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Teaching Statement

When I first began teaching, I came to class equipped with outlines, visual aids, and an abundance of enthusiasm. Classes seemed to go well. Students became interested in studying religion, but I could not have explained why. I was not a student of my own teaching practice. I relied on my intuition, a feeling informed by my own experience of the classroom and the imagined professorial ideal in my head. It took participation in a yearlong workshop on teaching and learning in religion (2007-2008) and continued involvement in the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) at Wake Forest University to help me shift from a pedagogy based on *feeling* to one informed by *research*. Through TLC events, I gained the knowledge and skills to assess my teaching.

The concepts of clarity and alignment structure my teaching practice. From the individual class to the overall course, I strive to articulate clearly my desired learning outcomes, and then design in-class activities and course assignments that align with these outcomes. It sounds so simple, but when you are swimming in content, meeting with colleagues, and researching a project, such clarity and alignment are often elusive. Yet, to foster student learning, commitment to both is essential. Research shows that students learn best through pedagogical practices that challenge them to shift from passive pupil to active participant.

At the start of my career I equated a “good” class discussion with active learning, but reading in the scholarship of teaching and learning expanded my view of active learning. Helping students “claim their education,” as Adrienne Rich argued, means more than being able to discuss a reading or comment on an idea. It means helping students acquire a variety of skills and knowledge about a topic, as well as fostering a sense of ownership of their learning.

Achieving this goal, then, requires careful alignment of clearly articulated course objectives with in-class and out-of-class assignments.

Fostering active learning also requires ongoing learning. I continue to participate in TLC book clubs and solicit help from its directors and colleagues, as I refine existing strategies, learn new ones, and grow as a teacher. As students change and technology evolves, continued development as a teacher is essential. Sometimes I seek help with a specific course. For example, struggling to organize my Religion and Popular Culture course, I went to the TLC for advice and was introduced to concept mapping. Armed with this new tool, I began categorizing my ideas and placing them in a hierarchical framework that not only helped me with my course, but also provided me with another teaching tool. Other times our book club discussions provide valuable tools. After reading *Make it Stick*, which shows that frequent, low-stakes quizzes help students learn, I added a variation of this assignment to Religion 101 via our course management system. Similarly, José Antonio Bowen's *Teaching Naked* challenged me to think about how I might more effectively use assignments and student time outside of class to improve in-class learning. As a result, I switched from reading reflection journals to worksheets that ask students not only to answer questions about the readings, but to do online research related to the day's topic. These assignments transform students into researchers who are gaining skills in both digital and religious literacy. My hope is that this fosters the type of "claiming" of which Rich speaks. Currently, inspired by Bowen, I am working with our Instructional Technologist to create a larger repository of videos by scholars on topics related to my Introduction to Religion course (The Religion 101 Project). This resource provides students with access to a variety of scholarly views, as well as another way to learn.

Carefully designed lesson plans and beautiful syllabi, as we know, do not guarantee effectiveness—student learning. Class assignments, student performance on an exam or their ability to write a specific type of paper, can help identify effectiveness in helping students meet course objectives. And, certainly, a great in-class discussion or a flop can provide an immediate sense of success or failure. Yet, deeper insight into student learning—how their thinking has transformed and what they will take away from the course—is harder to measure. It is, however, possible. A few years ago I designed a “Before and After” assignment for Introduction to Religion. In the first two weeks of class, I ask students to create a video that answers the questions: What is the study of religion and why is it important? This assignment helps me get to know them and their ideas about religion early in the semester, which allows me to calibrate my preparation accordingly. At the end of the semester, they re-watch their videos and write a one-page reflection on how their thinking has developed. Reading their reflections about their own learning—claiming their own growth and learning—has emerged as one of the most important measures I have found for assessing teaching effectiveness.

If I were starting my career over, I would encourage my younger self to become a student of her teaching. To become an active learner in the same way that she encourages students to own their learning. I would point her to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and encourage her to find a community that shares her pedagogical commitments. I would urge her to cultivate relationships with people who will listen to her worries about a class and help her brainstorm about an in-class activity, but who will also challenge her to reflect on what she is doing and why. I would tell her to keep taking outlines, visual aids, and passion for the subject into the classroom, and to recognize from the start that being a teacher means being a student.