

Playing Buddha Golf: Pedagogy and Perspective

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Introduction

I would like to begin our presentation by sharing with you a notation that appeared for Columbus Day on a Native American calendar published a number of years ago by the Mohawk nation: "On this day in 1492, the natives of North America discovered Christopher Columbus standing on their shores." While such a quote initially might seem out of place in a presentation entitled "Playing Buddha Golf", the connection is a direct one. As a generalist in religious studies, one of my primary areas of expertise is Native American sacred traditions. In that role, I have been part of an ongoing discussion among native and non-native scholars over the issue of the propriety of non-natives teaching courses in Native American sacred traditions. The conclusion reached by a number of us who are members of the Society for the Study of Native American Religious Traditions is that non-native scholars should tread lightly by seeking to teach the material utilizing categories that are as close as possible to the categories natives themselves use in encountering and responding to the world they experience

Such a cautionary approach is particularly relevant to the academic discipline of religious studies where two methodological assumptions, both derived from Western religious worldviews, have guided much of past scholarship. The first assumption is that religions can be categorized on an evolutionary scale from primitive to monotheistic. (A derivative assumption grounded in anthropology is that the scale goes from primitive, through monotheism, to scientific.) This assumption leads to the perception that religions that do not embrace the category of a monotheistic God are somehow inferior and, thus, less worthy of academic respect. While most contemporary scholars do not take the implications that far, we still rely on interpretive categories that, for the most part, have been derived from the more "advanced" religions. The second assumption is closely related to the first. Since Western religious traditions tend to distinguish themselves from each other according to a set of beliefs or doctrines, the analytic category "belief" guides the study of all religions by privileging belief over other dimensions of religion. The implication of this methodological approach is often to present non-Western religions first and foremost as belief systems even though this distorts the unique character of those non-Western religions that privilege ritual (e.g., Native Americans) or experience (e.g., Buddhism).

With these difficulties in mind, Michael and I began to plan our team-taught interdisciplinary cross-cultural course in Buddhism with the question, "What would a course in Buddhism look like using Buddhist categories of analysis?" Remembering the saying, "You cannot unask an asked question," we were committed to addressing the issue of the native's perspective. We had been teaching together every other year for about fourteen years so we were quite comfortable with each other. In our previous team-taught courses we had already developed and integrated into the course collaborative group work and higher order thinking. Now we were going to move forward by focusing on perspective.

Playing Buddha Golf

The title, "Playing Buddha Golf" comes from a running joke between Michael and myself about our relative ineptitude on the golf course. Each time we send the golf ball in a direction other than toward the hole, we remind each other to thank Buddha for giving us this opportunity to practice patience. This was a play on a passage in Roger Corless's *The Buddhist Vision*, a book we had selected for its taking a Buddhist view.

The connection of "playing Buddha golf" to "pedagogy and perspective" comes from our frustration over a class on Buddhism that we taught together two years ago. It was one of those "classes from hell". Since Michael and I had team-taught similar courses in Eastern cultures and religion for a number of years with quite 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.

Nevertheless, because of our frustration over the previous course we decided this time we would start from the beginning and reconstruct the course according to specific learning outcomes. 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 what Clifford Geertz calls “The Native’s Point of View”, that is, an insider perspective and; second, to use various tools and strategies in critical thinking that we had worked with before to accomplish the first outcome.

Course Design

The problem we faced in our initial stages of course design was monumental. As academics, we are trained to focus on content, on mastery of information, and, from the standpoint of the discipline of history, to view the development of that information chronologically. Yet, approaching a course on Buddhism “Buddhistically” as Roger Corless labels it, requires us to structure the course according to Buddhism’s own reality. The problem for us was that the essential category of Buddhism, the core reality, is what translators alternately have labeled “emptiness,” “transparency,” “pure experience,” “non-dualistic consciousness.” In other words, Buddhism centers on an experience, an experience that is prior to conceptualization. Indeed, any attempt to conceptualize “emptiness”, according to the Buddha, necessarily distorts Buddhism’s essence.

Fortunately, our problem was moderated somewhat by Buddha’s recognition that most individuals in the normal course of living have not grasped the essential nature of things and, therefore, need help in getting there. In our pre-enlightened existence our perception of the world, in the language of Buddhism, is illusory or, perhaps more precisely delusional. Given that starting place, the Buddha focused his teachings on practical means of breaking through this distorted consciousness. The metaphor used by the Buddha and continued by its schools is that of a raft that takes one across the river that separates our present world from Nirvana. Thus, in our efforts to approach the course Buddhistically and meet our first learning outcome, we developed what Buddhists refer to as “upaya”, skillful means, by which we could construct the raft for our students to move from their own perceptions of reality toward Buddhist perceptions of reality.

We settled on several “critical thinking tools” to begin building this raft. These tools drew on the work of Richard Paul (Center for Critical Thinking, Sonoma State University) and Art Costa (Institute for Intelligent Behaviors, El Dorado Hills, California) as modified by the Critical Thinking Working Group of the Adrian College Center for Effective Teaching. In utilizing these tools our first objective was to get our students to become aware of and skilled in using what Richard Paul calls the Dimensions of Thinking. Here we focused on five of the elements: Purpose, Point of View, Question/Issue, Assumptions and Basic Concepts. We introduced “purpose” first in order to make our students explicitly aware of our intended learning outcomes. We then focused on “point of view.” Here our intention was to lead them to an understanding that one begins the journey into the world of the “other” by first recognizing the distinct differences between Western and non-Western perspectives. The third dimension we identified was “Question/Issue.” Here we were explicit that the central question of the course was “How do Buddhists perceive the world and express themselves?” The fourth higher-order thinking dimension we emphasized was “Assumptions.” The emphasis on this dimension, we assured them, followed logically from their grasping of the prior three -- that the place to begin was to proceed to an investigation of the fundamental metaphysical and epistemological assumptions they brought to the course, our disciplinary methodologies contributed, and Buddhists expressed. Finally, we introduced them to the basic vocabulary of Buddhism and told them that they would be held accountable for using these concepts appropriately in their discussions and group projects.

The second higher order thinking tool we integrated into the course was based on Art Costa's model of the Three Story Intellect. The model suggests that a good thinker is capable of thinking at all three levels; as we go up the scale, we reach higher levels of thinking. With modifications by the Critical Thinking Working Group at Adrian College, we have labeled the levels (from lower to higher) Information/Data, Analysis/Process, Theory/Application. We integrated thinking activities into the course at each of the three levels. At the first level, as mentioned above, we provided vocabulary terms and required the students to integrate those terms into their group projects. We also gave them quizzes over the descriptive/factual information in their assigned daily readings. At the second level, we required them to participate in on-line discussion threads using the College's course management system. At the third level, we ask the students to develop museum projects which were to demonstrate their ability to interpret the course materials from “the native’s point of view.”

The on-line discussions produced dialogue along the lines we had hoped. Two discussion threads suggest the degree to which the students were attempting to bridge the gap between their cultural perspectives and those of

Buddhism. The first, which the students dubbed "Do the Dew," based on a popular set of soft drink commercials that sometimes feature Eastern images, explored the issue of why Americans might be attracted to Buddhism. As the initial message read,

I still do not understand why such a fuss? Achieving the enlightened state requires much devotion and empathy for others a contrary notion to many of the values and ambitions of nations who are driven by economic performance and the creation of wealth. It just seems unreasonable for a westerner, especially an American, to give up everything to foster a life of compassion and selflessness? Does anyone else agree?

The student added a note at the end of the message emphasizing his open curiosity about the question and affirming the seriousness of the entry: "I don't disagree that the Buddhist life is an honorable life I simply want to understand the fascination that surrounds Buddhist culture as and why it seems to have become a marketing favorite in many commercial mediums." The lively discussion that followed emphasized the degree to which "attachments" guide the actions of many Americans. The comments clearly indicated that the students had grasped the degree to which "being Buddhist" ran counter to the dominate values of our society.

A second thread took the somewhat whimsical title, "Welcome to My Stupa/Mini-Mall." Beyond introducing an interesting analogy, the author compared, at a serious level, Buddhist merit-gaining and Catholic ritual practices. In it, the student arrived at an important insight about the fundamental difference in Buddhism between achieving merit and escaping rebirth. Other students accepted the challenge of bridging the gap between the world of their experience and that of Buddhism. Indeed, the image of the "Gap" played a serendipitous part in the discussion serving as a metaphor both for the distance between the two worlds and the development of Buddhist sects -- it was one of the stores in the original Buddhist Mini-Mall. From these discussions, as well as other threads, it was clear that the students were engaging in second level thinking. They were analyzing the material according to their frame of reference and focusing in on the points of connection and disjunction.

Reaching the Farther Shore

Having these skillful means structured into the course design, we turned our attention to the "experiential" nature of Buddhism and the means by which our students could encounter it in the context of the academic nature of the course. In meeting with the students in the first several class periods and giving them an overview of the course, we were successful at arising in them an awareness of the first of the truths that noble Buddhists accept -- that the fundamental condition of human existence is suffering or, perhaps more precisely, dissatisfaction. Having piqued their anxieties about the course's objectives, we then assured them of that the foremost intention of Buddhism is the inherently practical notion of directing people out of this condition of dissatisfaction, and that, as a model of Buddhist experience using the tools and strategies we created, we would direct them out of their anxieties about the course.

According to Buddhism, the path out of dissatisfaction begins by taking refuge in the Three Jewels -- the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. We mirrored this path by dividing our course into three components -- one for each of the Three Refuges and selected a text primary of primary readings that is structured in such a manner. We also arranged the reading assignments to correspond to the three Refuges. This meant that our students did not get a "neat" introduction to the historical development of Buddhism, although we did provide some tools to aid in their understanding of this dimension of Buddhism. What we were most interested in, however, was how to communicate to them, and direct them toward an appreciation of, the purely experiential nature of the Buddhism's core; what our primary text called the "space" under the Buddha tree (the tree that symbolizes enlightenment in Buddhism). The skillful means we adopted to achieve this by assigning students the task of designing museum rooms that would reflect their perception of Buddhism.

Since the working out of enlightenment typically is engaged by Buddhists within a community of monks or nuns, the sangha, we had the students work collaboratively in developing their museum projects. This corresponded nicely with the research that has documented the value of collaborative work as students actively engage in the production of their own learning. Further, according to Buddhist tradition, the reception of the teachings of the Buddha as symbolized in the Wheel of Dharma, is manifest or incarnated in Mantras, sounds, and Tanka, sacred pictures (Corless, 40-1). This provided the model upon which we asked students to develop their museum rooms in both words (admittedly a stretch since Mantras are more like songs than words) and pictures (PowerPoint or poster

presentations). This corresponded nicely with our non-Buddhistic intention to build our assessment around different learning styles.

Assessment

As mentioned, museums were usually constructed within two media: graphic-visual and textual, i.e., pictures and words. Occasionally, some of the museum presentations included sound. Thus, a presentation consisted of a choice of images and their sequencing integrated with a well-composed essay, itself a balance between argument and description. With this the students created a space in which to show their vision of the Buddha.

We chose eight dimensions each to guide and assess the writing of the written portion and to guide and assess the choice and arrangement of the visual portion. The dimensions associated with the written portion included:

- (1) adequacy (enough data)
- (2) breadth (inclusion of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana)
- (3) depth
- (4) significance (getting to the heart of the matter)
- (5) clarity of expression
- (6) reasonability
- (7) accuracy
- (8) precision (using the terminology of Buddhism)

The dimensions associated with the visual portion included:

- (1) adequacy
- (2) breadth
- (3) depth
- (4) significance
- (5) congruity (relation between images)
- (6) insight (open viewer up to Buddhism)
- (7) practicality (appropriate amount of work)
- (8) relevance (correspondence between visual and written portions)

During the semester each group of students produced four museums: one each for the Buddha (founder), the dharma (the teachings), the sangha (the community), and an overview of Buddhism. The first three categories are called the Three Refuges (or Jewels or Treasures), constituting one of the fundamental sets of categories within Buddhism. We further required each group to account for similarities and differences among the three great divisions of Buddhism: Theravada (often regarded as original Buddhism, found in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia), Mahayana (a reformed Buddhism found in Vietnam, China, Korea, Japan), and Vajrayana (dominant in Tibet).

By the time the students constructed their final museums, we were able to have them construct their museums in terms of three other Buddhist categories: aversion, confusion, attachment (aka the Three Poisons). The final museum's were constructed within five days of the end of the semester with students building on the work they had done in their previous projects.

Conclusion

The final results were very gratifying. We realized that we had pushed the students to expand their understanding of Buddhism and the final museums seemed to reflect a serious, and in some cases insightful, effort in that direction. We were particularly pleased at the way in which the students adapted to the on-line discussions and the complexities of constructing museums. By the end of the semester, we were confident that we had given their "rafts" a gentle shove away from the shore of Western patterns of knowing. We were also quite aware that none of us had come close to seeing the other shore.