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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Day One: A Look Back

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“Timeliness is next to cleanliness and godliness; we don’t want to waste a minute. Plus, I’ve been looking forward to this moment since at least January, and it was hard to sleep a week ago.” That’s how we began. Welcome to this crazy class. I started imagining it when I picked up Carol Kaesuk Yoon’s *Naming Nature* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2009) from an end cap at the Harvard Coop years ago. Now you’re here, and I’m here, and it’s going to be great.

And it has been great. Two classes in, I have no complaints. Most of the students are doing the reading and taking notes, and nearly everyone had something to say when we met Wednesday. All good things, and yet I find myself thinking about what I’d do differently if I could do Day One a second time. There are positive and negative ways to play out a do-over, and there are better and worse reasons to chase this rabbit. But it’s a reasonable question for an instructor to ask after any class meeting: “What would you do differently if you could have another go?” So, what would I do differently? And what worked well?

Introductions

They’re keepers.

I like getting to know my students and – more importantly! – encouraging them to get to know one another. I introduced myself (complete with photos of my spouse, daughter and dogs) and invited Clare, our writing consultant, to introduce herself. Then I asked the students to introduce themselves to a neighbor – preferably someone they didn't already know – and share if they'd ever seen a snake in person or touched one. After a few minutes, the students introduced one another to the class, which gave me a chance make a name/seating chart. We learned quickly that my course fliers didn't attract a room full of herpers! In all, it took about 20 minutes for everyone to meet everyone, a step that moves us toward establishing a class rapport.

The Course Overview

Worth keeping, but it could use some revision.

The Prezi slides took us from the big picture (the course title) to the smaller picture (the subtitle) to the detailed plans (the arc and syllabus). My intention was to show students how the course's structure incorporates and interrogates a few key concepts in the study of religions, namely those in the course title: religion, dimension, human, experience, animals, and gods.

About three-quarters of the way through class, I paused, asked if there were questions (none), and then asked students if they would rather look at the syllabus or talk about the podcasts they'd listened to. They went for the syllabus.

This is the point I've considered reconsidering. Would it have been better to just talk and ask them to review the syllabus before the second class? Maybe, but on the other hand, it seems important for them to know what they're getting into from the start. Would a conversation about Elizabeth Kolbert on The New Yorker's Out Loud Podcast (assigned for the first class meeting) have generated more effervescence than paging through the syllabus? Possibly, but what about students who hadn't listened to the interview? It's hard to say. (Suggestions, readers?)

The Warnings

A keeper.

Given our focus, you might think that I would warn students that they'll be reading about and seeing – on film and in person – snakes. I did mention it, and they had a chance to express their disdain, anxieties and affections in their introductions. The warnings I wrote into my summative remarks weren't about snakes; they were about feelings and agendas.

I'm not sure what I think about "trigger warnings," but I know that my students bring complicated selves to the classroom. I also know that their experiences of courses aren't limited to intellectual experiences. So I told them that they might find themselves feeling ways or thinking thoughts that surprise them. "For example," I said, "I've joked with Clare, our

writing consultant, about trying to avoid becoming a vegetarian because of this class.” (An Appalachian by birth, I’d be sincerely sorry to give up pork breakfast.) I explained that beneath the joke lies a bit of anxiety: studying animals – even slithering snakes – makes them present to us in ways they (except for our beloved animal companions) aren’t most days. I told them that I’m here to support them, and that if supporting them means helping them find other kinds of support, I will.

Finally, I explained that apart from calling attention to the ways humans see themselves in relation to animals and gods (and that snakes aren’t evil!), the course has no normative agenda. If by the end of the term they find themselves unable to eat a BLT, that’s fine. If they find themselves eating lots of BLTs, more power to them.

This is the 3rd post in this series by Molly Bassett this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2015/09/day-one-a-look-back/>