiate Feminist Center of the Claremont Colleges, and Chris Guzaitis, now director of education and grants division at Illinois Humanities.

The second class is a full college credit course inside a men's prison, which I have only taught once thus far. Completing college credit courses gives the men additional time toward release. The possibility of providing college credit to incarcerated students is the recent result of sustained advocacy on the part of a dedicated group of faculty at the Claremont Colleges, and the willingness of college administrators to make it happen.

The pedagogical strategies used in both courses have been shaped by my involvement with a religion faculty cohort at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology & Religion, who collaborated on a grant and workshop on Pedagogies for Civic Engagement.⁷ In that thought space, we collectively identified four objectives for the kind of teaching that aspires to get students involved in the public sphere: intellectual complexity; analysis of systems and social location; *empathetic accountability*; and motivated action.⁸ Reflecting these ideas, my own pedagogy assumes that empathetic accountability can only really work in tandem with these other objectives. Empathetic accountability is not a voyeuristic subject-to-object empathy, but an encounter that moves to action from within mutual relations, analysis, and problem solving.

I try to develop empathetic accountability in three ways: 1) by assigning intellectually complex systemic analyses of race, class, gender, and economy and by having students develop awareness of positionality and differences within these systems; 2) by working to establish mutuality, community, and shared conversation in the classroom; and 3) by asking students collectively to imagine concrete steps toward change. Empathy is only *accountable* if interventions into the prison industrial complex are envisioned.

Systemic Analysis and Awareness of Positional Difference

Content and theory help to frame our time in prison and make students aware of the layers of racism and classism, economy, social norms, and religious teaching that have crushed incarcerated people in the United States. When the class is taught fully in prison, readings have to be vetted by prison officials; we read authors such as Angela Davis, W. E. B. DuBois, Bryan Stevenson, Jennifer Graber, Tanya Erzen and others. In the class with the six-week writing workshop, outside students read more of this kind of

⁷ Frederic Ware, review of Teaching Civic Engagement, eds. Forrest Clingerman and Reid B. Locklin, *Reflective Teaching*, https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/teaching-civic-engagement/.

⁸ See Reid B. Locklin with Ellen Posman, "Discourse, Democracy, and the Many Faces of Civic Engagement: Four Guiding Objectives for the University Classroom," in *Teaching Civic Engagement*, eds. Forrest Clingerman and Reid B. Locklin, (New York: Oxford University Press), 3–22.

framing material for classes held on the college campus—including Andrea Ritchie, Christina Sharpe, Lisa Maria Cacho; in the writing workshop itself, we focus on poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction by women of color.

Good framing is not enough, however; reflection is key, as some pedagogies of community engagement have suggested.⁹ Reflection helps students to make personal their learning, to integrate their academic learning with their emotional and social learning, and to move beyond any kind of voyeurism. Reflection can occur in reflection papers, peer discussion groups, and debrief sessions. In the full-credit class in prison, inside and outside students write weekly reflection papers. I particularly like this assignment as a way to check in with each student; in the other formats, I cannot hear all the conversations. Students have said in evaluations that the reflection papers are helpful for their learning; they have been equally valuable for me to understand what and how each person is learning.

Reflection also helps outside students to consider their own positionality and their difference from those who are incarcerated, even as they are experiencing similarities and connections with inside students. My colleague Valorie Thomas asked the following question to a class, and I have subsequently quoted her: Think about it, why are you *not* in prison? The question provokes the opposite of empathy; it asks students to understand all the contingencies by which they were able to make it to college instead of being funneled into prison. For some students, this question can cause survivors guilt, which is important to discuss in person or in feedback on reflection papers. For others, it allows recognition of systems of privilege, including the times when law enforcement was not called and might have been were surrounding circumstances different.

Mutual Engagement and Community Building

It is essential to make sure that the encounters between inside and outside students start out under the assumption that they are peers. It is not a helping relationship, where outside students are in the role of tutor. They are co-learners. I state this explicitly for outside students, multiple times. For the full class in prison, I interview students individually before accepting them into the class. This one-on-one time allows me to tell prospective students clearly and unequivocally that we are not going as helpers or as tourists.

In their guide for higher education in prison, Tanya Erzen, Mary Gould, and Jody Lewen suggest that in best practice, instructors “approach their incarcerated students in prison as capable, curious individuals and do not make assumptions about their abilities, interests, beliefs, backgrounds or goals based solely on the fact of their being incarcerated.”¹⁰ The guide emphasizes the need for instructors to have boundaries that do not “compel students’ self-disclosure or otherwise make students’ personal life

⁹ Joe Bandy, “Best Practices in Community Engaged Teaching,” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, last accessed December 29, 2019, <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/best-practices-in-community-engaged-teaching/>.

¹⁰ Tanya Erzen, Mary R. Gould, and Jody Lewen, *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison* (St. Louis, MO: Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2019), 28. www.higheredinprison.org.

experiences or backgrounds the focal point of their courses or otherwise exploit or violate the boundaries of their students.”¹¹ The same should be true of outside students interacting with their colleagues inside. For joint classrooms, separate introductory group meetings with inside and outside students can make these points clear.

One simple guideline can go a long way to avoid the violation of boundaries: insisting that all students use first names only and do not share last names. I learned this strategy from the Inside/Out Program, directed by Lori Pompa at Temple University.¹² This guideline protects everyone’s privacy and boundaries, and minimizes things like curious online surveillance. Certainly, inside students will sometimes share why they are incarcerated; but many have also expressed that it is rare that they are in an environment where this is not compelled and they do not feel judged.

Creating a shared community can also help with mutual engagement. Of course, community can’t be forced, and it can’t exactly be a stated expectation of the class. But creating a sense of mutual appreciation and shared experience can be powerful. As Erzen, Gould, and Lewen write, “For incarcerated students, the classroom creates a space to form lasting interpersonal bonds, and to develop a sense of community across cultural and racial lines. The community of the classroom enables students to form new peer groups and identities, away from the pressures and labels that are endemic to prison.”¹³ Although they are not speaking about joint classrooms, this work can also happen where inside and outside students come together. One inside student wrote at the end of the semester that he observed that positive communications in the classroom could carry over into interactions in the dorms and yard.

I find a few things very helpful in creating a shared space. These include: icebreakers, an abundance of small-group discussion, and a circle format for the large-group discussion. Many of the inside students have mentioned in reflection papers how important the icebreakers at the beginning of class are in getting to know each other and in offsetting the seriousness of the material. They asked me not to underestimate their necessity. Although I was at first apprehensive to include them in every class because of time restrictions, eventually I did so, to good effect. They help enormously in creating space of community, even if temporary.

I find many of these activities online and modify them to make sure questions do not accentuate differing life circumstances. For instance, I stay away from icebreaker questions about travel, since they clearly emphasize differences in mobility; this is not to say that incarcerated folks haven’t traveled, or that travel doesn’t come up, but prompts that easily call up summer vacations or study abroad—which can uncomfortably reveal disparities of privilege even in a non-carceral setting—are unsuitable in a setting where half the class is immobilized.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹² <https://www.insideoutcenter.org/>

¹³ Erzen, Gould, and Lewen, 9.

Guided small-group discussion are at the heart of my teaching in prison and help to form community. I do lecture to introduce ideas, clarify concepts in the readings, and set the framework; but every class or workshop involves substantial discussion in small groups comprised of inside and outside students. I provide prompts that home in on key points and ask students to make specific analytic moves. I have students physically move around between questions so that they talk with multiple people each class period.

For large-group discussions, the circle format is powerful. As the California Conference for Equality and Justice says in their restorative practices training materials, the circle acts as a container for the process. In a modification of restorative circle practice, I open and close class with a round of check-ins and check-outs. These take place after icebreakers. For these rounds, I use a talking piece (a sand dollar), which is passed in the circle. The talking piece authorizes people, especially quiet ones, to take the space to speak. Students can pass without talking if they wish. Check-ins include a few centering breaths and can be anything from, “What idea are you most excited about discussing from the readings?” to “What is one thing you observed this week, large or small, that makes the world a better place?” (Students answer from their daily lives, their interaction with friends and family, what they’ve seen on the news, etc.). Check-outs are often a version of, “What idea or thought are you taking away with you from today’s class?”

Large-group discussions are also aided by a talking piece. Because these classes have been large, I find it works well to ask students to limit their input to one comment per discussion item and to be mindful of airtime. Sometimes outside students have to be reminded to speak, that is, to be mutual in speaking, rather than assuming the space is only for incarcerated students to share their thoughts. I ask students to call on each other by name as they hand on the talking piece.

Wrestling with Enjoyment

It is worth pausing for a moment here to reflect before moving to my last point. The community building and educational process inside prison often feel very positive. As Charles Atkins, Joshua Dubler, Vincent Lloyd, and Mel Webb write, “[F]or many incarcerated college courses are a lifeline, and often to a stunning degree, as students, they *bring it* . . . [A]lmost invariably, a prison classroom is a charged educational environment in which extraordinary things happen.”¹⁴ Conversation flows easily. People are engaged. There is a lot of laughter. While there can be tensions and discomforts, for the most part inside and outside students have a good time. End of semester evaluations indicate that people have found the classroom community valuable and encouraging.

What does it mean to go into prison and have a good time? This point requires further reflection, especially in the light of Hartman’s writing on empathy. Hartman’s larger point is that even abolitionist empathy can be a colonizing form of enjoyment not unlike other forms of enjoyment extracted from slavery. As she writes, “The desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the

¹⁴ Charles Atkins, Joshua Dubler, Vincent Lloyd, and Mel Webb, “‘Using the Language of Christian Love and Charity’: What Liberal Religion Offers Higher Education in Prison,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 16.

material relations of chattel slavery.”¹⁵ Given that many have argued that prisons are an extension of slavery, what does it mean to teach in prison, in a way that does not used the racialized population there as a form of excess enjoyment?

Here it is crucial to think about *accountability*. To my mind, taking outside students into prisons for classes cannot be an end in itself. The experience of encounter, while powerful, could run the risk of being what Hartman calls a “sentimental resource,” enabled by the carceral system. Atkins, Dubler, Lloyd, and Webb acknowledge the importance of prison education but caution, “It is a dangerous vanity to mistake educating incarcerated people for a revolutionary praxis. Given the moral and social abomination for which, as Americans, we are collectively responsible, teaching a religion class to a group of incarcerated people is not nearly enough.”¹⁶ Instead, students need to begin to imagine together other ways to prevent and respond to social harm that does not involve threat, racism, caging, and abuse.

Collective Creative Thinking toward Change

To this end, both classes include a component where students think about changing the system. In the writing workshop, we think about writing as an agent for change somewhat generally. But in their outside coursework for the class attached to the workshop, students do a group project with two components: popular education for peers to raise awareness about an issue or problem for system-involved people; and an in-class presentation on interventions.

Popular education campaigns have included guerilla theater, art installations, opinion pieces in the student newspaper, poster campaigns, teach-ins and workshops, a zine-making event, interactive theater, a film screening with discussion, a YouTube video, a social media project, and so on. Students are asked to think about how their events would come across to people and communities affected by the system or the issues under consideration. They are asked to consider content warnings if the event could be triggering in any way.

For the in-class presentation, students research interventions into the problem for which they raised awareness in their popular education project. They look at interventions proposed by incarcerated folks, activists, community groups, and NGOs, and they propose one solution or intervention that they themselves can imagine. For each they are asked to evaluate the operative assumptions about punishment, redemption, or restoration.

Even better for collective thinking is the group project for the course taught fully inside. Together inside and outside students are asked to prepare a group presentation that explains a restorative or transformative justice theory, concept, or practice. This can be a strategy or practice that has worked, a theory about what is necessary, or a less well-known religious idea or text that has been used as a resource for restorative or transformative justice.

¹⁵ Hartman, 21.

¹⁶ Atkins, Dubler, Lloyd, and Webb, 16.

Groups are formed by doing a concept map around a question they have thought about ahead of time: What restorative justice and transformative justice practices do we want to know more about? Students write their ideas on the board, and I cluster the ideas. Students then indicate with post-it notes those issues that they would be happy to work on, in order of interest, and we form groups on the spot. Groups form around topics such as indigenous traditions; de-carcerating mental health; ethnic studies programs; children of the incarcerated, breaking the cycle; liberation theology; and family group conferences. (*Spotlight on Teaching* co-editor Jessica Tinklenberg, who is also program director of The Claremont Colleges Center for Teaching and Learning, helped me think through this process).

If they wish to foreground case studies of a particular kind of harm to be addressed by the practice, I suggest that they pick a *hypothetical* issue; in other words, it should not be taken directly from a group member's life story. They are asked to bear in mind the potential of upsetting people in the room who may have experienced trauma from social harm, including trauma in the system.

Students are encouraged to include participatory activities as part of their presentation. Particularly effective was one group's activity of a role-play for a family group conference. In this restorative practice, a person responsible for harm is put into conversation with the person harmed and community members. In small groups, students practiced listening to the imagined experience of the survivor and circumstances of the person responsible. Non-carceral community agreements were suggested, including agreements that would benefit the whole community, not just the involved parties.

Of course, these assignments don't actually change any material circumstances. But students begin a serious collective consideration of the wide range of societal problems that are too easily "solved" by incarceration. They are actively involved in envisioning alternative interventions and more radical thinking about responding to harm. I have anecdotal evidence that these courses have impacted the kinds of work some students go on to do, and it is something that the Critical Justice group at the Claremont Colleges has planned to follow more closely with the college credit courses. Such tracking is, in fact, essential for a claim that this kind of teaching creates change.

Concluding Reflection

The critique of empathy offered by Hartman, Wilderson, and Pedwell offers a vital caution to those of us involved in prison education, especially where inside and outside students learn together. The potential downsides of teaching in prison are clear: it could easily become something that gives further credibility to the system; it could produce the kind of colonizing enjoyment that Hartman analyzes; or it could lull outside students into thinking they'd done enough. These are sobering concerns, to be taken seriously.

Pedagogical design can and should think beyond empathy. Perhaps this means envisioning what David Seitz calls queer citizenship, that is to say, social belonging that is not dependent on the usual norms of behavior and status for inclusion. Seitz imagines queer citizenship as joint recognition, struggle, and modes of belonging that are created in "coalitions among people with incommensurable histories of

trauma and pleasure, alienation, affinity, and loss.”¹⁷ All of this requires vulnerability on the part of those entering the prison, students and professors alike.

By creating classroom communities based on mutuality between inside and outside students, collectively interrogating larger structures and inequalities, and proposing alternative ways to deal with social inequalities and harm, we work toward alternative modes of belonging and create change. It is my hope that such strategies can move us a little closer to world where abusive policing, punishment, and social exclusion are not the lucrative norm.

¹⁷ David K. Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 215.

Reading List

Ashby, R. and P. Lee. "Children's Concepts of Empathy and Understanding in History." In *The History Curriculum for Teachers*, edited by Christopher Portal, 62–88. London: Falmer, 1987.

Batson, C. Daniel. "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena." In *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, edited by Jean Decety and William Ickes, 3–15. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Bråten, Stein. *On Being Moved from Mirror Neurons to Empathy*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

Burns, Charles. P. E. "Teaching and Self-Formation: Why the Ignoble 'Intro to World Religions' Really Matters." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 4, no. 1 (2001): 15–22.

Buturian, Linda. *The Changing Story: Digital Stories that Participate in Transforming Teaching and Learning*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016. Available open access at <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/267>.

Davis, Mark H. "Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (1983): 113–126.

Cadwell, Katherine. "Transforming the Classroom." Accessed January 3, 2020. <https://www.katherinecadwell.com/transforming-the-classroom>.

Decety, Jean, and William Ickes, eds. *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank B. Wilderson, III. "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201. <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.183>

Hess, Mary E. "Exploring the Epistemological Challenges Underlying Civic Engagement by Religious Communities." *The Good Society* 26, nos. 2–3 (2017): 305–322. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/702186>.

James, Alison, and Stephen D. Brookfield. *Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2014.

Jensen, Sally. "Empathy and Imagination in Education for Sustainability." *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 21 (2016): 89–105. Available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1151868>.

Konrath, Sara H., Edward H. O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing. "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 2 (May 2011): 180–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>.

Lanzoni, Susan. *Empathy: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

Matravers, Derek. *Empathy*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017.

Pedwell, Carolyn. "De-Colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally." *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 27–49. Available online from the author, https://www.academia.edu/25905125/Decolonising_empathy_Thinking_affect_transnationally.

Porter, Adam L. "Role-Playing and Religion: Using Games to Educate Millennials." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 11, no. 4 (September 2008): 230–235. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2008.00468.x>.

Schumann, Karina, Jamil Zaki, and Carol S. Dweck. "Addressing the Empathy Deficit: Beliefs about the Malleability of Empathy Predict Effortful Responses When Empathy Is Challenging." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 107, no. 3 (2014): 475–493. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036738>.

Stein, Edith. *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989.

Trothen, Tracy J. "Engaging the Borders: Empathy, Religious Studies, and Pre-Professional Fields." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 3 (July 2016): 245–263. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12336>.

Wilderson, Frank B., III. "'Raw Life' and the Ruse of Empathy." In *Performance, Politics and Activism*, edited by Peter Lichtenfels and John Rouse, 181–206. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.