

Cultivating Critical Empathy

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My pedagogy seeks to cultivate critical empathy, a stance to the world that is simultaneously empathetic of others and critically aware of contingent, power-laden human relationships. I do so in the classroom by creating opportunities for empathetic observations; allowing such observations to be seasoned with reflexive analysis; and generating mediums and means that engage larger publics.

Take for example how my pedagogy inflects critical empathy within a mini-ethnography in my “American Gods: Religious Diversity in the US” course. Students select a local religious community, one that is not their own. They then complete a footnoted, five-page historical essay that provides context for this group. Students revise these essays after receiving feedback from peers, as well as myself. Then, at mid-semester, students attend a service at their selected site, arrange to take a 360-degree interior photo of the space, and conduct an informal interview with the religious community’s leaders. With their visit completed, they compose a five-page ethnographic essay that combines observation and analysis, the latter drawing upon concepts they encountered in class. For example, one student used Robert Orsi’s notion of the “materialization of religion,” taken from his essay “Material Children,” to analyze how devotees at the Northampton Shambhala Center created religious presences through their ritual practices. Students then share their findings in a public-facing 800-word blog entry about the community they visited, and they post this on a course website dedicated to documenting the religious diversity of the surrounding geographical area (a project similar to Harvard’s Pluralism Project). This includes their 360-degree interior photo, complete with clickable hot-spots that explain significant objects in the image. Thus, across the semester, students practice ethnographic skills that cultivate empathy, apply religious studies theory to their observations, write in three different academic genres, and collectively produce a resource for the greater public.

My day-to-day teaching provides ample opportunities for careful listening and reflexive responses. For example, in my “Introduction to Religious Studies” course, I often assign students a round-table discussion paper in which they wrestle with how Buddhist teachings about impermanence and no-self can be congruent with Buddhist devotional practices around relics. Students often have strong opinions about this question, and I use a “circular response” method to air their arguments in class. That is, one student addresses the question without interruption for one minute. Then, the student to their left builds upon that argument, either with agreement or dissent, in their own one-minute contribution. Finally, once all students have spoken, I allow for an open conversation in which I also participate. This discussion activity requires active listening by all students, does not presume agreement by all students, and gives voice to all students, thus cultivating critical empathy in the classroom toward each other, not just the subject matter that they engage.

The critical empathy cultivated in an introductory course can deeply shape a student’s intellectual trajectory. A former student encountered Buddhism for the very first time in my “Introduction to Religious Studies” course. This same student declared as a religious studies major and became my advisee. Two years later, she asked my essay prompt, detailed above, to a Buddhist nun at a Chinese monastery where she had gone to study as part of the Woodenfish summer program. A year after that, she reflected in her senior exit interview that a question posed in an assignment in her first semester had led, quite unexpectedly, to a relationship of critical empathy with another religious tradition. She now plans to pursue Buddhist Studies in graduate school.

Irrespective of what my students do with religious studies content knowledge in their future careers, my students learn to make observations informed by careful listening, subject those observations to critical analysis, and share those findings in situationally appropriate mediums. In a more general sense, these concrete pedagogical outcomes provide them with a blue-print for building lives as engaged citizens in contemporary America, a nation whose democratic future can be enhanced by careful, empathetic listening and reflexive analysis that inform judicious public action.