



Suggestions for Teaching and Learning

The success of a course built upon the ideas herein depends to a large degree on how well the class, as a whole, is prepared. The following are suggestions with regard to establishing rules and guidelines for the class; building a classroom community; establishing an atmosphere of respect and comfort; and dealing with potentially sensitive or controversial issues.

What follows are several methodological and practical suggestions for the development, delivery, and refinement of a course exploring religious diversity. One of the most exciting aspects of teaching a course of this nature is the opportunity to revise existing practices or to invent entirely new teaching/learning opportunities as they arise.

Religion Backgrounders/Profiles for Teacher Reference and Use

Recognizing that educators possess differing levels of knowledge and experience with religious and cultural diversity, and also reflect a diversity of religious perspectives and faith traditions, a number of backgrounders of several religions and religious perspectives have been developed, as well as backgrounders related to diversity of religious perspectives and world religions in Canada and internationally.

These backgrounders are a general teacher reference to help teachers prepare for the course. Nonetheless, certain aspects of these backgrounders may be useful as classroom or student resources.

The backgrounders for each religion not only follow the organizers used for this course, but also provide a comprehensive summary of the religious perspective or religion. Most importantly, they provide information on that religious perspective or religion in Canada and in Manitoba. This series of documents will include

- Introduction to Religious Diversity: A Canadian Perspective
- Aboriginal/Indigenous Spirituality
- Atheism, Agnosticism, and Secular Humanism
- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Daoism and Confucianism
- Hinduism
- Judaism
- Islam
- Sikhism

Developing a Respectful Classroom Community

Teachers and students will benefit from the investment of time in preparing the class to investigate and appreciate religious diversity. A confident, respectful classroom community with clear guidelines will generate more productive discussions and authentic learning experiences.

Creating a Safe Place

Topics exploring religious diversity and discussion involving these topics often expose student sensitivities more acutely than other classroom topics. We therefore suggest requesting that students treat the classroom as a safe space. It is important that the privacy of individuals be protected. Personal and sensitive information shared by classmates ought not be discussed outside the classroom without their consent. While it is important that learning and dialogue not be restricted to the classroom, it is also important to respect and protect the moments where a student shares something personal or otherwise potentially vulnerable. Classroom discussions before the commencement of the course proper can serve to identify and clarify the distinction.

A second and equally important consideration for guidelines on classroom discussions revolves around the distinction between critical thinking and inappropriate critique. As has hopefully been made clear, the goal of this course is to investigate and celebrate diversity, rather than to promote any particular faith (or humanistic) commitment. While few would doubt that the latter is an important issue, the proper context is not the classroom, but rather the family and individual conscience. Students should be encouraged to examine their own perspectives and beliefs to grow their understanding of themselves and their community. Discussion, questions, and even debate are important tools in this endeavour.

How one questions others and what language one uses to question others about their religious beliefs, practices, and experiences is very important. Teachers and students must be aware of their language and framing of questions to ensure that they are respectful and appropriate. While healthy, vigorous discussion is encouraged, one must always do so in a respectful manner.

Direct personal attacks or put-downs, as well as the use of derogatory terms are never appropriate. Such behaviour only serves to stifle discussion, hurt the individual and group, and repress diversity. The guiding thread for distinguishing between these different modes may be the use of a reflective question.—Is my speech intended to clarify and encourage dialogue, or to personally attack or demean the individual? Again, discussions and exemplars can help students become cognizant of the difference, although even the best-run classroom will occasionally have trouble with this distinction. Such occasions need not provoke only admonishment, but can provide valuable teaching and learning opportunities as well.

Finally, students must learn the difference between arguments and statements of belief. The confusion between the two occurs regularly even in university-level, introductory survey courses. Student learning should not be assessed based on belief. If there is a place for this, it is within faith communities. Instead, student growth, whether demonstrated informally in discussions and reflection, or formally by way of projects and presentations, should be assessed by way of articulation developed in argumentation. Personal beliefs, by their very nature, are subjective positions and should be respected. Healthy discussion about the origins, nature, and importance of a belief or beliefs is to be encouraged. Argumentation, which builds on dialogue and exploration of differing opinions, leads to collective understanding and encourages rational, objective evaluation.

Effective and Inclusive Learning Environment

An effective environment will be

- student centered
- engaging and relevant
- welcoming and respectful of diversity
- inviting and inclusive
- participatory, interactive, and collaborative
- reflective and celebratory
- integrative
- challenging
- knowledge and inquiry based

Role of the Teacher

It is the role of the teacher to create a supportive environment. This role is varied and includes

- being a facilitator
- guiding learning and inquiry but not being all-knowing about different religions
- using people from the faith communities as resource people for authentic voices and perspectives
- being sensitive to diverse religious beliefs
- fostering a sense of acceptance, trust, and comfort in the classroom
- demonstrating a valuing of all learners
- guiding students in accessing, using, and understanding a variety of resources and texts related to religious diversity and specific religions
- fostering critical thinking and inquiry
- helping each student form individual beliefs and attitudes
- allowing time for reflection
- challenging students to act upon their learning
- providing time for students to ask questions

While it is understood that each teacher brings their own perspectives, beliefs, and experiences to the classroom, it should also be understood that a teacher should not make any attempt to promote or denigrate any student's beliefs. Pursuant to that, the teacher's role is not to indoctrinate or proselytize.

Acknowledging and Respecting All Religious Perspectives

Many persons throughout the world do not identify with, follow, or practice one of the major world religions. It is, therefore, essential to recognize that, in addition to what may be thought of as being major world religions, religious perspectives such as atheism and agnosticism, religions with fewer adherents, and emerging religions represent important aspects of religious diversity. As a result, these religious perspectives ought to also be respected.

Furthermore, accepting religious diversity also means accepting as being worth discussion those traditions that are outside mainstream awareness or acceptance. While they are often labelled fringe or cults in a pejorative tone, this generally reflects a desire to maintain firm and clear boundaries between traditions and contested beliefs. Educators must remain aware of the likelihood that students belong to these traditions, or have some interest in them, and be willing to accommodate. The organizational focus here on philosophies, practices, people, places, and times/dates provides a helpful tool for the investigation of all traditions.

Student Voice and Engagement

Once classroom guidelines have been discussed and established, there are several activities that promote a successful student learning community, and ensure students have a voice and that their interests are reflected in the classroom. Student engagement—absolutely key to authentic learning—comes about not only by way of a safe, respectful environment, but also through ensuring students’ interests are considered and engaged. This is achieved by

- Providing choice and input on which religions to study. A class survey of students’ choices could be especially valuable, provided teachers ensure that student choices include a diversity of religions.
- A pre- and post-course evaluation of students’ knowledge of religious diversity and their own religious perspectives.

A discussion of classroom rules or guidelines ought to embody all of the above, along with particular classroom and community needs and concerns.

Guidelines for Selecting Which Religious Perspectives to Study

- Relevancy and reflecting the cultures of the classroom: What are the religious traditions/perspectives present in the classroom?
- What are the religious perspectives in which students express interest or curiosity in studying?
- Who is missing and should be included?
 - What groups are living in our community or attend the same school, but are not represented in the classroom?
 - What religious traditions are often misunderstood, or for which the students and community may have either little knowledge or strong stereotypes/misinformation?
- Is there an adequate representation of religious diversity?
 - How can I provide an insight into the range of religious perspectives?
 - Is there adequate representation of religious traditions of significant representation internationally?
 - How can we make linkages to smaller faith groups who may have made significant contributions to the evolution and development of world religions?
- Accessibility to authentic voices
 - What resource people are available?
 - Are there videos and other resources available?
 - Are there gathering places nearby that can be visited?
- What is your own knowledge level and comfort with different religious perspectives?
 - Do you hold significant biases towards a religious tradition or group?
 - What do you need to do to be better prepared?
 - Do you need to be the expert on every religion?
 - Who can assist you in exploring religious perspectives that are less familiar or comfortable to you?
 - How will this further your own learning and growth?

Teaching and Assessment Tools

Suggested Assessment and Evaluation Model

Assessment in this course should be ongoing and should include opportunities for student reflection, self-assessment, and peer assessment. Inter-religious experiences (e.g., visit to a religious gathering place, interview with a person of another religious tradition, attendance at a religious event or ritual) are encouraged and should be part of the assessment plan.

A classroom-based assessment approach, including assessment for learning, as learning, and of learning, will help students reach their potential and ensure academic rigour. Early and frequent assessment tasks, including descriptive feedback, will help students learn and grow, and appreciate the religious diversity in our communities.

Teachers may opt to create a class wiki, blog, or other social media tool as a means of facilitating the ongoing exchange of ideas throughout the course. The following model proposes guidelines for assessment of learning, and suggests a wide variety of assessment tools and strategies.

Knowledge and Critical Understanding

Knowledge and critical understanding of religious diversity and specific religions, key concepts; evidence of enduring understandings

Research/Inquiry (Process and Product)

Topic selection and generation of guiding questions, inquiry planning, engagement in dialogue, ongoing learning log, peer and self-assessment

Planning of research-action project, implementation, communication, and evaluation of results

Choice of research product, quality of work, and presentation

Tools:

Inter-Religious Experiences

Knowledge, analysis, reflection, and understanding of religious diversity and specific religions, key concepts; evidence of enduring understandings

Tools:

Teachers are encouraged to use assessment and evaluation practices, such as the following, that are consistent with student-centered instructional practices:

- Negotiating and making explicit the criteria by which performance will be evaluated
- Designing assessment tasks that help students make judgements about their own learning and performance
- Designing assessment tasks that incorporate varying learning styles
- Individualizing assessment tasks as appropriate to accommodate students' particular learning needs
- Providing feedback on student learning and performance on a regular basis

Assessment activities, tasks, and strategies include, but are not limited to, the following:

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| ■ anecdotal records | ■ performance tasks |
| ■ audiotapes | ■ portfolios |
| ■ checklists | ■ projects |
| ■ conferences | ■ questioning |
| ■ demonstrations | ■ questionnaires |
| ■ exhibitions | ■ self-assessments |
| ■ interviews (structured and informal) | ■ seminar presentations |
| ■ inventories | ■ surveys |
| ■ investigations | ■ tests |
| ■ learning logs/journals | ■ videotapes |
| ■ media products | ■ work samples |
| ■ observation (formal and informal) | ■ written assignments |
| ■ peer assessments | |

Some additional teaching and assessment tools and activities that may be particularly useful for this course include the following:

- **Reflection journals**

As part of ongoing assessment, a regular reflection journal would be especially valuable. Journaling would allow the course content to better reflect student concerns, questions, and learning needs, while also helping students take ownership of their growth. Journals may be shared with teachers, or could be used as inspiration for larger projects.

- **Site visits**

Making links with community groups would help students connect academic ideas and real-world practice. Visits to religious sites and participation in ceremonies would help accomplish this purpose. Given the sensitivity of such visits, students would need to be coached on appropriate, respectful behaviour.

- **Guest speakers**
 Speakers can help connect students to the community, increase their exposure to religious diversity, and ensure authentic voices.
- **Discussion**
 In-class discussions are particularly valuable when exploring diversity. More strongly than with other types of school activities, discussion encourages students to engage actively in the exploration of diversity by directly encountering the differing viewpoints of other students. Various strategies (jigsaw, think-pair-share, circles, galleries, fishbowl, etc.) could be employed.
- **Portfolios**
 One form of on-going assessment that may prove valuable to students is to maintain a portfolio. Students could include not only reflections, but also articles from newspapers or from the Internet. One advantage of this approach is that it would allow and encourage students to focus on a particular topic or tradition, rather than religion as a whole.
- **Creation/Production Artistic Expression/Works**
 Visual Arts, Drama, Music, and Dance can be valuable ways of connecting the course to learners who experience more success from a variety of learning styles. Creating a school mural on religious diversity can be an active way for the class to express their understanding and engage other students.
- **Literature Studies (Novels, Graphic Novels, Essays, Stories, Biographies...)**
 Students' reading of novels or literature may enhance their understanding of a religion and provide a personal perspective or narrative that they might otherwise not experience.
- **Process Writing**
 Essays, Stories, Poems, Opinion Pieces...

Selecting Learning Resources

A range of learning resources such as literature, narratives, films, videos, and multimedia resources can be effective for exploring issues related to diversity of religious perspectives and world religions. However, it is critical that teachers carefully preview, select, and plan for the use of these resources to ensure that they are used effectively and that learners benefit from reading and discussing the resource.

Video, websites, and multimedia resources, as with all other literature or educational resource selections should be reviewed by school division staff before they are used by students. In this way, learner sensitivities and the perspectives of the student population, as well as the appropriateness of the resource for the intended learning objectives are taken into account. In addition, the effectiveness of a particular resource will depend greatly on what the teacher or facilitator does in terms of preparing the audience before viewing, as well as the needs and interaction of students during and post viewing.

In selecting learning resources for this course, consider the following questions:

1. Are you confident that the books, readings, and other resources you are using are of sufficiently high quality?

This is indicated by a range of factors, including: accessibility of text; accuracy, balance, and relevance of the material; usefulness of illustrations and pictures; appropriateness and challenge of learning activities; depth of treatment; and acknowledgement of diversity and sensitivities/controversy.

2. Are you confident that the books, videos, or other resources on religious perspectives, religions, and beliefs that you are using give a fair and authentic representation of them?

Not all resources are the same, many experts can find much to praise in most books and learning resources that treat religions either individually or thematically, they can also identify weaknesses.

3. Do you and/or the school library/learning resource center provide students with access to a wide range of good quality books and other resources for exploring religious diversity?

School libraries/learning resource centres may offer collections of books and other resources on specific religions and diversity of religions, but these can sometimes be dated or not adequately reflect the contemporary diversity of religious perspectives in the school and Manitoba's communities.