

## **Personal Teaching Statement**

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My course syllabi from nearly twenty years of teaching tell a story. When I crafted my first undergraduate courses, I taught as I had most recently been taught: I lectured, students took notes, and I tested them for acquired knowledge. The classrooms I had known were largely teacher centered, with little thought given to diversity or individuality among the students. After a few semesters at a diverse state university, I came to appreciate the triangular structure of the classroom, consisting of the course content, the students, and the teacher. It was only when I understood how most college students view that triangle – with themselves and their interests as primary – that I learned how to teach in a more meaningful and constructive way. My syllabi over the years illustrate a change from seeing the classroom as a space devoted to imparting knowledge to seeing the classroom as a space for exploring the complex interaction of ideas. I now see the classroom as a space for learning how to take chances, for testing out new knowledge, and for playing with ideas, all values that directly informed my successful 2011 NEH Enduring Questions course grant. That course asks a central question and embraces challenge, critique, and creativity in seeking answers. As I have come to understand it, effective teaching meets students where they are and supports them to test their limits, to expect more from themselves than they have before. Effective teaching is best recognized through positive, constructive energy in the classroom, and it is best measured through the willingness of students to embrace the process, to try out ideas in class and in their written work. It can be measured more formally through assignments designed to gauge both acquired knowledge and acquired abilities to think more deeply about issues that matter.

My syllabi indicate a shift away from more traditional toward more creative assignments and assessment. Understanding the students' view of the pedagogical triangle has helped me connect content to assignments that promote learning that is often based on and challenges students' existing commitments. I have come to expect more from my students because I respect them as individuals with integrity and potential. I do not expect them to become religious studies scholars, but I do expect them to extend themselves intellectually in my classes. Facilitating intellectual risk-taking is most difficult in introductory-level teaching. Students often take just one or two courses in religious studies, so it is imperative that introductory courses be taught well. Lower-level courses, either in general education or religious studies, can be particularly challenging because students are not always prepared for the rigor of college work and because they tend to have less drive and commitment in courses not connected to their major. The puzzle of how to find the sweet spot here between "religious literacy" and intellectual exploration drives me to develop and teach courses with engagement as the key: building collaborative class websites, conducting fieldwork, creating board games, and

staging debates on controversial topics all allow students a more complex view into the often abstract ideas we study and provide them with more transferable skills than offered by traditional midterm and final exam.

My syllabi also show an increasing willingness to be transparent about what I aim to accomplish in each course. Students need to learn to question a world that appears to be given, and in that spirit I regularly ask students to think about the course and how it is unfolding, to question what is expected of them and why. Over the years I have tried and failed in the classroom as often as I have tried and succeeded, and all along I've let students know my reasons and goals. I have learned along with them, sometimes about the subject but more often about our mutual teaching and learning.

As I continue to develop as a teacher, I continue to develop new courses. In fall 2012 I taught our department's first pedagogy class for graduate students and upper-level undergraduates who are interested in teaching as a career. Many of our students may go on to teach in some capacity, whether in religious studies or some other discipline; indeed, many potential careers involve teaching skills to some degree. Extensive reading in the scholarship of teaching and learning as well my work in the history of religious studies as a discipline help shape this course, which is designed to be very hands-on and constructive. I will continue my work in the scholarship of teaching and learning in conjunction with this course. I recently developed two new undergraduate courses that aim at encouraging civil discourse around topics that tend to provoke incivility in the public sphere. Through carefully moderated, text-based class discussion and integrative projects, I hope to instill some degree of analytical sophistication about complex issues, even in the absence of solutions or agreement. I am drawn to teaching the conflicts, because the conflicts help launch students into uncomfortable territory that is full of potential for growth. I highly value the skills of observing and learning about religion, as our students will encounter religion and religious ideas well beyond their formal education. I hope to give them the tools and the confidence to do so.

The story of my syllabi points to a future of continued growth. I would advise any new teacher at any level that teaching and learning are about growth and hard work, both of students and teachers. Think of what you do as process, not product. Be deliberate about how and why you change what you do over time, mindful of what those changes might signal about your shifting pedagogical and scholarly commitments. Above all, remember that students will come to your classroom as they are, and your job is to create an environment that helps them leave as more informed, more reflective, and more capable and resourceful thinkers. Your syllabi – and you – will and should transform as you teach and learn from students and colleagues. Above all, expect and embrace change.