

*From Playing Buddha Golf to Dances with Wu:
Pedagogy and Perspective in non-Western religion courses*
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Introduction

Let me begin by noting that the phrase “Playing Buddha Golf” comes from my friend and collaborator in this project who noted that because of our shared lack of skill in golf, we ought to thank the Buddha after every shot for giving us that opportunity to practice patience.

The idea that I am going to present in the next few minutes is offered as a “work in progress.” It is an attempt to continue and expand a process that has been developing within the discipline of religious studies for the past few decades. What I hope this presentation will accomplish is to further a conversation within the discipline; a conversation centered on moving away from Western ethnocentric approaches to non-Western religions and toward pedagogical approaches which focus on viewing religious traditions from what Clifford Geertz calls “the native’s point of view.”

Context

Beginning eighteen years ago, I have offered a team-taught upper-level course in Asian religions with a colleague from the history department at Adrian College on an every-other-year basis. We alternate among three topics: Buddhism, Chinese religions, and Japanese religions. By the nature of the college in which we teach, we are both generalists. My colleague Michael McGrath’s was (he has since retired) one of three faculty in his department and I am one of three and one-half faculty in a combined religion and philosophy department. Michael’s specialty is Chinese military history. He is fluent in Chinese and has a strong interest in the religious dimensions of China and Japan. My specialty is religion and culture with an emphasis in American religion and Native American religions. I have had responsibility for our department’s courses in non-Western religions since my arrival at Adrian College twenty years ago.

For the past twelve years, I have been involved in developing higher-order thinking strategies and methods as part of the Adrian College Center for Effective Teaching (ACCET) and have designed my introductory level courses using collaborative and active learning approaches. I have also worked to accommodate various learning styles in my classes. In the years Michael and I have team-taught our upper-level course we gradually moved to incorporate these approaches into our classes. About ten years ago we began to structure our course assignments and assessment to reflect Richard Paul’s (Center for Critical Thinking) work in Critical Thinking and Art Costa’s (Institute for Intelligent Behavior, Habits of Mind) model of the Three Story Intellect.

From year to year our course designed focused on several learning objectives: (1) To expose students to a culture which differs significantly from their own so that they can gain an understanding of human diversity; (2) To gain an understanding of the particularly Chinese (Buddhist, Japanese) ways of defining, experiencing, and responding to transcendent dimensions of reality; (3) To develop the necessary thinking skills which enable students to pursue their own learning strategies in connection with the previously stated outcomes.

The approach we used was to have students work together toward the production of a presentation that included both a written and visual component; one that told the story of the narrative through symbols, pictures, and other conceptual representations of the traditions and sub-traditions which they were studying. We finally settled on the idea of structuring these presentations in the form of museum rooms with each of their group projects being put together in a final museum project that reflected their understanding of the larger tradition.

We prepared them for these assignments by emphasizing the importance of the design of the museum, its contents, the relationship of components to each other, and the overall experience of moving through the museum. This meant that the starting point should reflect the situation of one “entering the religion” and that the exit point should reflect the situation of one “leaving this life.”

After a particularly disastrous teaching experience in our Buddhism course six years ago, Michael and I sat down to assess the problems we had encountered. Since we had taught courses in Eastern cultures and religion every other year for more than a decade with very successful results, we felt fairly confident that the problems we experienced were not directly related to our team teaching together or our teaching of Buddhism as the subject material.

Playing Buddha Golf

We decided this time we would start from the beginning and reconstruct the course according to two of the specific learning outcomes described above. The two outcomes that we decided were central to the course were to develop within the students the capacity to view Buddhism, however partially, from Geertz’s notion of the “native’s point of view” and, second, to use various tools and strategies in critical thinking that we had worked with before to accomplish the first outcome.

In particular, we asked two types of questions in designing our course. The first centered on the Buddhist approach to Buddhism, “What is the fundamental perspective from which Buddhists approach Buddhism?” The second centered on the worldview assumptions, “What are the basic categories Buddhists use to structure their tradition?” Both of these questions were designed to move the students beyond traditional Western approaches to non-Western religions which privilege belief and historical development. We felt this was particularly significant with the Buddhist tradition because of Buddhism’s emphases on experience and consciousness. Since the details our development of this course appear elsewhere, I will only summarize our thinking here.

We were fortunate in having Roger J. Corless’s text *The Vision of Buddhism* available for our course. Corless’s “Buddhistic” approach, as he calls it, begins with the assumption that experience is the key entry point into Buddhism and that this experience is channeled through the Three Jewels -- the Buddha (e.g., the experience of Buddha), the Dharma (e.g., the transformative power of Buddha’s teachings), and the Sangha (e.g., the community in which this experience is developed). We were confident that the structure of the course projects would bring the students into their study of Buddhism at the starting point of Buddhism, the First Noble Truth. In other words, we wanted our students to feel discomfort; discomfort that derived from the non-traditional structure and methods we adopted. We also wanted students to raise the typically Buddhist question, “How do I end this dissatisfaction?” by developing an awareness of the three poisons or aversions of Buddhism (attachment, aversion, confusion) and by employing skillful means, *upaya*, as a way of moving toward a realization of Buddhism. We viewed the course structure as the “raft” that would take them there. While it was clear by the end of the semester that none of our students had been transformed into Buddhists (nor was this the intention), we were particularly satisfied with their efforts to move beyond traditional Western categories of interpreting religion and history and engage the perspective of Buddhism as developed in our selected text and from the course design.

Dances with Wu

When we began to plan for last year’s class in Chinese religions, we decided to use the same basic approach but to expand it to the assessment criteria we applied to the student projects. We believed that this would allow us to use course assessment as a pedagogical tool in moving them towards the insider’s perspective. Because of the complexity and diversity of Chinese religions, we employed a slightly different course design. As with the previous Buddhism course, we wanted to emphasize religious experience. Again, we were fortunate in having Donald S. Lopez, Jr.’s *Religions of China in Practice* available as a text. We maintained the same emphasis on student projects but here developed two sets of themes that we believed are central to understanding the place of religion within the Chinese historical and cultural experience. The first set focuses on four traditions that are central to the middle kingdom: (1) ancestor-folk religions in which we also included imperial rituals; (2) Confucianism; (3) Daoism; and, (4) Buddhism. The second set focuses on the way in which each of these traditions: (1) defines the “unseen” world; (2) communicates with it; (3) ritually encounters it; focuses on the way in which each of these traditions (4) lives earthly life in harmony with it.

In structuring the class discussions, lectures, and group work we ask the students to keep in mind the following questions to guide their reading and class preparation: (1) How did the Chinese in each particular religious tradition and historical period conceive of and relate to the world beyond the human realm?; (2) In what way did humans in successive historical period expand their previous understanding of their relationships with the world beyond themselves?; (3) How did the religious solutions proposed in each historical period help the Chinese gain a fuller sense of being human?; and, (4) How did each historical period answer the question, "How then should we live?" These questions were also to be reflected in the design of their museum rooms. As in the Buddhism course, the final project would incorporate each of these four projects into an overall museum that would reflect their understanding of the Chinese world.

Assessment

The thematic assessment categories we chose are: Yin Yang, Harmony, Propriety, and the Dao. We further subdivided each of these thematic categories into the following criteria:

Ying Yang:

Balance -- evidence appropriate oppositions, complementariness, and proportionality

Depth -- deals well with dynamic complexity and nuance

Breadth -- makes reference to the diversity of the dynamics of the tradition

Harmony:

Harmony -- content and segments fit together well; flow from one to another

Propriety:

Fairness -- descriptions and images are consistent with Chinese culture

Adequacy -- images and information adequately developed

Dao:

Coherence -- overall project makes sense

Insight -- project shows profound insight about Chinese traditions

Significance -- gets to the heart of Chinese state religion; the significance and role of the emperor in maintaining harmony and balance

As we used these criteria to evaluate our first set of projects, Michael and I agreed that they did adequately assessed what we wanted from our students' projects. The matrices (which are detailed in the appendix to this paper) helped us focus on our announced expectations. At first, we did not always agree on the assignment of a particular score to one or more of the categories but, by the third set of projects, we almost always had the same score in mind. In assigning the points to each of the categories, we discussed the project elements in some detail. We wanted to be sure that we "saw" the same strengths and weaknesses in the projects.

In keeping with our belief that thinking and assessment strategies and tools have their greatest pedagogical impact when they are intentionally and explicitly given to the students, we placed the grading matrix on our course management system. Students could thus use the matrix to frame their reading, discussions, and collaborative group work. We also placed a discussion thread on the course management system for each of the course components but the students in this class did not seem as persistent and creative with the discussion threads as had the previous class in Buddhism two years earlier.

Conclusions

For the most part, our students seemed to use the grading matrix to help them think about the structure, organization, and content of their museum rooms. While their overall projects were not as creative as the Buddhism class two years prior, the groups did manage to develop projects that we believed were on the edge of reflecting Chinese perspectives. None of the groups, however, seemed to enter fully into the dance of the universe. The result of our efforts has been that the assessment process for us has been enjoyable, precise, and creative while reinforcing in the students' minds the important categories that shape the Chinese perspective.

In presenting this set of assessment criteria and matrices, Michael and I hope only to engage other teacher/scholars in a discussion of the degree to which course structure and assessment can be used to further move students toward an insider's view of the tradition. We accept the fact that the matrix is not without problems and we invite your thoughts and comments in making them more precise and reflective of the world and experience that is Chinese religions.