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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



When Idiots Teach

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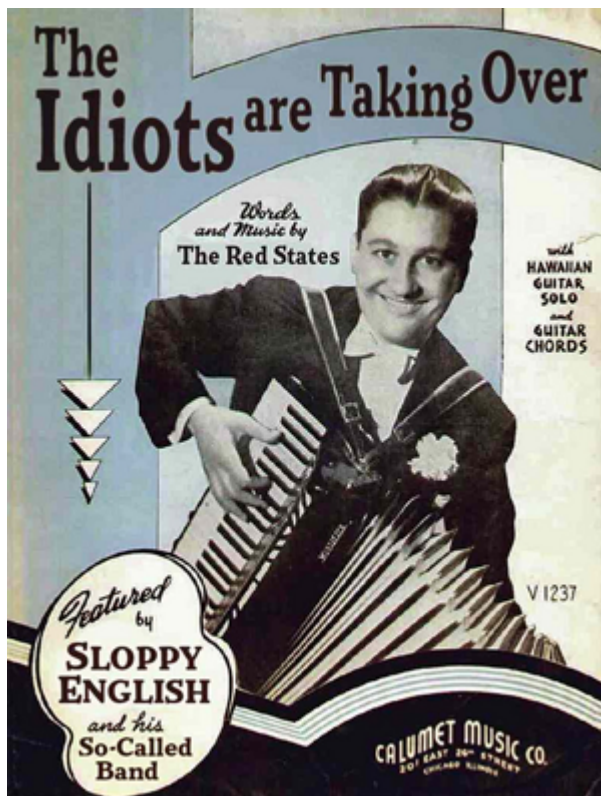
Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: collaborative learning | vocation of teaching | course design

This is a post about that time I taught a semester-long class on a topic about which I knew almost nothing... or perhaps I should say “the most recent time.”

This was no one’s fault but my own. I work at a college that has no requirement for students to



learn about religion; it is therefore relatively unconcerned about what I teach as long as students enroll in my classes. But this kind of freedom also comes at a price: I work in a department of only 1.5 full-time professors – both of us trained in Christian theology – so if we are going to offer a program that most would recognize as the “academic study of religion,” we must often teach outside our narrow specialties.

I am a believer in the academic study of religion, even if I’m still not exactly certain what it is. I am also a believer in religious literacy, so this semester I taught a course we call “Judaism and Islam,” in which we try to “cover” two “world religions” in fourteen weeks. I have taught a World Religions course for years so I had about one or two weeks’ worth of knowledge on each tradition already under my belt (Abraham! Five Pillars! Talmud!), but that left about ten weeks of necessary self-education.

Prepping to teach this course felt like drinking from a fire hose. I had to read new texts and prepare brand new lectures. I had to teach myself about Rabbinic traditions, Sunni caliphates, and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts; I had to learn more about ISIS and be prepared to discuss how it is or is not “Islamic.” Happily, I had eleven wonderful students (about four of them majoring or minoring in Religious Studies, the rest taking it as a humanities “distrib”) who hung in there with me and were patient about being my guinea pigs.



But here's the great part: I felt so inadequate to the task of teaching this course that I called in reinforcements. For one meeting, a colleague of mine brought in pictures and memorabilia from his bar mitzvah in the 1960s; on another day, a different colleague and her female Reform rabbi came to class to answer any and all random questions about Judaism posed by my students. During the second half of the term, two male students (perhaps the only two Muslims currently enrolled at this college) agreed to come in and talk about their own experiences growing up in Michigan; and last week the author of a book we were reading graciously offered to Skype in so we could talk about her ethnographic research. These four meetings were by far the most engaging and memorable of the whole term, and were especially helpful in breaking down any stereotypes that may have been lurking in students' imaginations.

This is not to say that a class would work well if it consisted only of visiting speakers. It was important, I think, that my students had already done the hard work of reading hundreds of pages of text, and sitting through many hours of lectures and discussions, before ever getting to talk to guests about their specific experiences. It was also important that we had discussed, over and over, the vast diversity that exists *within* religious traditions, such that no single Jew or Muslim can speak for all of Judaism or Islam.

I beamed with pride when our Skype scholar congratulated the students for their pertinent and probing questions - with nary a terrorism question among them! And it was also fun for me to have others in class from whom I could learn as well. It turns out that feeling like an idiot can be great for your teaching! I am certainly not knocking the value of faculty having expertise, but perhaps academe would benefit from all of us feeling like idiots every once in a while.

<https://wabash.center/2015/04/when-idiots-teach/>