

Teach Teaching at the Collegiate Level

Spotlight on Teaching

Ellen Posman and Reid B. Locklin, Co-editors

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 issues focuses on a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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Team Teaching in Religious Studies: Editors' Introduction

Ellen Posman, Wallace University

Reid B. Locklin, University of Toronto

Autonomy and/or Collaboration—Competing Values?

Academia is often a solitary pursuit. We design our own research projects and conduct them as we see fit, and, similarly, we design our own courses and teach them as we see fit. This is one aspect of academic freedom, and it is part of what attracted many of us to academia in the first place. As a result, team teaching presents something of a challenge: it threatens some of that treasured autonomy.

There is a traditional model of team teaching in higher education that preserves much of this autonomy and can seem to ease workload: the “tag-team” or “serial teaching” model. Two or more professors with different kinds of expertise on a subject take turns lecturing, each providing an assignment or exam for her or his unit. This more traditional model has some obvious benefits, in that students can receive knowledge from and ask questions of experts of subfields within a subject. One can imagine a New Testament course co-taught by one scholar of the Gospels and another expert on Pauline literature, or a course on Indian religions co-taught by an expert on Hinduism side by side with one on South Asian Islam. But is this truly team teaching? Or can some learning outcomes and interdisciplinary connections be better achieved through a more fully collaborative process? As the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching website notes, “Tag-team teaching has its benefits, but it misses out on the benefits of dialogue and the give and take engaged by the team of instructors.”¹ It is this give and take that each article in this issue highlights as an important model for student learning, so these articles push us to think about the most useful and fully collaborative ways to pursue team teaching.

We should not fool ourselves into thinking team teaching is less work than teaching on our own. While it may seem that team teaching would lighten workload by splitting up the teaching and grading time, the authors here confirm the scholarly consensus that team teaching is often more time consuming, especially in the preparation stages, as collaborators work together to set common course goals, choose materials, and arrange syllabi. For example, Mary C. Boys and Sarah Tauber discuss the intricate planning that went into their course “Faith Journeys and the Religious Education for Adults,” based on reading Jewish and Christian memoirs. Every aspect of the course was collaboratively planned, from choosing memoirs to constructing assignments. Norma Baumel Joseph and Leslie C. Orr, in discussing

¹ “Team/Collaborative Teaching (Archived),” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teamcollaborative-teaching/>.

their course on “Food and Religion,” also confirm that sharing the tasks of course design, class preparation, and student evaluation does not mean less work. The collaboration can, however, make these tasks more enjoyable and effective for student learning.

When approached more collaboratively, the added benefits are immense for faculty, and especially for students. Some faculty cite the chance to be a student again and to learn from a colleague as a perk, while others point to building friendships and networks across campus. Honing one’s own collaborative skills, learning new pedagogical strategies from a co-instructor, and the enjoyment of sharing ideas with colleagues are also common refrains.²

De-centering the Instructor

The most important benefit, arguably, is to students, which translates to a more fulfilling experience for faculty, as well. Beyond content area expertise, students are afforded a window into the scholarly project itself. As professors question one another, students see critical thinking at work. As faculty discuss course issues openly with one another in front of the class, students see the way the content of the course is not a given, but constructed out of choices. As faculty approach the same subject from different disciplinary perspectives, students realize the benefits of interdisciplinary thinking. But perhaps what comes through most of all in these articles is that students themselves learn the art of collaboration. All ten of the authors in this issue (in five co-authored articles) stress the exercise of collaboration itself both for them and for their students.

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Also important is modeling reflection, especially when complemented by assignments that require students to engage in similar types of reflection such as journaling, guided discussion, and reflective essays. All this contributes to bringing students into a community of learning. Can this be done without teaming up? Certainly. “But team teaching does provide an ideal environment for this type of engagement, in part by making it almost impossible to stick with a teacher-centered classroom in which the teacher is the sole authority delivering knowledge to the students. The interaction of two teachers—both the intellectual interaction involved in the design of the course and the pedagogical interaction in teaching the course—creates a dynamic environment that reflects the way scholars make meaning of

² See James R. Davis, *Interdisciplinary Courses and Team Teaching: New Approaches for Learning*, American Council on Education (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1995), and Kathryn M. Plank, ed., *Team Teaching: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011).

the world.”³ Each pair of authors here provides a vibrant example of this process and the types of learning they see from students.

Joseph and Orr’s article on teaching “Food and Religion” begins with the concept of blending content expertise, combining Joseph’s specialty in Judaism with Orr’s specialty in Asian religions. Yet this is only the beginning, as this method opens up the notion of specialization to include student voices. They write, “It is the very mechanism of team teaching that allows this course to be shared and thereby not owned by any one tradition or person. Team-teaching teaches multiple approaches and openness to shared experiences.” Clearly, the team-teaching method here allows for enhanced student engagement as participants in a learning community. The instructors also require an embodied engagement, and by focusing on food, they encourage students to reflect on their experiences of eating, preparing, and sharing food, all while modeling the interchanges between the instructors as a way to pursue critical thinking and collegial conversation.

The next two articles delve into interdisciplinary team teaching, in which students can approach a topic from multiple perspectives and thereby see the limitations of a sole perspective and begin to question the way knowledge itself is constructed. Cara Anthony and Elise Amel explain the variety of benefits students get from an interdisciplinary course involving religion and psychology entitled “Brain, Stomach, and Soul.” They point out that the interdisciplinary character allows students with different interests or previous expertise to connect to the course in different ways as it also demonstrates the limitations of approaching an issue from one perspective. They choose to use the “Iterative Praxiological Method” to approach the social issue of environmental sustainability, in order to show students the necessity of integrated learning when attempting to find solutions to complex social problems. Melissa Stewart and Deborah Field also discuss interdisciplinary team teaching, here as an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of women’s studies. They not only highlight the ways that any one disciplinary lens is limited, but also emphasize transparency in their process, questioning one another in class, admitting to ignorance in the other’s field, and collaborating aloud in class about the structure of the course. This process is designed to enhance students’ critical thinking skills as it “presented them with a more honest impression of the ways in which human knowledge must be actively constructed, rather than simply received.” Both courses engage students in creative and reflective assignments to allow them to bring disciplinary perspectives together and to question the notion of “received knowledge.”

The final two articles examine a more cutting-edge team teaching strategy of cross-institutional collaboration. Boys and Tauber involved students from their respective seminaries—one Christian, one Jewish—in their “Faith Journeys” course in which students read multiple religious memoirs. Here, too, the team-taught nature of the class allowed for more personal interfaith exploration as well as the possibility of transcending one lens to examine a subject more fully. One of the authors’ stated priorities was “listening to the authors and to each other in ways that helped students discover themes and experiences that transcend specific religious traditions while also appreciating those that are rooted more firmly in the particularity of distinctive religious traditions.” Discussion was the key format of the course, and the final assignment included the presentation of a book jacket for one’s own memoir. In

³ Plank, 3.

this case, the collaborative model of team teaching combines with the narrative content, allowing for the development of empathetic listening and reflective sharing.

Finally, Amy L. Allocco and Brian K. Pennington have designed a remarkably innovative cross-institutional course on “India’s Identities” that includes a study abroad component. Their experience embodies all of the best aspects of team teaching already mentioned here, and more. Working together across different institutions—one draws locally in Tennessee and from more working-class families, while the other, over the mountains, draws students from across the nation to North Carolina—and eventually across different continents provided students with a variety of opportunities. The instructors have different content areas of expertise (North vs. South India) and different methodological approaches (history vs. ethnography), allowing students to see the complexity of India from a variety of angles while focusing on shared questions of religion, caste, and gender. Discussion, journaling, and reflection were again heavily emphasized. All of this, combined with the cross-institutional nature of the course, allowed students not only to learn the course content about India and to appreciate the multiple disciplinary perspectives on the subject, but also to reflect on their own social locations at home. As the authors put it, “In the mirror of India, students recognized the Americas and saw their own experiences reflected through the lives of others.” With the pace of technology and the existence of distance-learning equipped classrooms on campuses, there are surely even further possibilities for cross-institutional team teaching in the future.

Low-Tech Strategy of the Highest Order

Religious studies is interdisciplinary by nature, and we can all imagine ways to capitalize on that in the classroom. Team teaching presents one way to model and enhance some learning habits and goals we have for students: questioning, admitting ignorance, cooperatively thinking aloud, empathetic listening, critical thinking, skepticism of “received knowledge,” and recognition of disciplinary limitations. As other scholars have noted, in this information age, the goal of higher education must move further away from mere dissemination of information to helping students integrate new information as they themselves become constructors of new knowledge, and team teaching can be a “low-tech” way to facilitate that kind of learning.⁴ The articles here represent ways to make the most of such collaboration, many of which are also noted in Stanford University’s Center for Teaching and Learning’s biblical-style “ten commandments of team-teaching.”⁵ Some of these include taking the time to plan, setting common grading standards, attending all classes, referring to one another’s ideas, modeling dialogue/debate, and engaging students in the discussion. Above all, these various strategies amount to an attitude of genuine openness and collaboration in teaching and learning, both between the instructors themselves and between these instructors and the students whom they invite into scholarly conversation.

⁴ Mary Jane Eisen and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, “Team-Teaching: The Learning Side of the Teaching-Learning Equation,” *Essays on Teaching Excellence* 14 no.7 (2002–2003). Available at http://podnetwork.org/content/uploads/V14-N7-Eisen_Tisdell.pdf, last accessed May 18, 2020.

⁵ Melissa C. Leavitt, “Team Teaching: Benefits and Challenges,” *Speaking of Teaching: The Center for Teaching and Learning-Stanford University* 16 no. 1 (2006): 1-4. Republished at <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/767>, accessed May 18, 2020.

Ultimately, team teaching may not be less work, but it certainly brings other types of rewards. No less than online teaching, profiled in the last issue of *Spotlight*, or service-learning, or one's choice of textbook, team teaching gives its own distinctive shape to our teaching, opening up new venues for dialogue and discovery. The result? New possibilities for collaboration, critical engagement, self-reflection... and perhaps even a good meal.

Embodied Religion, Embodied Teaching: Team Teaching “Food and Religion”

Norma Baumel Joseph, Concordia University, Montreal

Leslie C. Orr, Concordia University, Montreal

Rather than use the master chef model so popular on TV and in the classroom today, Norma Joseph and Leslie Orr chose the more conventional yet creative approach of a team preparing and serving choice meals for a variety of guests over a course of months. “In our vision of the set table, students would be encouraged to explore and experience concepts of food and religion as they intersect and interpret one another.”

Participation and Particularity

Both of us aim in our individual teaching to have students appreciate religion as a lived reality—in the present and in the past. Rather than thinking of religion in the disembodied abstract, we want to give students the opportunity to explore what religion means and what religion does in specific and concrete terms. The outline of our team-taught “Food and Religion” course suggests a topical approach—with units, for example, on “Festivals, feasts, fasts and community”; “Gifts, offerings, and connecting with the divine through food”; “Life cycle rituals and food”; and “Food choices, restrictions, decisions, arrangements.” We do not attempt to “cover” all religions, or even to generalize within each topic area. We focus instead on particular contexts and practices, drawing especially on our own areas of expertise, where there happens to be an extraordinarily rich array of relevant material and where we can take advantage of the fact that there are two of us in the classroom.

We began the course, in its most recent iteration, with “Two case studies in food and religion: Jainism and Judaism,” and returned to issues concerned with food in these two traditions throughout the semester. Materials from two or more religious traditions might be juxtaposed—more often with a view to highlight differences among them, the religious particularities and cultural specificities at play, than to discern commonalities. With regret, we stopped teaching Mary Douglas’s wonderful essay “Deciphering a Meal”: it was too abstract and too far outside of our students’ frame of reference. But this frame of reference—or rather these frames of reference—themselves offer a wealth of potential materials and opportunities for students to engage on a personal level with the course. Our university’s diverse student population means that we have people in the classroom who can draw on their own experience and knowledge to tell the rest of us about the significance of food and religion for the holidays that take place during the semester: in the fall of 2010, we had Eid al Fitr, Rosh Hashanah, Canadian Thanksgiving, the Mexican Day of the Dead, Diwali, Eid al Adha, the Orthodox Fast of the Nativity, Hanukkah... and Passover! Our university’s multi-ethnic urban setting also provides resources: having the class meet in a

building adjacent to a food court (with rather excellent Thai and Middle Eastern fare, for example) gave us the opportunity to send the class out with the assignment to eat—and return to the next class with their reflections on food, symbols, and identity informed by more than simply doing the assigned reading.

Our mantra for this course—and a motif for our teaching enterprises elsewhere—is “embodied religion.” We want to stress that religion is something that exists in a particular time and place, but also in a person who knows and experiences the world through the senses and in interaction with a physical, as well as a social, environment. Our pedagogy and our efforts as a team thus posit particularity and participation as key. The food court assignment is a first step. We have tried to encourage this mode of participation—eating food, and sometimes preparing and sharing food—in a number of other ways. Students have to keep a journal recording their experiences, observations, and reflections related to the course content. They are given a cookbook analysis assignment in which they are to choose and examine a cookbook for its religious and cultural content (what it conveys about values, ceremonies and rituals, the social and ethical dimensions of food preparation and consumption, etc.), and ideally, to try out some of the recipes. We always have a few occasions when students or teachers bring holiday foods to class that we nibble on together. (Leslie can always be counted on to bring sweets for Diwali.)

Finally, we have two more elaborate events, during the regularly scheduled class time, in which we share food. (We are fortunate in having a space on campus that we can use for these purposes, which is off-limits to the usual food services supplier and has a kosher kitchen.) One of these events is the student potluck, usually on the last day of class, which is typically a festival of international treats, lovingly prepared by our students (who turn out, in some cases, to be professional chefs). A second event is Norma’s seder, which takes place regardless of the season; November is as good as April. It is not a full meal, but a sit-down affair with all the ritual foods. This is an extremely interesting learning opportunity for our students, for a number of reasons. The diversity of those present is acknowledged; it is understood, for example, that the Muslim students will not have wine and the vegans won’t eat the eggs. The diverse possibilities for the celebration of the Passover meal are also pointed out (Norma combines Ashkenazi and Sephardic fare).

Team teaching emphasizes and enables the shared experience of the ritual uses of food on such occasions. And of course the symbolism of the food items is explained. But they are not just symbols, are they? Have a bite! Non-Jewish and Jewish students alike—and together—have the opportunity to be in an academic setting where they are learning something new, and something about one another, in a way that is immediate, personal, and shared. Because we are a team, we approach this topic not as a celebration of a holiday belonging to one of us, but rather as an exploration of meaning, identity, food, and festival. In this case, and in others, it is the very mechanism of team teaching that allows this course to be shared and thereby not owned by any one tradition or person. Team teaching teaches multiple approaches and openness to shared experiences.

Team Teaching as a Feminist Practice

Starting in 1993, the two of us began to develop team-taught courses that would be key components in our undergraduate women and religion curriculum. Convinced that the courses had to model the practices of feminist theory and method, we chose team teaching to highlight a particular style of education and interaction. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues for a “democratic” model of teaching and learning that fosters collaboration through the acknowledgment of a range of perspectives, positions, and experiences among teachers, students, and the subjects we seek to learn about.¹ Feminist pedagogy relies on notions of diversity, agency, and participation, and food studies are uniquely suited to convey these notions. Students readily understand the nostalgia, identity, and links to a treasured past through food, and they learn to respect difference in the embodied traditions of eating. Our pedagogy relies on this pathway as we encourage their openness to each other, to otherness in general, and to their own otherness. Through our own sharing and our course structure, we give them the tools of agency and enable respect of traditions—theirs and that of others.

Our first team-taught courses were “Goddesses and Religious Images of Women” and “Women as Ritual Experts,” and a bit later, we offered “Feminist Hermeneutics and Scripture.” In 2003 we inaugurated “Food and Religion” as a team-taught course. In the last twenty years, we have had the opportunity to team-teach fifteen courses, and eagerly look forward to arranging such collaborations in the future. Our approach has not been simply to divide up courses into units that each of us could individually teach, but rather to participate together in all classes with one of us as the lead presenter and the other bringing up questions and comments, allowing there to be something of a conversation between the two of us about the material. In the first instance, the logic of teaching together arose from two considerations: (1) sharing the tasks of course design, class preparation, and student evaluation would make these processes a lot more fun (although not necessarily less work!); and (2) in terms of content for these thematic (not tradition-based) courses, we could capitalize on our common interests and on our varied expertise—to Leslie’s knowledge of Asian religions we add Norma’s grounding in the anthropology of religion, feminist studies, and Judaic studies.

We soon realized that there were positive consequences not only for us as colleagues and scholars, but also for our students in terms of the course format as well as its content: students not only got the benefit of the extent of our joint knowledge of various traditions, but were also given models—in the exchanges between Norma and Leslie—for critical thinking and collegial conversation. Issues and debates were taken off the course pack pages and voiced in real time and space. Whatever merit these models have in the grand scheme of our students’ intellectual development, they did not immediately translate into more engaged class discussion, except in the case of smaller classes; but they did seem to inspire fuller participation when students were divided into smaller discussion groups. Meanwhile, however, other means of encouraging student engagement and learning were available to us in the case of our course on food and religion. We sought to enhance participation by finding a way to bridge course content and students’ own lived experience. Since eating food, preparing food, sharing food,

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

remembering food, and caring about food are such ubiquitous experiences, we looked for ways of having students relate in an immediate and direct way to what they were reading and hearing in class, and to reflect on their experiences and ways of knowing. Part of the challenge was to draw in students whose academic, in-class skills made them feel at a disadvantage. Journal writing (which for many was more an exercise in scrapbooking) provided a means of self-expression that allowed them to individually make connections with the course content. In class, we found that films that were more personal and “autobiographical”—like Karen Silverstein’s inspired *Gefilte Fish* (First Run Icarus Films, 1984)—worked better than larger-frame all-about documentaries in allowing students to feel and enunciate the intimate and multiple links between food and religion, and to engage with each other. And, of course, best of all for encouraging engaged and embodied learning, is the sharing together of food as well as experiences and ideas.

Broadening the Circles of Participation

A goal for our future teaching of this course would be to enhance collaboration among students through sharing and embodied learning. One way would be to have a potluck group meal early in the semester to foster engagement and fellowship and to underscore the significance of food at its most visceral level. Another would be to have students work in groups organized around a topic (not around a type of food or a religion), in which there is a trading of ideas and information and also an opportunity to cook and eat together. The increasing interest in food studies, at our university and elsewhere, promises to make such enterprises more logistically feasible, as food studies “labs” (i.e., kitchens) may begin to be part of the campus infrastructure.

Our course in food and religion clearly lends itself to a team-taught approach, but some of what we have realized in teaching this course is more generally applicable to other contexts of team teaching. The classroom dialogue between the team-teachers extends beyond discussion about the topic of the day and represents a relationship between people who are not the same as one another, in terms of their own embodiment and identity—separate behaviors, personalities, experiences, and backgrounds. Our team teaching not only provides models for collegial academic interchange but may also, on a deeper and more personal level, give students a sense of the appreciation of diversity and respect for difference. Finally, the fact of our own participation and the fact that we don’t constitute a singular unified authority figure may open the door for students to feel that they are partners in the teaching and learning process.

Brain, Stomach, Soul

Cara Anthony, University of St. Thomas

Elise Amel, University of St. Thomas

Psychological “Framing” in a Theology Classroom

What does daily diet have to do with faith? Is the way I eat a meal sustainable and meaningful? Are my food choices consistent with my religious values? These are the kinds of questions students grapple with through our team-taught, upper-level course that fulfills a core requirement in theology at the University of St. Thomas. At this level, courses are designed to give students an interdisciplinary perspective or to address a pressing social issue. “Theology & the Environment” does both, since we address the issue of food sustainability through the lenses of both theology and conservation psychology.

A good amount of grappling with this complex, interdisciplinary issue occurs through a series of short academic journal entries that account for about half the graded work of the semester. In the journals, students interpret experiences such as growing a basil plant, shopping for and cooking a meal, or visiting an urban farm in light of both theological and psychological concepts they have learned in class. Although many of the individual entries do not require students to write about both psychology and theology, one assignment in particular requires students to employ their knowledge of an important psychological concept to communicate effectively with a religious group. This entry is due near the end of the course, after students have had practice integrating material and just when the markets in Minnesota are offering the first local produce of the season. Students visit a local farmers’ market and, afterward, create an advertising flyer that appeals to a specific religious group—Buddhist, Jewish, or Christian—drawing on values, beliefs, and practices of the religion to encourage members to visit a farmers’ market.

The psychological approach we emphasize in this assignment is called “framing an issue.” Framing an issue in terms of beliefs and values that are important to a particular group is not the same as distortion or spin. Rather, framing calls attention to the most salient aspects of the issue for a specific audience. In course readings, students have already seen that certain religious beliefs, values, and practices overlap significantly with environmental outlooks. In order to create an effective poster for the farmers’ market, students need to know what the most relevant beliefs or values are that might help members of a religion see the connection between their worldview and buying locally grown food direct from the farmer.

We encourage students to get creative with the assignment, and they do, incorporating images and creating slogans that function as framing devices—the specific elements that create the frame for the issue. For example, students who choose to create a flyer for Buddhists might refer to the “middle path,” which is the ideal of a moderate lifestyle avoiding both excess and poverty. They might evoke Jewish understandings of justice for laborers, or a Catholic vision of food as sacramental.

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Live out the mission of Christ as stewards mindful of the environment - appreciate the beauty of God's creation, support the work of other stewards, and grow with the interconnected community of St. Paul, Minnesota.

*



As Catholics, we understand that everyone deserves good food. Food sustainability is a social problem that can only be fixed when we form a community to take action.

We must encompass those goods and benefits that we can all share. We must trust one another, as farmers and friends, to promote God's call to protect and celebrate the richness of creation.

What we stand for...

- Overcoming hunger and poverty
- Providing safe, local, healthy and cost-effective food supply
- Certifying proper care and benefits for farmers
- Protecting God's beautiful creation

Going to the St. Paul Farmer's Market, you will see firsthand the commitment and respect the community and its farmers have for nature and everything it provides us as humans. They understand the Catholic worldview of interconnectedness, which sees the oneness in all things, with no true separation deeper than appearances.



Enjoy great food, local flare, and a chance to reinforce the narrative beliefs of the Catholic scripture.

use a Bible quote?

Student flyer for farmers' market, courtesy of Rosalyn Murphy.

Collaboration as “Iterative Praxiology”

Two pedagogical concerns motivated us to create this assignment. First, this course has a lot of parts to coordinate—psychology, environmental sustainability, and three world religions. We chose to focus on food sustainability since food is such a fundamental element of everyone’s experience and plays important roles in the religions we study in the course. But we still needed to help students integrate psychology and theology—to see and experience the ways that humans can simultaneously act as both psychological and religious beings. Creating the flyer brings all the elements of the course together into a practical, problem-solving action.

This leads to our second pedagogical concern: the relationship between theology and psychology that we want to model in the classroom. Would we try to harmonize the two disciplines as much as possible? What about potential areas of conflict? Fortunately, we found an approach that maximizes the

cooperative elements of our classroom endeavor without losing each discipline's distinctiveness. We adopted a pedagogical method from University of Portland professors Russell Butkus and Steven Kolmes. Butkus, a theologian, and Kolmes, a biologist, developed what they call the "Iterative Praxiological Method," which is "the collaborative attempt to address a complex problem, utilizing scientific and theological-ethical analysis, with the aim of proposing ethical solutions and policy guidelines."¹ Instead of directly inquiring about the relationship between theology and a scientific discipline, both disciplines focus on a common problem: ecological sustainability. The method is iterative because it cycles repeatedly through four steps that can be summarized in the following way:

1. **Historical/social analysis:** What is the problem and how did we get here?
2. **Scientific analysis:** How can science provide theories, models & evaluation of data to clarify the situation?
3. **Theological/ethical reflection:** How can religion/ethics shape our values and guide our decisions?
4. **Ethical practice & policy implementation:** sustained pro-environmental action, in both private and public life.

While this method was developed for a theology-natural science pairing, we adopted it for theology-social science, and it can certainly work for other disciplinary pairings. The farmers' market flyer emphasizes steps two through four of the Iterative Praxiological Method. Utilizing the psychological theory of framing issues, students evoked core ethical values of a religion to tangibly address one aspect of a complex problem: the need to change the way we eat.

The Benefits of Interdisciplinarity

Strategic interdisciplinarity has helped us to model constructive collaboration between two disciplines that sometimes fail to connect with each other. We do not pretend that the instructors (or students) share identical worldviews, but we show how our shared desire for a safe and sustainable food system can bring different kinds of people together in ways that respect their various identities. Cooperating on approaches to common social problems also enables students to see the necessity of integrated learning. No one discipline is going to solve complex social challenges—we need all the wisdom and knowledge we can muster to resolve our current ecological problems.

Team teaching also allows different students to connect with the course in different ways. Whether their primary interest is psychology, theology, or environmental studies, students are likely to find something that motivates them. Such variety can be a liability as well; anyone planning to team-teach has to make clear to students how to bring the two disciplines into dialogue with each other. The first version of our course had so many different elements to juggle that most students never connected them effectively. We alleviated this problem by providing a clear road map for the course, with

¹ R. A. Butkus and S. A. Holmes, "Theology in Ecological Perspective: An Interdisciplinary, Inquiry-Based Experiment," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 11, no. 1 (2008): 42–53.

assignments available weeks or months in advance of due dates. We assigned two ungraded journal entries to give students time and practice with this novel assignment and to adjust to instructors' expectations. Nearly every class, we took a moment to "check in" on where we were in the Iterative Praxiological cycle, and to review how the day's activities contributed to the successful completion of one or more future assignments. When returning assignments to students, we reminded them of what they had accomplished with each bit of work. We also learned not to sacrifice our own best teaching strategies in order to create a generic shared classroom style. For example, each instructor has different ways of leading students through difficult readings, and we do well to retain our best practices.

This course would probably be different if it were not the third required theology course at a Catholic university. By the time students enroll in this course, they already have some knowledge of Christianity in general and of Catholicism in particular. This allows us to quickly review some topics, and to spend more time on other, less familiar ones. In other contexts, it might be necessary to study just one religion or to otherwise simplify the topics. And no matter what kind of interdisciplinary team teaching you try, you will never be able to "cover" your standard topics with the same thoroughness and depth as a single-discipline course.

The benefits, however, make team teaching worth it. Too often, academic courses in theology end up being a history of ideas. Psychology has helped this course to move away from the trap of seeing religions only as cognitive belief systems, and to instead see them more as comprehensive schools of living. Students get to see how people succeed or fail in living out their religious commitment—and begin to understand *why* they succeed or fail.

Building Interdisciplinary Networks: Team Teaching for Religious Studies Professors

Melissa Stewart, Adrian College

Deborah Field, Adrian College

Interdisciplinary Team Teaching

In times of budget cuts and the shrinking of the humanities, women's studies courses offer religion professors an opportunity to build interdisciplinary networks across campus. Women's studies in particular relies on multiple disciplines as well as personal experience to construct knowledge; it requires students to synthesize diverse types of information and insights. This makes it both inspiring to students and challenging to teach. We suggest that a transparent model of team teaching is a pedagogical strategy that can meet this challenge by modeling how to integrate various disciplinary insights and personal experience into true interdisciplinary knowledge production. By transparent team teaching, we do not mean splitting lectures in half; rather we refer to a process of open-ended, open-minded intellectual interaction that we will describe below.

In relation to the course we team taught, "Introduction to Women's Studies," this strategy had several practical payoffs. As professors of history and religious studies, we were able to point out to students how both historical and religious questions and concerns permeated every topic from sexuality to gender roles. For example, we explained how Christian notions of purity and virginity as well as the history of slavery and colonialism lead to differing stereotypes about the sexuality of white women and women of color. These constant reminders of multiple perspectives informed by our disciplinary training highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of women's studies and all knowledge production, and inconspicuously highlighted the limitations of any one discipline's perspective. Because our method of team teaching is less authoritarian, it allowed us to be more transparent regarding the many conscious—yet hidden—decisions a professor makes when leading a class. Finally, since the class was largely discussion based, team teaching helped us to demonstrate for students how to use one's personal experiences and anecdotes as a means to explain theoretical concepts such as intersectionality or feminist theology.

Team Teaching Women's Studies through Religion and History

The discipline of women's studies evolved out of the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s with its emphasis on consciousness-raising and its concomitant assertion of personal experience as a valid form

of evidence. Taking these values seriously required us to commit to a more transparent approach to both teaching and knowledge production.

Team teaching made our pedagogy both more open and less authoritative because we verbalized the kind of questions and comments that professors usually confine to the privacy of their own minds. We would interrupt each other (gently) if we were going too far off on tangents, ask each other for clarification, and question aloud whether we had devoted sufficient time and attention to a topic. We worried that we would appear unprepared or disorganized to the students, but we also appreciated that this process presented them with a more honest impression of the ways in which human knowledge must be actively constructed, rather than simply received. Furthermore, our willingness to learn from one another displayed the limitations of our own expertise and traditional disciplinary boundaries. As professors, we found admitting ignorance to be uncomfortable, but it sometimes led to effective lessons. For example, one day during a discussion of sexuality, Melissa, who was raised in a traditional Baptist family and is a scholar of religion, was connecting social norms with the doctrine of Original Sin. Deborah, who is a historian and was raised in an unorthodox Jewish family, expressed her long-standing confusion about the concept. The resulting colloquy illustrated the contrast between insider and outsider perspectives on our society's majority religion, enabling students to see how what is familiar for the majority could in fact be strange for the minority.

In addition to the risks to our own authority posed by interdisciplinary team-teaching, another hazard we faced was that the class would devolve into personal sharing without academic content. In many ways, this was the easiest challenge to overcome because the solution lay in what we already knew how to do: apply rigorous standards to student work and design substantive assignments. All of the assignments in the course emphasized mastering and applying women's studies terms, such as gender, intersectionality, objectification, and privilege. We strongly encouraged students to use these concepts throughout class discussions, and they produced presentations and papers analyzing media clips and their friends' Facebook pages by applying these concepts. The final for the class consisted of a take-home "dictionary" in which students defined twenty key terms and applied critical thinking to them by questioning terminology or by describing different ways of conceptualizing the term.

In allowing students' and our experiences to be a valued, although not sufficient, subject for discussion, the class provided many real and meaningful examples of the feminist conception of intersectionality. Intersectionality rests on the assumption that social categories are mutually constitutive, so that multiple factors such as gender, race, class, and age merge together to form individual identities. As they talked and listened to one another, it became clear that the students' racial and class backgrounds, sexual orientations, and religious identities all led to very different experiences of gender. Our own participation highlighted generational change, which was especially clear in our discussion of abortion. Many of the students asserted that although they themselves would never have an abortion, they did not want to interfere with other people's decision to do so. Yet they rejected the "pro-choice" moniker because to them it implied advocacy for abortion. Their tolerance for choice, yet rejection of the pro-choice label, completely perplexed their forty-something professors, a generation gap that reflects a wider national debate among feminists.

Building Interdisciplinary Networks

We teach at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. It is a small, private college of liberal arts and sciences related to the United Methodist Church with an enrollment of 1650 students. Women's studies is an interdisciplinary program that only offers a minor.

The course "Introduction to Women's Studies" is the required 100-level gateway class to the minor. It rotates among interested faculty from various departments across the campus. There is no common syllabus, so professors naturally tend to privilege their own disciplines. One reason we decided to team teach the course was in order to develop a common syllabus or at least a common vocabulary that could possibly better prepare students for the multidisciplinary courses that follow in the minor. Student feedback and the results of the final indicated we met these goals and that students gained interdisciplinary knowledge and higher order critical thinking skills. For the most part, they took the final project seriously, and they produced a "dictionary" of terms that they can use as a reference tool for future course work in women's studies.

Our experience suggests the power of a religious studies perspective; for example, our discussions of sexuality demonstrate the need to reflect on the role that religion plays in our cultural assumptions, ethical categories, and historical development. It is easy to imagine, therefore, how insights from religious studies would lead to deeper discussions in a wide variety of classes, from environmental studies to film studies. Team teaching is one of the best ways to accomplish this goal.

Good team teaching requires transparency of process, which resulted in some discomfort for us and for some the students. One student's written course evaluation criticized the ways in which we "seemed to figure things out in front of the class." This unease belies the success of our approach. Instead of receiving pat answers from authorities, students witnessed and participated in the uncertain, ambiguous, and strenuous process of revisioning knowledge production. In a global age when knowledge is changing quickly, and the nature and future of humanities is in question, this ability to integrate disparate information is an invaluable skill for both students and professors.

Jews and Christians Learn from Memoirs: A Collegially Taught Course

Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary

Sarah Tauber, Jewish Theological Seminary of American

Reading Memoirs, from Cover to Cover

In the fall term of 2012, we taught an interreligious seminar, “Faith Journeys and the Religious Education of Adults,” for students from our two seminaries, which are across the street from one another. The course involved a close reading of contemporary religious memoirs by Jewish and Christian authors. In addition to providing the intrinsic value of reading about varied religious journeys, this course challenged students to draw insights for their practice as religious professionals, and to embed that practice in a deeper understanding of religion in contemporary American life.

Making selections among the many memoirs constituted a key pedagogical decision. During the preceding spring and summer, we each read or re-read about 15–20 memoirs by Jewish and Christian authors and met on a regular basis to develop criteria for selection. In every case, we sought compellingly written narratives. Then we looked for memoirs that spoke to a range of religious sensibilities within our respective traditions, eventually choosing a list of seven books that constituted the backbone of our seminar. We integrated an eighth text, D. P. McAdam’s *The Redemptive Self* (Oxford University Press, 2006), as a means of offering a theoretical basis to our course.

Once the course began, conversation became the dominant strategy. From the start, we emphasized the importance of careful listening and respectful exchange, since we were not simply reading about the faith journeys of our authors, but also opening up our own lives of faith. We also met in an informal setting that enabled people to be more comfortable than in a typical classroom. Generally, about 3–4 days prior to the class meeting, we would send out several open questions about each week’s reading. These became the conversation starters, but particularly as the level of trust deepened, participants raised personal issues and shared examples from their own struggles as seminarians.

The course was demanding in that we required reading eight books (most available in electronic format) and preparation for each discussion. This proved to be a challenging element, particularly in a time when many professors use an anthology of e-readings. One second-year graduate student told us it was the first time since she had been in seminary that she had read an entire book—let alone eight of them!

We had three written requirements: a letter to one of the memoirists, to be shared with all in the course; a self-evaluation; and the design of the cover of one’s own memoir: title (and sub-title), layout,

front flap, author identification, and excerpts on the back. We ended the course with an opportunity for each participant to share her or his cover—one of the best sessions either of us has ever led. We will further discuss our reactions to the final project in the next section.

Attentive Listening as Pedagogical Strategy and Interreligious Value

The animating background values that guided this course included the following priorities:

- Modeling for students how to read, interpret, and respond empathically to the narratives that religious seekers tell through their memoirs. Through such modeling we sought to guide the learners toward becoming attentive readers of the stories on the written page, as well as attentive listeners to their own evolving faith journeys. Empathy was stressed in order to encourage the learners to identify those aspects of the memoirs that resonated in their own lives, with the other authors, and with each other as a group of students.
- Listening to the authors and to each other in ways that helped the students discover themes and experiences that transcend specific religious traditions, while also appreciating those that are rooted more firmly in the particularity of distinctive religious traditions.

Because this course was geared toward developing an understanding of teaching adults through the use of spiritual memoirs, two domains of educational literature were pertinent: theory and practice of adult learning and, as a subset, the varied uses of narrative in adult education. A two-fold goal was to guide the students to a more sophisticated self-reflection on their own faith journey while helping them acquire or enhance their skills as teachers of adults in a religious

MEMOIRS FOR FALL 2020

Helen Fremont, *After a Long Silence: A Memoir* (Delta, 2000)

Freemont tells the story of a deep family secret and explores its consequences for her family's sense of identity.

Julius Lester, *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (Arcade, 1995)

Lester, son of black Methodist minister, a prolific author and civil rights activist, narrates his own complex search, including his conversion to Judaism and interracial marriage.

Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballantine, 2008)

Miles, a self-described, left wing, secular lesbian, has a dramatic conversion to Christianity through the experience of communion, which awakens her determination to feed the hungry.

Dani Shapiro, *Devotion: A Memoir* (Harper Perennial, 2010)

Shapiro, raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, reflects on her own struggle to find spiritual practices that sustain her.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

Brown, an Episcopal priest, is a well-known preacher and author. In *Leaving Church*, she tells the story of the burnout she experiences in pastoring a rural congregation—a book every clergy person (and anyone who works intensely in the religious realm) should read.

Paul Wilkes, *In Due Season: A Catholic Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

Wilkes, a journalist who has written books on Jewish and Catholic congregational life, reflects on his own complex journey as a Catholic of Slovak descent.

Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist: One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (Wisdom, 2008)

A black woman from a poor family in Alabama, Willis becomes a distinguished scholar of religions of the East, a practicing Buddhist—and a lifelong Baptist.

context. In retrospect, we should have devoted more time and resources to enhancing their abilities to function as adult educators.

Educational research has identified the transformative potential of learning in adulthood. In a religious context, adult education includes the ongoing construction of a self-narrative that can help the learners incorporate their spiritual and religious seeking in a way that allows them to arrive at a more integrated adult identity. Our course was structured around multiple layers of narrative, driven by the texts themselves, the personal narratives of the students, and the narratives of the two religious traditions of Christianity and Judaism.

One significant element of the course involved the two of us acting as facilitators rather than lecturers. Facilitation called for the teachers to step back from our role as experts and open up a space for active participation for the learners, primarily through conversation with and among the students. Because it was a small group, the emphasis on discussion gave each student ample opportunity and motivation to participate, thus honing their own thinking through externalizing their thoughts verbally as well as responding to their peers' ideas. Some students struggled with this component of the course, and at times we had to devise more thorough strategies for ensuring that every student claimed her or his voice.

The final assignment offered the students a chance to synthesize the various dimensions of their learning. Although they were given a choice of either reading a separate memoir and preparing a visual and oral presentation or creating a book jacket for their own imagined spiritual memoir, all chose the latter assignment. This task required them to identify and reflect upon the core theme or themes of their own faith journey, to draw from the memoirs as referential texts while designing their own unique vision. The students found this experience enlightening and absorbing, as did the instructors. The project emerged as a compelling and moving way to synthesize the collective learning and the individual insights that grew out of it. Neither of us anticipated the extent to which the students would be excited about this unusual kind of assignment in an academic setting. We felt that most of them discovered new aspects of their identities as religious individuals as a result.

Bridging the Personal and the Academic

Our course bridged the gap between a rigorous reading of texts in an academic context and more personal connections to one's religious tradition. Early in the course, we sensed that some students were skeptical about the intellectual demands of reading narratives of people's religious lives; as the semester progressed, they realized that an attentive reading required them to expand their universe of imaginative empathy, develop respect for complicated life journeys, and draw upon resources from their other courses.

Using the memoirists as interlocutors enabled participants to glimpse the ways a different religious tradition functions in the lives of its adherents; participants also came to the realization that even dissimilar rituals and stories often spoke to common concerns or questions. Because a number of the memoirists admitted to their own uncertainties about their beliefs, our participants were able to situate some of their own doubts and apprehensions in a larger context.

We believe our approach is valuable in any interreligious setting. If memoirs are not as numerous in your field, biography and autobiography might be substituted. Moreover, we encourage professors across the range of religious studies to incorporate narratives into their courses as a way of inviting students to move beyond abstraction into the messiness of peoples' lives. This is of particular value for those whose life work will center on pastoral concerns.

Teaching collegially is both labor intensive and relational intensive; we set aside significant amounts of time to plan together. Nevertheless it is an immense pleasure to have a partner with whom to process the class sessions, to discuss concerns about students, and to collaborate in the creative and demanding work of teaching.

Teaming Teaching India's Identities across State and National Borders

Amy L. Alloco, Elon University

Brian K. Pennington, Maryville College

"India's Identities," in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Tamil Nadu

At both of our institutions, Elon University (NC) and Maryville College (TN), three-week travel/study courses led by two faculty members in the January (or winter) term have long served to further the global education and internationalization goals that are major campus priorities.

This past January we inaugurated a new study-abroad course that was not only team-taught, but also drew instructional staff and students from both campuses: "India's Identities: Religion, Caste & Gender in Contemporary South India." When this unique course arrangement was approved after an extensive vetting process, two primary objectives drove our planning: group cohesion and learning outcomes related to the diversity of Indian social structures. We anticipated that our collaborative course could only be successful if the students from both institutions were invested in the partnership and in the formation of positive group dynamics, and if they received excellent preparation for their encounter with contemporary Indian identities.

We began the fall semester with a weekend course retreat at a sprawling rental house nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains in Asheville, North Carolina, roughly halfway between our two institutions. Our goal for the weekend was, again, two-fold: we were interested in building community and foregrounding academic content. Since this was the first time students from the two schools were coming together, and since many of them from the same institution did not know each other well, we began with ice-breakers. We followed these by asking students to work in groups to introduce their home institution to students from the other school before moving into a speed-dating session in which they interviewed each other in pairs and then introduced their partner to the full group. After a leisurely lunch we brought students to a long, conference-style table for a lecture and slideshow covering the course's three foci: religion, caste, and gender. The two of us delivered this content jointly and integrated a discussion of the preparatory reading assignment, which introduced many of the key terms and concepts that we expanded on in our presentation.

The final session of the day focused on student needs and expectations for our time together in India. We divided the students into groups and asked them to use the butcher paper and markers to list their anxieties about adjusting to India and coping with group travel, ways their colleagues could help them to deal with these, and the key "ingredients" for positive group dynamics. We took notes on the discussion

that ensued and subsequently compiled the students' ideas into a document that would eventually become the "statement of commitment" that we'd all sign onto before embarking on the course.



A group photo in front of Chennai's iconic Kapaleeswarar Temple. Photo credit: Sophia Spach.

Following this session, the students broke into teams to work on cooking individual Indian dishes from recipes we supplied. While we, avid cooks with a great deal of Indian culinary experience, were on hand to assist, our intention was to let students continue to get to know one another on their own terms as they worked on the cooking project together. We left them around a firepit with s'mores that night, and reconvened over breakfast for a slideshow of the sights they would encounter on the walking tour we'd take on their first day in India. We asked them to complete a reflective writing assignment and then to share it with a partner, who would then be paired with them on that first day's walking tour four months later. In our final session of the weekend, we displayed the map of South India and the sites we would learn about and travel to, and offered students ample time to ask their many questions.

We met with our respective groups of students throughout the fall semester, with Amy traveling to Maryville for class meetings and Brian Skyping in to the Elon classes. The rhythm for the preparatory course included weekly reading

assignments and a one-page précis, lecture-discussions focusing on course content, and research toward the two short papers students would each write. The site paper focused on a place we would visit in India (e.g., Mammalapuram), while the issue paper dealt with a topic we would encounter (e.g., marriage practices); these forty-six papers were assembled into our course reader, which constituted the students' daily reading assignments during our travels in India. Students also signed up for leadership roles, such as contributing to our course blog, being a course photographer, and helping with gifts for those who would host us.

Once in India, we continued our emphasis on group cohesion by rotating student roommates each time we changed hotels. Since our focus was on the ways that religion, gender, and caste shape everyday Indian lives, our days were filled with visits to a variety of religious sites, people's workplaces and homes, market areas, academic institutions, urban neighborhoods, and slow-moving villages. We talked about the places where social stratification is most and least visible, how religious identity shapes dietary practices, and the ways in which gender expectations and roles are shifting in contemporary

India. We gathered almost daily for group discussions to process the events of the day and make plans for the next, and students completed regular writing assignments in the field in response to prompts that engaged our activities and their readings. Students learned from guest lecturers—a non-literate cook/cleaning lady, a grandmother studying for her PhD, a working-class father of one, a human rights lawyer, the artisans who carve stone images of the deities—and from each other via the presentations each student made about his/her two paper topics. As instructors, we learned from these guest lecturers, our engaged and curious students, and from one another. Our different training, field contexts, and methodologies meant that we often analyzed and taught material differently, so teaching together in this environment sharpened each of our pedagogies and challenged us to think in new ways.

The Benefits and Challenges of Institutional Collaboration

At both Elon University and Maryville College, the curricular model for international study-abroad courses presumes in-country experience on the part of at least one of the faculty members, but not necessarily academic background. As a married couple with expertise in the religions and cultures of India, we were in a unique position to push our institutions to enhance the academic content of these courses and to raise expectations about rigor in and student learning outcomes for such study-abroad experiences. Brian has extensive research and travel experience in North India, Amy in South India. Brian is trained as a historian, Amy as an ethnographer. We both have considerable experience in study-abroad as both faculty member and student. The established cultures of ambitious internationalization at our institutions encouraged us to approach our respective deans with our proposal: a collaborative study-abroad course that could combine our complementary expertise, pool institutional resources, and position Maryville College and Elon University at the leading edge of study abroad pedagogy. The course, moreover, would be located in the social and geographic spheres that have provided the context for Amy's study, language training, and research in India for more than fifteen years, and where her network of on-the-ground contacts could help us to keep the course fee affordable for students.

In this course, we aimed to raise the academic standards of three-week courses at our institutions and to set student expectations about the rigor of the course from the very beginning. For the course to meet its objectives, students would have to acknowledge several things: the critical roles their own attitudes and habits would play; the considerable investment of time and energy by the two of us to make the course stand out among similar offerings not only at Maryville and Elon but nationally; and the unique opportunity for immersion that we were offering. Our credibility on these accounts and our ability to get students to work far harder than their peers would require an entire semester's prior work on cultivating a group ethos and emphasizing academic preparation.

These challenges were exacerbated by the distinct cultures and practices at our two institutions. Maryville College students are typically from working-class families from Tennessee and surrounding states. First-generation college students are a significant population. Elon recruits nationally, and its students are generally more broadly exposed to diversity and are well-traveled. Class differences are underscored by the fact that whereas published tuition costs are equivalent, Elon students tend to pay full sticker-price, while Maryville significantly discounts its tuition. Elon's study-abroad operation is considerably more

complex, offering up to thirty courses in the winter term out of an office with a full staff overseen by a dean of global education. Maryville offers, on average, four study abroad courses out of an office with a staff of one or two. At Elon, faculty members are governed by more detailed policies, while Maryville grants its faculty considerable latitude in course design, delivery, and budgeting. Most significantly, where Elon requires a one-credit preparatory course in the fall semester, and students receive a letter grade for four semester hours of academic credit, Maryville students undertake more informal preparation and receive three hours of experiential, nonacademic credit on a pass/fail basis. The distinct cultures of our different institutions thus required almost as much navigation as the Indian cultures to which we wished to introduce our students.

New Insights, New Identities

Student evaluations of the course provide one set of measures, but the anecdotal evidence is at least as compelling an assessment tool for us. Our Facebook group remains active today—students post news articles about India or videos they come across. It is the site of frequent “I miss you all SOOOO MUUUCCCHHH!” kinds of posts, but perhaps most gratifying are the updates that confess a nagging longing to return to India or recurrent thoughts about the places and people the students encountered. Inspired by their three weeks in India, many of them are making plans for additional study abroad. When we are asked today about how the collaborative aspect of the course went, we still joke that the students loved each other a little too much. There have been a couple of visits over the mountains that separate Elon from Maryville and students from the two institutions were reunited this spring at the Southeast region’s AAR meeting.



Maryville and Elon students walking down a village road in Kerala, South India. Photo credit: Amy L. Allocco.

But it wasn’t all love and harmony. In terms of group cohesion as the necessary precondition for any learning, we have become more keenly aware of some things. Week two is toughest for the students: the exhilaration of first encounters and blossoming friendships fades, the drudgery of travel sets in, the poverty

and harassment start to feel unrelenting, and being “on” for presentations, reading, and group interaction every single day tests students’ patience. For us, on the other hand, the first week is the

hardest: the set of tasks stretching ahead requires nearly constant negotiations on the phone or in person. At the same time, we have to talk students through the feelings that emerge from the fairly uncompromising, head-on encounter we expect of them while they manage homesickness and jet lag and show up at all hours in our room. And the questions!



On our last evening in the village, students performed some “American” dance numbers for our hosts. Photo credit: Brian K. Pennington.

The endless questions: Where can I buy a sari? Where do the cows go at night? Where is the nearest trash can?

It’s week three, or better yet, the second half of week three, when it all starts to come together. Motivated by the impending close to what they start to recognize is—pardon the inevitable cliché—the experience of a lifetime, students go into processing overdrive. We met in group sessions of two hours each at least twice per day in our last, four-day stint in Chennai, and we had to cut every conversation short. And every one of those discussions was searching, substantive, and revealing. Students deftly contrasted the lives and experiences of Indian women and men of different castes and religions with analytical insight informed by the discipline’s categories but taking shape according to how they now understood the multifarious, paradoxical, and contradictory lived experience of contemporary Indians.

Our deans and colleagues will want to know about those evaluations. The students were consistently and exceedingly positive about a set of things we will only mention: the collaboration itself; the expertise and investment of the faculty members and what our backgrounds and efforts gave students access to that they wouldn’t have had otherwise; and their understanding of Indian social structures and diversity. They were, however, reserved or critical about the amount of work the course required. Comparison with other courses at our institutions, in which less reading and writing was assigned, leaving more free time for beaches and bars, was common.

More significant than the expertise of the instructors or the workload, perhaps, were the students’ newfound insights about themselves and their social locations. The best moment of all came the day before we were to leave. Inequality was emerging, unsurprisingly, as a major category of concern. An Elon student remarked on the privilege she once thought she recognized in her life but now understood better and signaled, sincerely and without a hint of defensiveness or embarrassment, that she now saw

inequality in the group she might not have seen before. A Maryville student from a tiny Tennessee town raised her hand and replied, matter-of-factly and without a resentful note that she now recognized herself as an economic minority. In the mirror of India, students recognized the Americas and saw their own experiences reflected through the lives of others.

While our collaborative course required far more preparation and negotiation than any comparable single-institution study-abroad course would, we remain convinced that its benefits made the extra effort truly worthwhile. This unique team-teaching situation challenged each of us to think seriously about the craft of teaching abroad and adapting to diverse student populations. It also enabled us to design assignments and activities that would significantly deepen the academic content in this immersive course. Maybe best of all, this collaboration pushed us to “see” issues related to religion, caste, and gender in contemporary India afresh through our co-instructor’s methodologies and perspectives and to make that real-time intellectual conversation available to our students.

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