

## Teaching Philosophy

Education can provide one of the most fruitful contexts for human growth and transformation. The cultivation of critical thinking and engaged dialogue in the classroom can profoundly shape the way students approach the entirety of their lives. After a person embarks upon the journey of the mind in such a way that their passion for learning is ignited, a thirst for knowledge can sustain their engagement in the praiseworthy project of lifelong learning.

As an instructor of religions, I seek to engage students in the celebration of cultural differences. Contrary to antiquated notions of “high” and “low” cultures, it is imperative that variegated cultures are embraced and valued equally as different human expressions of lived experience. One need not look any further than the current political climate in the United States to find evidence of the need for anthropological approaches to religious, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences as diversity to be celebrated not feared.

To this end, I seek to cultivate Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas*, an egalitarian environment in which the delicate balance between structured and non-structured learning space is held in creative tension. To achieve such a dialogic space, it is imperative that students are afforded the opportunity to voice their questions and perspectives. Employing the Socratic method allows for fruitful, mutual engagement in the classroom. If a class is too large for such an approach, I intersperse questions throughout my lectures in order to draw them into the dialogue. Small-group projects are also helpful in inviting students into productive conversation. When students engage in classroom discussion they process information differently than they do when passively listening to a lecture. When all perspectives are expected to be voiced, students will often spend more time in preparation, their retention will improve as they actively synthesize and verbalize their ideas, and ultimately the increased number of voices will result in more perspectives available to the entire learning community. To foster student confidence for dialogic engagement I ask open-ended questions at the outset of class sessions to assure them the space is safe for their voices. I also treat students as celebrated individuals within the community by learning about each of them. The cultivation of trust engenders candid conversation.

In addition to active involvement in spoken dialogue, students are encouraged to engage in written discourse. Writing brief responses to reading assignments offers excellent opportunities to reflect upon the material and develop important questions. A discussion board component is a useful forum for students to stay engaged in conversation with the text, classmates, and the instructor through written reading responses. These short responses also often serve as a springboard for productive in-class discussion.

The selection of pedagogical tools is also crucial. Reading assignments must be within the grasp of students both in length and content. Obtuse and inaccessible texts can prove counter-productive. The appropriation of audio-visual technologies is also hugely useful for capturing the imagination of students. Taking different modes of learning into consideration, it is important to provide various media for visual, audio, and tactile learners. Photographs, films, music, and art bring students closer to the human beings and their religious lived experiences. When practitioners of other religions are humanized in a way that minimizes “othering” it fosters respect and understanding across boundaries of difference.