

Internationalization and Cultural Diversity in Higher Education: Teaching for Mutual Understanding

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Abstract

Internationalization of universities in the Asia Pacific has brought to the region unprecedented waves of students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. This inherent diversity provides an opportunity to re-evaluate curriculum and acclimate students to the value of mutual understanding. Drawing upon the author's experience in designing and implementing an undergraduate liberal arts core curriculum course, this article surveys the role of international universities as living laboratories for developing innovative responses to cultural diversity, provides a rationale for teaching comparative religion from an inclusive and non-sectarian perspective as a subject of cultural diversity, suggests reasons for encouraging interdisciplinary cooperation between the humanities and the social sciences, and features a case study on the development of an interactive interdisciplinary liberal arts course on Religions of the Asia Pacific designed to provide opportunities for domestic and international students to explore cultural diversity through religion.

Keywords:

Internationalization, higher education, cultural diversity, comparative religion

Focusing on the emerging institutional, curricular, and pedagogical dynamics of inspiring undergraduate students in international universities to appreciate cultural diversity for mutual understanding, this article draws upon the author's experiences and insights from researching, designing, and implementing a general education core curriculum course at an international university in Japan. It reports on the results of an action research project on the contributions of the humanities and the social sciences in encouraging domestic and international students to learn the value of mutual understanding by describing the transformation of a social science discipline based introductory course on regional religions into an opportunity to explore comparative belief systems from a mutually inclusive, non-sectarian, and interdisciplinary viewpoint. The article includes a case study on a systematically constructed and carefully delivered course that describes an innovative opportunity for students to develop discursive practices aimed at exploring the cultural diversity created by their presence in the university. These experiences suggest that this model of teaching and learning about cultural diversity may be relevant to international universities in the Asia Pacific region that are also enrolling increasingly diverse student populations, but that conventional discipline-based approaches to curriculum and pedagogy may fall short of benefitting from this new diversity because of tendencies to operate within politically and economically competitive disciplinary perspectives and thus miss important opportunities to encourage positive and cooperative relations among and between domestic and international students. As regional higher education moves toward further internationalization, it becomes possible to conceive of the university as a 'living laboratory' for interdisciplinary innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. Proceeding from the author's broader research interests on curriculum reform, integrated teaching, interactive learning, and multicultural understanding, the article suggests that reflecting on these themes may inspire administrators and faculty to sharpen their views of cultural diversity and mutual understanding, because although humanities and social science faculty may work within different locales and disciplinary frameworks they are sharing the experience as educational and cultural workers within evolving international university settings that are increasingly being shaped by emerging yet unpredictable regional socio-economic trends.

INTERNATIONALIZATION, CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

In recent years, as state funding has systematically and often abruptly been withdrawn from higher education, universities have been forced to restructure along economic lines, often implementing curriculum reforms that tend toward attracting students by rethinking traditional disciplinary structures and moving more into employment oriented instruction, in particular through calls for developing ‘transferrable skills’ for the labor market. While the author has explored this trend elsewhere (Progler, 2010), the current article will take this ongoing restructuring as a point of departure by temporarily bracketing off arguments for and against the evolving tendency toward skills-based instruction, and instead use the opportunity to reflect on the implications of moving away from teaching within a disciplinary framework and toward teaching that embraces interdisciplinarity. The article will take as a case study the general education core curriculum course Religions of the Asia Pacific, which provides an opportunity for students, regardless of their majors or career goals, to gain some awareness of and facility with cultural diversity. Although many campuses provide opportunities for domestic and international students to interact and learn about one another, the large scale lecture courses to which many faculty are assigned pose a challenge in that a common starting point for the discourse cannot be presumed. Due to this inbuilt ambivalence, core curriculum courses ought to be approached as stand-alone experiences that can be shaped into opportunities for students to dwell in multicultural settings and develop discursive practices that provide an inclusive outlook on diversity.

In this context, one way to approach the teaching and learning of cultural diversity in a core curriculum course for mutual understanding is to envision it taking place within the international university conceived as a ‘living laboratory.’ The academic literature on living laboratories in higher education has tended to highlight two main characteristics: the involvement of stakeholders in the design and implementation of projects, and the nurturing of projects with a focus on innovation. In this sense, laboratories are not closed environments for controlled experiments; they are open sites to reflect on experiments that have already been initiated by history and institutions within their own parameters and imposing their own limitations. Seeing the university as a laboratory in this way takes its inherent diversity as a starting point for course construction and pedagogical development. In other words, rather than conforming students to

presumably immutable disciplinary frameworks, curriculum and teaching can be shaped to respond to the cultural diversity created by the increasing presence of international students in university classrooms. While many of the academic disciplines acknowledge, measure, and theorize about cultural diversity, there is an overall assumption that treats diversity from within existing social science paradigms that tend to imagine or strive for dealing with known quantities. As an alternative, a living laboratory takes the unknown as its starting point, where the parameters are defined by institutional structure, enrollments, and availability of resources, and focuses on how these are put together in order to innovate curriculum and pedagogy.

Conceived in this way, with stakeholders seen as participants in an experiment conducted by history and that includes demographic, economic, and institutional change, the current situation harkens back to the early days of cultural anthropology when it became the task of academics to sort out the implications of what had happened as a result of increasing contact between tribal societies and the modern world. Reflecting on the place of fieldwork in the emergence of cultural anthropology, Margaret Mead, as cited in Yans-McLaughlin (1996), recalled that:

the idea of using the field, that is, villages, among primitive peoples or in peasant peoples in other parts of the world, as laboratories grew up. These weren't laboratories where we experimented on people. History made the experiment, and we could go in and judge the results.

As university faculty are caught up in the largely experimental trend to internationalize, it becomes crucial to move beyond approaching teaching as if nothing has happened and instead to become what Schon (1983) referred to as 'reflective practitioners' by continuously reflecting upon what it means to work within an institutional environment infused with increased diversity the parameters of which are largely beyond their control. It is in this way that universities can be seen as 'living laboratories.' According to Lacasa, Martinez, Mendez, and Cortes (2007, p. 2), living laboratories offer:

the challenge of examining new technologies in everyday contexts as used by people according to their own goals. In these contexts, people from different generations explore innovative tools by interacting with them and discovering new and unexplored ways of acting. We are interested in showing how this

perspective has roots in social researchers, especially those who have found inspiration for their work in sociocultural psychology and anthropology.

Although living laboratories as presently conceived tend to favour technological innovation and university-corporate partnerships, the concept can also be fruitfully, and more generally, applied to curricular and pedagogical innovation. The elements of stakeholder involvement, collaboration between object and subject, and open-ended environments emerge as constants across the contexts in which living laboratories are discussed. But in order to avoid limiting this discussion with reductionist and utilitarian impulses from experimental science, in which the researcher pre-determines and controls the parameters of an experiment in a closed laboratory ostensibly to provide validity, the concept of laboratory is applied here in a more open way, taking cues from action research and grounded theory and developing a course in process while seeing the faculty and students as participating in an experiment in the spirit of Mead and carried out in international universities conceived as living laboratories.

To illustrate, this paper will reflect upon the unfolding of an undergraduate lecture course that was developed and delivered over a six year period. While originally conceived as focusing on the Asia Pacific and proceeding from a viewpoint informed by sociology, the course is part of a curriculum now being transformed to suit a broader range of students than originally anticipated and also to integrate perspectives from multiple disciplines. This ongoing transformation is part of the experiment brought about by changes in university management over the past decade, as public funds have been withdrawn and survival strategies resembling those deployed by for-profit corporations have been implemented. While this trend toward privatization, internationalization, and interdisciplinarity has been subjected to critical analysis for its catering to the increasing influence of market values and corporate governance in higher education (Aronowitz, 2001; Miyoshi, 1998), this paper will for the time being put on hold these arguments and debates that seek to judge and evaluate this emerging state of affairs, and turn instead to reflecting upon what happens in the classroom. The primary goal here is to temporarily accept the terms of this ongoing experiment in order to reflect on its implications in practice through course development.

The course development that is the object of this research began as a fairly conventional offering in comparative religion with a regional focus and as seen through the lenses of anthropology and sociology. Originally entitled Peoples and

Religions of the Asia Pacific, the course gradually proceeded from these prior disciplinary domains to broader topics that began to transform the experience from the conventional coverage of material into more of an opportunity for students to learn to develop multicultural awareness and the relevant discursive practices. As the new course Religions of the Asia Pacific emerged, the first assumption it embodied was that this was not simply a course introducing students to a well-formed disciplinary discourse with its accompanying sense of certainty, since the curriculum of which the course was now a part reflects a more interdisciplinary outlook and includes infusions from the humanities and media studies. The course thus became an opportunity to reflect on the generative potential of uncertainty and to explore intercultural understanding, the goal being to develop a way of thinking about religion as an expression of cultural diversity and providing the discursive tools to deal with multicultural awareness.

In this way, a course on comparative religion became an opportunity to consider a mutually inclusive and non-sectarian approach to multicultural awareness that situates religion as a set of values, conceiving of the religions more as ‘wisdom traditions,’ to use the phrase of Smith (1995), rather than presenting religion as a social institution. In adopting this values and wisdom oriented approach, an important challenge emerged that involved resisting what might be called the ‘missionary impulse.’ The struggle in presenting religion within a values framework became to avoid prioritizing one or another tradition (including atheism) over the others without reducing them all to objects that are subjected to the critical tools of sociological analysis. This involved resisting the inherent temptation to seek refuge within a discipline and instead to move beyond seeing a particular disciplinary viewpoint as the only way to present the course material, which also helped students to move beyond their own subjectivities. To avoid the missionary impulse that places one tradition above the others, Smith (1995, p. 249) positions ‘listening’ as the key to appreciate the values and wisdom of others, as a way to move toward seeing the world through the eyes of others:

We listen first because our times require it. Daily the world grows smaller, leaving understanding the only place where peace can find a home. Those who listen work for peace, peace built not on religious or political hegemonies, but on mutual awareness and concern. For understanding brings respect, and respect prepares the way for a higher capacity, which is love.

For Smith, rather than seeking an illusory balanced view between the good, the bad, and the ugly in the world religions, the purpose of teaching religion is akin to presenting works of art--museums rarely highlight bad art--which is why he prefers to present the religions as wisdom traditions and takes seriously what they have to offer the contemporary world.

While Religions of the Asia Pacific was initially developed to conform to the degree-by-course approach still prevalent in most universities, where each course is seen as part of a rationalized curricular design that relegates some tasks to other courses in sequence, the realization emerged that it is also possible to develop a meta-narrative, or an overarching discourse, about cultural diversity as a stand alone experience in which form and content are fused. In addition to teaching a course only as an individual part of a formal curricular structure, since these structures themselves have become more fluid and tentative, it is also possible that this meta-narrative can cut across the boundaries of convenience and formality as represented by coverage, scheduling, and sequencing. A connective cross section eventually emerged with wisdom and experience, rather than belief and practice. However, this posed somewhat of a challenge to the prevailing approach toward teaching religion, which tends to be polarized between the strictly secular approach that subjects all the religions to an overarching scientific and critical, even dismissive, viewpoint, and the strictly sectarian approach that subjects all the religions to the viewpoint of one. The latter is not avoided by simply taking refuge in the discourse of 'world religions,' because, as Masuzawa (2005) has shown, the sectarian viewpoint of nineteenth century European Christianity remains embedded in the discourse of world religions. Both the secular and the sectarian approaches are in their own ways dismissive in that they overlook what Carse (2009) has called the 'durability of religion,' which he sees as related to a generative state of ignorance, that along with humility accepts the limitations of human knowing and continually inspires thinkers to reflect on the symbols and questions to which religious experience has given rise. As a way to reconcile these approaches, it seemed preferable to take a cue from Whitehead (cited by Peters, 1975, p. 92), who noted that 'the essence of education is that it be religious,' not religious in the sense of inculcating or reinforcing a sectarian orthodoxy, be it spiritual or secular, but religious in terms of duty and reverence.

The approaches to religion within the humanities and social sciences also tend to be polarized. While the social sciences often recognize the transnational challenge posed by religious movements, the discussion is frequently focused on security and perhaps the challenges faced by the secular state. The humanities

often focus on the philosophical dimensions of religion, while tending to essentialize or dehistoricize this dimension of thought. The two views, while relevant for understanding religion as a subject of cultural diversity, are less often integrated. While these concerns remain important, the challenge that arises here is to see religion on the plane of values and multicultural awareness without fully giving in to either view. One way to accomplish this, taking a cue from Peters (1975), is to focus on the experience of awe and the limits of human reason in education, which for the purposes of the current article becomes a way to connect religious thought and religious experience across cultures and over time. While such an approach may raise questions of standards for scientific inquiry, Peters suggests that standards often imply efficiency and ends, while in the humanities processes matter as much. Peters (1975, p. 102) also emphasizes a similarity between science and the humanities, which he identifies as reason, although it takes on a somewhat different characteristic in the humanities: ‘A reasonable man is one who is prepared to discuss things, to look at a situation impartially from the point of view of others than himself, to discount his own particular biases and predilections.’ With this view of reason in mind, a focus on the religions as wisdom traditions can perhaps move these conversations beyond simply reflecting on the existence of diversity through multicultural awareness and intercultural communication by accepting that there is something to be learned about how to live in the world and with one another by looking at the best of what the wisdom traditions have to offer, and that they might inform lifestyles that relate human beings to larger cosmological contexts. Acknowledging these situated limitations, and conceiving of them as potentials, has enabled an outlook that might inform the design and teaching of a course on comparative religion, a task to which this article will turn in the case study that follows. However, it may be useful to first survey some of the relevant views on the potential for teaching comparative religion as a subject of cultural diversity.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TEACHING ABOUT DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS

As societies become more globalized, with travel and communication making the planet seem smaller in terms of life experiences, students are more likely than ever to encounter cultural diversity in daily life, prior to, during and after their university education. Whether through mass media images, such as those on the local and international news, or through the internet and entertainment,

or while traveling or studying at university, or through social experiences in the workplace, most students are likely to encounter people of different cultures professing faiths other than their own (including professing no faith at all). Given this cultural diversity presently, though perhaps haphazardly, encountered by students coming to international universities, it seems more necessary now than ever to formulate coherent programs to acclimate students to living responsibly in a culturally diverse world. Religion, including views held toward or about religion, is a critical part of that diversity.

If international universities are understood as one of the few sites that can provide a dedicated space for encountering and reflecting upon cultural and religious diversity in a systematic way, it becomes important to recognize and nurture these learning spaces as essential elements in the quest to understand ourselves and others. Taking Japan as one example, Fujiwara (2005, p. 353; cf. Fujiwara, 2007) surveys the value of religious studies in Japanese higher education and highlights the role of this crucial site of formal learning:

Since religion is virtually excluded from school curricula in Japanese public education, colleges are, for most students, the first places where they can substantially learn about religions and religious studies. Ironically, undergraduate programs of religion have recently been downsized due to economic difficulties. The situation is especially critical, given that religion is gaining more attention worldwide and teaching about religion is a major public role that scholars of religion can undertake for an increasingly diversified society.

Colleges and universities in other internationalizing societies might explore opportunities to further undertake this public academic role by providing courses that present religion in the framework of understanding cultural diversity. However, given this tendency to downsize such programs in favor of those catering more to economic development, it seems crucial to initiate and maintain discussions on the importance of nurturing these learning spaces.

Discussions on the purpose of teaching religion as part of university curricula may also move beyond the question of cultural diversity into the topic of public policy. In surveying the place of teaching religion in American public education, for example, Bryant (2006, pp. 65–66) suggests three reasons for ‘knowing about religion’: 1) As part of understanding the ‘pivotal roles that religions have played in the formation and development of the world’s great civilizations’; 2)

As a way of coming to terms with the role of religion, mitigated by various economic and political factors, in the ‘resurgence of sometimes violent forms of fundamentalism in many parts of the world during the last couple of decades’; and 3) To appreciate the vital place of religion in the ‘demographic transformation occurring in many societies, especially the United States,’ and to move beyond toleration to seeing ‘diversity as a source of strength, a genuine pluralism.’ Religion has clearly played an important role in the history of civilizations, and, while civilizations are not entirely discernible through the lens of faith, religions certainly open a window of inquiry into civilizational dynamics, in particular in terms of their longevity as systems of belief and ritual to which people still often turn for identity and solace, and also their contribution to forming contemporary values. In the media age, religion is often portrayed--not always accurately--as a causal factor in social strife. While news media, often due to time constraints, might tend to employ simplistic sound bites bordering on stereotyping that may only distort complex socio-political events into one-dimensional caricatures, their placing of religion in the public light ironically offers an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss related questions beyond rectifying the misinformation and moving toward understanding the coterminous causes of strife on the one hand and examining the overlooked wisdom that religions might offer on the other. In societies experiencing migrations reaching to the extent of bringing about demographic transformations, and coupled with the emergence of the global megacity, with people from multiple religions existing side by side--and even peoples of different branches of the same religion--cultural diversity gives pause for reflecting upon the ways we understand one another. Though by no means the only reasons for teaching religion in universities, these are crucial purposes of teaching religion for multicultural awareness.

Such a prospectus may require developing a nuanced outlook on religious pluralism that is commensurate with the diversity created by the presence of multiple religions in a single socio-cultural setting. In reflecting upon the thinking of the South Asian philosopher and literary figure Rabindranath Tagore regarding religion and education, the great poet’s grandnephew Saranindranath Tagore (2003) has identified three outlooks from which teaching and learning about religion might proceed: internationalism, traditionalism, and cosmopolitanism. While internationalism seems to hold potential as an outlook to inform teaching religion for the purpose of developing multicultural awareness, a problem arises in abolishing, neglecting, or otherwise damaging regional and national traditions. Contrary to the hopes and fears brought about by globalization, the world has not

become more uniform and the internationalist outlook, though perhaps laudable for its emphasis on cooperation, falls short of dealing with the distinctiveness of locality. On the other end of the spectrum is what Isaiah Berlin (cited by Tagore, 2003, p. 84) has termed 'gloomy traditionalism,' which tends to overemphasize inherited cultural traditions while insisting on their constraints. This outlook is ironically shared by academic orientalists and religious fundamentalists, in that both see in gloomy traditionalism an over-simplified purity that defies or generalizes reality but which is also politically expedient for the pursuit of their respective agendas. Traditionalism without the gloom and politics has some potential as an outlook because it can form a response to consumerism and other flighty trends, but in the end it is still liable to devolve into a habit that ossifies the past, rather than seeking wisdom for the present. A third outlook, what Tagore calls 'deep cosmopolitanism' (2003, p. 84), suggests that an understanding of religion hinges on comparative interpretations and respectful presentations that move beyond focusing only on difference and which take similarity seriously, thereby addressing the tendency to make sense of something new through what is already known, and which can in turn create toleration of diversity as a response to complex lived realities. However, the fruition of this outlook depends on an honest willingness to engage in dialogue, Tagore (2003, p. 91) suggests, because:

the institution of dialogues across cultures is of utmost importance. The possibility of such dialogues, however, rides on the cultivation of a kind of intellect that is open to transformative encounters with other cultures, on the wisdom of not shutting off the world while gathering sustenance from one's own cultural inheritance.

The pivotal point here is that contact with cultural diversity and multicultural awareness can bring about transformations in perceptions of one another, but that these transformations do not necessarily involve becoming defensive or fearful toward religion and its adherents.

Building upon the above points of forming a culture of deep cosmopolitanism and learning to appreciate the role of transformative toleration, Ten (2003, p. 157) adds that beyond teaching about religions in universities, they can also become sites of cooperation:

When social and economic life produce associations of people from various religions, drawn together by non-religious common interests, the religious

differences themselves may become less significant in the formation of attitudes. If we have been propelled closer to others by our shared associational interests, then we may begin to better understand and appreciate their religious values.

This approach to toleration can perhaps succeed through associational interests initiated in international universities, and surrounding communities, that are not only for the sake of religious dialogue, but which instead can address any one of a number of issues, such as collectively facing the current ecological crisis, but which by way of the varieties of people concerned with such issues can provide an indirect forum for learning about diversity. As international universities bring people together around associational interests, this can in turn inform the process of teaching about religion as a subject of cultural diversity. Coming as it does from an Asian thinker in a cosmopolitan society, this third approach holds out potential for framing an outlook that upholds diversity without erasing it in the name of cooperation, as is the problem with internationalism, and which can respond to cultural diversity without recourse to chauvinistic fundamentalism, a problem with traditionalism.

In addition to considering the purposes and outlooks for embarking upon the teaching of religion as a subject of cultural diversity, it is equally important to evaluate methodological and pedagogical approaches to the actual teaching of religion within the context of the university as a living laboratory, which provides opportunities to consider methodological as well as curricular innovations. Ganzevoort (2006) elaborates upon three methodological viewpoints relevant to advancing this project: committed teaching, detached teaching, and dialogical teaching. Because it is rooted in a particular religious point of view, committed teaching, while on the surface appearing to provide an insider viewpoint on a specific faith, sometimes ends up courting exclusivity and inciting hierarchical competition through recourse to monolithic defenses and/or dogmatic proselytizing. The challenge for the committed teacher within a particular faith attempting to teach religion for multicultural awareness is to avoid comparing the religions in order to judge or rank them, since one's own faith will almost always come out on top. While that might work for confirming faith within a religious community or faith-based institution, it can be hazardous to the project of comparison for multicultural awareness since to rank cultures is to ascribe value to them, and by extension to devalue the cultures of others, which is destructive of dialogue. At the same time, secular academics, often

responding directly to faith-based and religiously committed teaching, may claim supremacy for detached teaching of comparative religion but may also yield to an indifference that can hobble communication, owing largely to the illusory stance of the objective observer. This is sometimes tempered by a form liberalism, which while open to diversity can at times take to neutralizing that which is being studied, placing the scientific project at the apex of inquiry. A third possibility, Ganzevoort suggests, is to approach the teaching of comparative religion through the creation and nurturance of dialogical and mutually respectful relationships between religious points of view, by which plurality becomes an opportunity for mutual enrichment that respects differences while highlighting parallels, and which seeks accommodation for the sake of understanding, and which in turn can proceed from reconfiguring religions as wisdom traditions, not only for the purpose of knowing about them, but also for the purpose of learning from one another.

Whatever position one might take on the above points, teaching religion for the sake of cultural diversity and as an aspect of multicultural awareness seems necessary in the international universities of today, and not just for its own sake. Taking into consideration the ambiguity and uncertainty of life and belief in the post-modern worldview, Huston Smith insists that religion matters. In reflecting on the contemporary feeling of ambiguity, Smith (2001, p. 4) points out that post-modern life remains ambiguous despite what he recognizes as the 'impressiveness of pure science' and the 'miracles of technology.' If universities could embrace the world's ambiguity, rather than fear it, Smith (2001, p. 207) suggests that new vistas for spiritual awareness and religious co-existence might actually be opened: 'Along with multiculturalism, which has faiths rubbing shoulders as never before, this recognition of the world's ambiguity could help to reduce the friction that has so bedeviled religious relationships in the past.' In addition to coming to terms with the post-modern condition of ambiguity, which involves the present, there are also portals from the past that likewise point the way to a future of co-existence. Recalling as an example the scope and longevity of the Chinese empire and its impact on culture and society to the present day, and echoing some of the points made above, Smith (2001, p. 207), who was raised in China, notes that 'part of the reason for China's success may lie in the way she positioned her religions as partners rather than antagonists.' China, in other words, can represent the development of a civilization that embraced diversity through a both/and, rather than an either/or, outlook, one in which multiple affiliation was the norm. This outlook, still evident in Japan and other

parts of East Asia, is often unintelligible to those raised in the Western religions, or in the academic disciplines that are formulated around or in opposition to those religions, which tend to be characterized by exclusive affiliation.

As the form and content of education need not be limited to those ideas and processes originating in the modern era, the above points about China also raise the possibility of looking toward the wisdom traditions not only as objects of study for their content, which in the end might reduce them to static traditions, but also as subjectivities that can help to encourage multicultural awareness in international universities, particularly in the Asia Pacific, and which can see the traditions as dynamic and with real value for teaching cultural diversity today.

AN INTERACTIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPARATIVE RELIGION

With the above theoretical issues related to teaching religion for multicultural awareness as a backdrop, by way of illustration this last section will turn to the practical dimension of teaching. Three interrelated points will be considered: 1) Shaping the presentation of the course materials to address an evolving sensibility of cultural diversity in conjunction with developing a meta-narrative on comparative religion; 2) Balancing Smith's wisdom and values oriented approach to comparative religion with a more experiential dimension by adding case studies of religious rituals, pilgrimages in particular; and 3) Delivering the course through the use of a learning management system that enables open-ended and interactive teaching, providing opportunities to engage with evolving student sensibilities.

The syllabus for earlier permutations of Religions of the Asia Pacific was based on a two-pronged strategy: 1) Assigning chapters from a textbook, which would be assessed with midterm and final examinations; and 2) Using class time for student presentations, which would be assessed *in situ*. Although the course had been taught for several semesters prior to the reform process discussed in this article, it had not been evaluated. When the course was reviewed with an eye toward including it in the new liberal arts core curriculum, several shortcomings emerged. The reading material consisted of a collection of social science oriented essays covering specific points about regional variants of selected religions in the Asia Pacific, illustrated by primary source materials from within these religions. The readings were too advanced for the first and second year undergraduate students who would be taking the course, many of whom were

having their first experience of English based instruction and half of which were not in the social science major. The specialized viewpoint that was presented in the readings, though sound from a disciplinary standpoint, did not provide a cohesive discourse on the relationships among and between the religions; it was more oriented toward area studies and the economic, political, and social contexts within which regional religions were situated. While somewhat useful as an introduction to the sociology of religion, the reading material seemed detached from the liberal arts core curriculum and the experiences of a highly internationalized student body. As it made more sense to design a new course utilizing a humanities approach that would suit the liberal arts outlook of the core curriculum, as well as a much broader spectrum of students, the previous reading material was subsequently removed and considered for a more advanced course on religion and belief systems intended for social science majors.

Another shortcoming of the previous approach was its utilization of class time. Beyond a midterm and final examination based on the social science readings, the coursework had consisted entirely of student presentations. Each student was assigned a few minutes to give a presentation about either their own religion or a religion of their choice. As this had been a large scale lecture subject with an enrollment of over two hundred students, the presentations took up most of the contact time in class. While providing an opportunity for open sharing was an admirable feature of the course that seemed conducive to fostering intercultural exchange and mutual understanding, in practice it lacked rigor and cohesion as there was no connection between the reading and the student presentations, and there was no basis to evaluate or relate the widely divergent presentations. In the new course, which sought to more effectively utilize the class time, the spirit of the presentations was preserved in an online discussion forum and through assignments, to be discussed below.

In light of the shortcomings of the previous social science course, a new interdisciplinary liberal arts oriented core curriculum course was subsequently designed utilizing a world religions discourse based on the work of Huston Smith, as noted above. The rationale for settling on this approach was that most of the major world religions are represented within the Asia Pacific and that, for the purpose of infusing the humanities into a liberal arts core curriculum course as opposed to introducing a disciplinary discourse, there were enough similarities among those religions to speak of them generally while also retaining their regional variations. This decision was made in recognition of the limitations of the world religions discourse, as noted by Masuzawa (2005, p. 316), who found

that the dominant discourse has tended to prioritize the hegemonic nineteenth century Eurocentric view of religious studies characterized by insisting upon an essential unity and universality of all religions. This differs from the viewpoint of Tagore, as noted above, who suggests that similarities ought to be taken seriously to foster dialogue. In order to avoid the pitfalls of the Eurocentric universalist and monologic approach but without sacrificing the benefits of a relational and dialogic approach, it was decided that a balance needed to be attempted between the humanities oriented wisdom and values discourse, as exemplified by Smith, and the experiential discourse of the social sciences, anthropology in particular. The wisdom and values discourse, which emphasized commonalities for the purpose of mutual understanding, was tempered by the social science approach, which tended to focus on differences between religions for the purpose of providing context and illustrating diversity.

Within this new framework, the first task was to select reading and other materials. After surveying several entry-level textbooks geared toward undergraduate students as well as general readers, *The Sourcebook of the World's Religions* (Beverluis, 2000) was settled upon. This sourcebook featured a variety of chapters written by committed teachers from each religion, introducing the basic tenets of their faiths interspersed with excerpts from sacred writings and primary sources. A clear benefit of this sourcebook was that it included comparative essays on themes that cut across the domain of each religion. Although well beyond what could be covered in a single term, the scope was global and inclusive. The sourcebook was also appealing because it was originally designed as a discussion aid for interfaith dialogue by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. Although the sourcebook worked well as an introduction to each religion from the perspective of its believers, the fragmentary framework was not very conducive to developing a cohesive discourse among and between the religions, and its tenet-based approach did not lend itself to a humanities and social science outlook. It was clear that another text was needed in order to integrate the experience for students and which was open to the humanities and the social sciences, so the sourcebook was moved into supplementary materials.

After revisiting the goal of the course as an interdisciplinary introduction that was intended to encourage dialog and mutual understanding, and given that the ideas of Huston Smith had informed some of the decisions regarding the course rationale, it made sense to use his *Illustrated World's Religions* (Smith, 1995). This decision hinged on two observations: 1) Smith wrote this book

with general readers as well as undergraduate students in mind and it featured a relatively well-developed integrated discourse about religions that provided a set of concepts and a vocabulary that was both rigorous and inclusive, and 2) Smith had consciously integrated the humanities into the presentation of each religion, in particular music and the visual arts, which better served the liberal arts focus of the course. As an abridgment of his classic work, *The World's Religions*, the illustrated edition maintained the depth and rigor of a seasoned scholar of comparative religion while being more easily comprehended by non-specialists. An added advantage was that this book was paralleled by *The Wisdom of Faith* (1996), a five-part television series featuring sensitively conducted interviews with Huston Smith by the American journalist Bill Moyers. The interviews nicely complemented the text with descriptions of the author's fieldwork as a participant observer in regional variants of the world religions, including Turkish Sufism, Indian Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism, and Japanese Zen. The experiential dimension highlighted in these interviews also provided a way to integrate the previously planned focus on pilgrimages to illustrate religious rituals.

For the pilgrimage case studies, it seemed sufficient to dedicate one lecture each to those of East Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. Since the focus in these case studies was to be on the experiences of pilgrimage, documentary and ethnographic films were consulted and eventually several selected. For East Asia, given that the university was based in Japan, two films on pilgrimages in Japanese Buddhism were used. *Arukihenro: Walking Pilgrims* (2006) follows a group of pilgrims on a two-month journey to visit each of the eighty-eight Buddhist temples circumscribing Shikoku island, and *Mineiri: A Thousand Years of Prayer in Kunisaki* (2010) focuses on the mountain austerity ritual pilgrimage associated with the Tendai branch of Buddhism. For South Asian pilgrimages, *Kumbh Mela: Songs of the River* (2004) highlights the multiplicity inherent to Hinduism by taking viewers through the carnival-like atmosphere of the sacred site at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers in India, while *The Wheel of Time* (2003), made by acclaimed German filmmaker Werner Herzog, profiles the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, a site sacred for Buddhists, Hindus, and followers of the indigenous Bon religion. For West Asia, two films were selected: *Holidays* (2002), which features a segment on Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, including (among others) Filipino and Korean pilgrims, and *Inside Mecca* (2003), a National Geographic production on the Islamic pilgrimage that follows a group of Malaysian pilgrims on their journey. These videos complemented--and at times also complicated--

the reading material by highlighting the experiential dimension of religion and ritual, as well as by raising opportunities to discuss the socio-cultural complexities of regional variants intertwined with global flows. Although the films were the main source material for the three regional case studies, selected chapters were assigned from an illustrated guide to the world's pilgrimages, *Sacred Journeys* (Westwood, 1997). Used in conjunction with the particular experiences depicted in the videos, the guide provided a comparative overview of similarities found among many pilgrimages: the making of sacred places, the motivations of 'pilgrim-tourists,' and the question of expectations upon arrival.

Students responded well to these new course materials and to the way in which they were integrated. During the class lectures, careful parallels were drawn among and between the religions, and emphasis was placed upon presenting students with an inclusive and non-sectarian discourse on religion by highlighting terms and commonly found concepts, such as 'authority' and 'ritual,' which enabled nuanced discussions of similarities and differences.

With the course materials and their presentation settled upon, the next task was to develop assessments and assignments. Initially, as was the university norm, students were given a midterm and final examination, which are practical responses to large scale lectures of more than two hundred students, since they could be efficiently graded, and which easily lend themselves to content-focused disciplined-based courses. However, given that this was a liberal arts core curriculum course emphasizing diversity and exploration, basing assessment on only two high stakes examinations detracted from the kind of incremental skill building that this course sought to develop, so assessment eventually moved away from examinations and more toward weekly quizzes and short assignments. The quizzes were from the readings, videos, and lectures and were factually oriented to encourage students to engage with the materials and with one another around those materials. The assignments were related to the pilgrimage case studies, and mainly involved open-ended questions with no single correct answer. For example, prior to the lecture on sacred sites, students were asked to find a quotation that spoke of a sacred place. Using a learning management system, an interactive weblog was set up to allow students to post these quotations after being instructed on proper citation according to the style manual in use at the university. The end result of the assignment was a student-generated 'quotron' that portrayed the diversity in the ways that places became sacred, and these quotes were reviewed and commented upon before the lecture about sacred places. Other questions served similar purposes, such as asking, for example,

‘Why do people make pilgrimages?’ and each could be similarly answered by a quotation. These assignments served three purposes: 1) Preserving some of the open sharing among students that characterized earlier permutations of the course but without using precious class time to achieve it; 2) Encouraging students to do a little research and contribute to materials that will enhance their own and their classmates’ learning; and 3) Helping students to grasp the norms of proper academic citation and gain some respect for rigor. In addition to these more or less text-based assignments, other weblog assignments were developed that asked students to post an image in response to an open-ended question about religion and ritual. In other words, instead of finding a quote to define a concept like the sacred, they could select an image to depict it, and doing this without using textual descriptions became an exercise in visual literacy and provided opportunities for students to gauge their collective responses, while also enabling the professor to spontaneously reflect on links to the course materials.

The final weblog assignment, which proved to be very popular, sent students out to the community around the university to spend some time at a ‘religious place,’ and to then post a photo of the place along with a short reflection on the experience. This assignment, often done in mixed groups of domestic and international students, helped everyone, including the professor, to collectively discover the remarkable religious diversity of the relatively small city in which the university was situated. Students eagerly approached the fieldwork experience, which gave the professor an opportunity to revisit the experiential dimension of religion, and which also provided insights into Smith’s approach of immersing himself in religions and rituals. Complementing book learning with experiential learning encouraged students to generate and share their own informal stories, as Smith had done in the interviews, and provided a mini-pilgrimage experience that illustrated some of the points that Westwood had made in her discussion of sacred places and pilgrim-tourists.

In addition to the weekly assignments and assessments, a key element of the course was an online discussion forum in which students could post comments and questions about the lectures and materials, and through which they could make their own connections among those materials. Setting down a few basic rules in the name of netiquette and mutual respect, and not attaching grading or other value judgment to the forum, helped it to become a more free and open discussion among the students with one another, as well as with the professor, who monitored the forum on a daily basis to help ‘take the pulse’ of the class in terms of engagement and interest, and to make any necessary adjustments.

This is not the place to go into greater detail about the particulars of this course, but the foregoing description is included to illustrate how approaching the classroom as a living laboratory helps to foster the development, enhancement, and improvement of teaching and learning in process and by involving students in the construction of their own learning experience. It had an advantage over the previous presentations-based approach in that the experience was infused with a respect for academic rigor and gave students some idea of what it meant to do research, both textual and field-based. Course development involved continuous reflection on the materials and methods of teaching, which proved to be somewhat more time consuming than the previous approaches. However, the trade-off in time seemed worth it in the interest of providing a cohesive and coherent, inclusive and engaging, learning experience for the kind of diverse student body increasingly found in many international universities in Japan and throughout the region. This integrated and interdisciplinary approach to teaching in the university as a living laboratory suggests a model that conceives of students and professors as engaged participants and reflective practitioners in a curricular and pedagogical experiment that transverses the boundaries between the humanities and social sciences without obscuring their distinctiveness, and which may in turn help others to make the most of this experimental moment in the history of the academy by encouraging mutual understanding and a respect for cultural diversity.

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