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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Singing the Mid-Term Blues

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Maybe you've been here before.

It's the middle of the semester. Your undergraduate survey class has been rolling along fine. Students are fairly engaged, and you feel you have a good rapport. Then along comes the mid-term, and you realize that the situation is not what you thought.



In my case, the course is an introduction to 'world religions' (yes, I know it's problematic). So far, we've read a book of easy theory (William Paden's *Religious Worlds*), and we've been introduced to Judaism and Christianity - in each case through a book chapter (Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One*), selections of ancient texts (Genesis and Exodus for Judaism; Mark and Galatians for Christianity), and a modern text (Abraham Heschel; Martin Luther King, Jr.). It is clear to me that, while not all students are reading carefully, a number of them are keeping up. They do a 5-minute essay at the beginning of each class about the day's reading, and I spend most class periods trying to make sure they've gotten something out of it. Other days we do some type of small group activity (such as comparing Genesis 1 and 2 or the

genealogies in Matthew and Luke). When given frequent chances to ask questions, they have none.



Photo credit: Brook Ward <http://bit.ly/1rYeNW4>

The mid-term this week was a chance for them to show what they've learned. It was worth 50 points: 30 points of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and a timeline, plus 20 points of mini-essays. Even though I was as generous as I could be on the essays, the high score among 40 students was 41.5. The average score was 31 – a low D.

Now comes the soul searching: What am I doing wrong?

If there had been at least a handful of A's, I would have worried less. An extremely high percentage of students in my classes are there to fulfill a humanities requirement; they aren't necessarily interested in religion, and they hope it will be an easy course. These students don't expect to work much and a bad mid-term grade can be a useful wake-up call. But when even the most engaged students can't break a low B, it's clear that something is amiss at my end of things.

A professor I admire says his teaching philosophy is to have high expectations for his students; expect the best of them and they will never fail to give it to you. So I continue to require (what I hear is) "a lot" of reading in my intro courses, because I am trying to set the bar high and let them rise to the occasion. I also don't spoon-feed them information in bullet points; although I occasionally stand and use slides, I usually sit and lead discussions about the readings... in which I often end up doing most of the talking. Most of them sit slack-jawed and take few notes, but some answer questions or make comments. Even so, here I am at mid-term, with students who think Constantine lived BCE and don't know the names of Abraham's two sons.

The question for you, dear readers, is: What do I do now?

Do I "dumb down" the class – tell them exactly what to memorize from each chapter so that they can just Google terms and don't actually have to read? Do I just plow ahead with my current plans, knowing some of them will fail or drop out, while hoping others will be inspired to work harder? I have seven more weeks to get them to *want* to learn something. What would an excellent teacher do?

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