

AAR

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The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Eugene V. Gallagher, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News—AAR Edition* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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TEACHING WITH Site Visits

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Guest Editor

From the Editor's Desk



Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching Editor

FORTUNATELY, the study of religion offers much occasion for humor. This issue on Site Visits, shaped and produced with the expert assistance of guest editor Joyce Flueckiger, reminds me of a cartoon I once stuck on my office door. In a dimly lit restaurant, family members are kneeling on the carpet around their table as diners look on astonished. A customer asks, "Religious ceremony?" Waiter replies, "Lost contact lens!" A delightful way to cast doubt on the WYSIWYG principle (what you see is what you get).

Diana Eck's *A New Religious America* (2001) and the myriad projects she has undertaken under the Pluralism Project, including the CD-Rom *On Common*

Ground: World Religions in America (1997), eloquently, vividly, and impressively document the transformation of the religious landscape of the U.S. Dotted across urban and rural America are places of worship, community centers, and cultural festivals that underscore the stunning fact that "the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth." The implications of this are many, least of which is the need for enlightened mutual recognition, a prerequisite for civil society.

However, as the cartoon illustrates, understanding requires far more than just seeing. In a world saturated with images (still and moving) that function as the primary medium for the message, Marshall McLuhan's prediction that "The future of the book is the blurb" is not far off the mark. Modern communication technologies have intensified the use of and (often exclusive) reliance upon the visual senses as a source of information. Ironically, while students may assume that reading a book or journal article is harder to do than watching a video or attending a religious festival, the rigors of checking facts and sources, analyzing multiple perspectives, assessing logic, and asking critical questions are intellectual tasks applicable to both. Hence, the training of perception and visual intelligence is a crucial part of developing students' thinking skills. To rephrase the Chinese proverb: A picture's not worth a thousand words unless one knows all them words!

“A picture's not worth a thousand words unless one knows all them words!”

The articles in this issue of *Spotlight* carefully examine the complexity of Site Visits (broadly defined) and the risks and opportunities involved in using them. Wide-ranging in scope, they address the practical nuts-and-bolts of organizing site visits as well as their pedagogical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions. Readers will learn why the contributors use site visits in their teaching; how they prepare their students for them and integrate them into course assignments; the types of challenges their students and hosts face during site visits; and alternatives or substitutes to site visits (for example, museums and Web sites). Embracing the opportunity to learn from the dynamic and multifaceted religious landscape of America, the articles also signal the pitfalls of mere sightseeing, and chart ways to making these encounters truly transformative and educational. ■

Integrating Field Research in the Introductory Religion Course

Sheila E. McGinn, John Carroll University



Sheila E. McGinn is Professor of Biblical Studies and Early Christianity at John Carroll University. Her publications include *The Montanist Oracles*, *The Acts of Thecla*, *studies of Paul's letter to the Romans*, a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, and a bibliography of 20th-century research into the Book of Revelation.

I have used field research as an integral part of my "Introduction to Religious Studies" course for over a decade. Three students are in each research group, and the project includes several components, with at least one site visit. The description of the assignment is as follows:

Field Research Project:

Student groups engage in a three-part Field Research Project on one of the five major world religions, focusing either on an unfamiliar religious tradition or an unfamiliar ethnic community within their own religious tradition. The three parts include:

1. Library research regarding the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices
2. Observation of a religious ritual in that tradition
3. At least one interview with a minister or other leader of this religious community regarding the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices and how they are related to one another.

As an optional extracredit activity, the

group may participate in four hours of community service (not proselytizing nor "outreach") with this religious community.

The group writes a three-part Field Research Report. As co-authors of the report, each group member is expected to have input on each section of the report and to make corrections to each other's work where necessary. The three parts of the report include:

1. A research paper outlining the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices
2. A descriptive analysis of the religious ritual the group observed
3. A transcript of the interview with the religious leader.

If the group chooses to include the community service component, the write-up must include both journal entries contemporaneous with the activity and a reflective essay analyzing how this particular community service activity illustrates (or goes counter to) the beliefs and ethics of the religious community.

At the conclusion of the project, the research group gives a 20–25 minute class presentation that includes: (1) a basic survey of the tradition's central beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices; and (2) an interactive demonstration of one key ritual and exposition of what key beliefs and ethical values it conveys. Both components must actively involve the class in the presentation, and the ritual demonstration in particular should appeal to as many of the senses as possible; use of authentic dress, music, and foods is encouraged.

Class presentations are graded both by the instructor and by the students. The group is assigned an overall project grade for the written work, itemized according to each component of the field research report; group members then decide together how to allocate the points awarded for the project.

Students visit the site at least once to gather the data to write a "verbatim" (i.e., descriptive) analysis of the ritual space and

of a particular religious ceremony. The directions for the verbatim analysis are as follows:

Constructing a Verbatim Report:

Part I: Observation

1. Prepare yourself mentally, emotionally, and physically for your observation. Ensure that you will be able to be alert and attentive to the situation, not distracted by physical needs. Practice taking note of your own emotional responses without getting caught up in them. Remember that your goal for the observation is to report as completely and accurately as possible the details of the event. Be sure to arrive at the site early enough to have time to take notes about the physical surroundings for the event you are observing.
2. Begin your observation notes before the actual event by describing the background of the event. Note where it will take place, who will be involved, when, what you know of its purpose, etc. If it is permitted, I recommend taking photographs of the setting and of the activities before, during, and after the event. The photos provide helpful reminders of details you may not have had time to jot down during the event. If you plan to take photographs during the ceremony itself, use high speed film (ASA 400 or higher) or a low lux digital camera, so you will not need a flash.
3. During the event and immediately following, write as complete and accurate a description of the event as you can. Include every factor you see as relevant, while omitting extraneous ones.

“*The ritual demonstration in particular should appeal to as many of the senses as possible; use of authentic dress, music, and foods is encouraged.*”

Include descriptions of:

- a. The architectural features of the site or building
- b. Physical arrangements, colors, and ornamentation of any furnishings
- c. Leaders and participants in the event (their sex, age, dress, location, speech, actions)
- d. What the ritual means to the participants you are observing
- e. Whatever else you think is of importance.

Part II: Analysis, Reflection & Evaluation

Analysis: As soon as possible after the event, even while you or your group are/is still on the way home, begin your analysis of the event.

1. What actions, persons, places, and things seemed to you to be the most important? Why? (E.g., they occupied more time, had a more prominent physical location, etc.) Did the participants you consulted agree with your assessment?



Facilities for ablutions before prayer, Cleveland's Grand Mosque, November 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

2. What actions, persons, places, and things seemed to you to be the least important, or even superfluous? Why? (E.g., they occupied more time, had a more prominent physical location, etc.) Did the participants you consulted agree with your assessment?
3. What connections do you see between specific verbal and ritual "moments" or aspects of this event?

4. What connections do you see among the various ritual actions?
5. Outline the basic "ritual process" for this event.

Reflection:

6. What signs can you identify in this ritual? What key symbols can you identify?
7. What does each of these signs and symbols mean/convey?
8. What kind of ritual is this? Why would you classify it this way?
9. What does this ritual teach (e.g., about human nature, the divine, the natural world, the assembly of believers)? How does your reflection compare and contrast with what the participants said it means?
10. How (i.e., by what means) does this ritual event convey a sense of the meaning of life to its participants? What is the meaning it conveys? How does your view compare and contrast with what the participants said it means?



Communion during Sunday Mass at Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, December 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

MCGINN, from p.ix

11. In what ways did you, as an observer, find this ritual meaningful? In what ways did you find it lacking?
12. What did this observation teach you about your own beliefs (about human nature, the divine, the community of believers, etc.)?

Evaluation:

As a group, evaluate your observation according to the following four criteria:

1. What were the objectives you had set for this observation, and to what degree did you accomplish each of them?
2. Do you think your observation strategy was an appropriate one? How might you adapt this strategy to make the observation more effective/efficient?
3. Did all of the group members fully participate in this observation? How might you improve the group dynamic?
4. What questions did this observation raise for further research or discussion?

Each group analyzes not only the site,

but also their own group dynamics. I do early, midway, and summative assessments of the group work, based on assessment forms from CECAT (Collective Effort Classroom Assessment Technique), by Charles Walker and Thomas Angelo. Members of the group assess themselves and one another. In a concluding evaluation session, they discuss how to allocate the group grade among the various members of the group (based on value of contribution, amount of effort, etc.). Barring any unusual and extenuating circumstances, I use their figures for allocating the project points among the various group members.

The final course evaluation asks specific questions about the value of the field research project. One initially surprising result of site visits was that students overwhelmingly responded that the field research reduced their prejudice toward “other” people, particularly people of other religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds. I have not yet tested for a prejudice-reduction effect in a systematic way, to check the validity of these self-report data, but it seems safe to say that site visits at least have the potential to break down religious and ethnic prejudice in a way that the typical in-class readings and assignments do not. ❧

BURFORD, from p.v

us how to do the prayers. As usual, prior to this visit I had reminded the students that I expected them to learn how to do all of the practices we would be taught there, but that whether they actually did them was up to each of them to decide. On this occasion, the male students joined the other men up front, the female students and I joined the women in the back, and we all participated in the prayers. After the prayer service, Dilara showed us around the mosque. Despite the fact that our delayed arrival at the mosque shortened our site visit considerably, the experience proved pedagogically worthwhile. In the site-visit response-essays they wrote for the following class meeting, and in subsequent class discussions, the students recounted and incorporated in our study of Islam specific points of practice and belief that they learned at the mosque, many of which they would never have read in an academic book on Islam or learned from me. In addition, these students — many of whom were taking their first religion course — demonstrated notable sophistication in their reflections on the experience itself. Several raised thoughtful questions about the influence of our presence on the activities we went there to study. Others brought up the possibility of commodification or exploitation of a religious tradition through site visits, and we discussed how to avoid this potential pitfall.

Something that happened at the mosque illustrates the importance of making the effort to integrate site visits into our courses. When we met Dilara at the mosque, a student from a nearby institution of higher learning joined our group. Each time Muslims who were attending the service at the mosque asked the students (in a friendly way) who they were and why they were there, my students explained that they were studying Islam in their religion class at Prescott College, and had come down to learn about Islam firsthand. Each time the other student responded that she, too, was studying Islam in a class (at her university), and said — sounding somewhat annoyed — that she was there because her professor was “making everyone in the class visit a mosque.” The Prescott College students, slightly appalled, silently exchanged looks every time she said this. For that student, the site visit clearly represented a taxing deviation from her pedagogical norm. In contrast, the students in my class — accustomed to site visits as an integral part of their education — valued this visit as a unique experiential learning opportunity. This attitude, coupled with our advance preparation for the visit and the students’ focus on completing the follow-up assignment, guaranteed that this site visit contributed significantly and uniquely to the depth and quality of learning in this course. ❧

CARLSON, from p.iv

A frequent scenario is the uncritical, romantic “yes” students sometimes express when they visit a site for the first time. Once my class and I visited a Japanese Zen center. Most of the students were enamored with “the mystical East,” speaking openly about the profound “spiritual presence” they felt they encountered. However, on the walk to the elevated train to take us back to campus, two of the students were shaking their heads, grumbling among themselves. I asked these two recent immigrants from Vietnam why they were so troubled, and they replied, “That’s not real Buddhism.” As we talked, a possibility emerged: Later in the week we would be nearby another temple, one these two students themselves frequented. They knew the monk personally and volunteered to contact him and to arrange for us to visit. It meant shifting a few things and having a shorter lunch break/discussion time that day, but we went. It was indeed a very different experience than our earlier one at the Zen center. The class came to appreciate the diversity of “Buddhism.” Furthermore, they realized that two sites did not exhaust this diversity. The two Buddhist students helped teach and exemplify, again, an epistemology of diversity wherein multiple perspectives might be discerned and engaged, even as these two students experienced in a new way the diversity of their own tradition. As Jonathan Z. Smith has put it, in the classroom, “nothing must stand alone.... [E]very item encountered ... [must] have a conversation partner, so that each may have, or be made to have, an argument with another in order that students may negotiate difference, evaluate, compare, and make judgments” (Smith 1988, 735). The same holds true for courses using site visits.



Gurdwara Sahib, Chicago, August 1999 (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Carlson).

Integration of site visits in the study of religion can foster and exemplify an epistemology of diversity, wherein the critical and integrative thinker is one who learns enough to be able to consider multiple views, multiple approaches to a problem, and multiple applications of a theory or concept; to adjudicate between them in a deliberate and reflective manner; and to develop a coherent, informed, and ethically responsible vision.

References:

Smith, Jonathan Z. “Narratives into Problems’: The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 727–739. ❧

BRODEUR, from p.x

the need to include at least two of the oldest New London religious communities in order to ensure that the students take history seriously in their search for understanding contemporary religious life. The principle of diversity calls for the need to select site visits that collectively reflect the diversity of the religious life of New London. The principle of progressive acquisition means that, because students progressively acquire their ethnographic skills through firsthand experience in the class site visits before they embark on their own team site visits, their choices cannot be finalized until the end of the first third of the course.

This first third of the seminar focused exclusively on teaching students how to distinguish between description, analysis, and interpretation, the three sections into which I divided the blackboard after returning from each class site visit. Through an inductive process of trial and error, which I guided every step of the way, the students developed their descriptive, analytical, and interpretative skills collectively. During the second third, they continued honing their skills not only through the collective process developed around the class site visits, but also through their new team site visits. Upon their return from class site visits, I allowed more and more time for the teams to share their own site visit stories. Discussion of both class and team site visits strengthened the acquisition and quality of the students’ ethnographic skills. During the last third of the course, each team collected their survey results, discussed them in class, and finally presented them during the final public academic conference.

Conclusion

The PPCC integrated site visit methodology is not only fun to teach, it results in higher research output as the quality of ethnographic skills increases exponentially over the course of one semester. By using a progressive collective reflection process, students become aware of how fine the line is between commodification of superficial relationships with religious communities for research purposes only and, on the other hand, legitimate production of knowledge that serves some of the needs of the religious communities engaged in reciprocal relationship with Connecticut College. The challenges of a service-learning methodology, let alone one embedded in a serious research agenda that also aims to serve community needs, are not easy to carry out satisfactorily. The PPCC integrated approach requires a great deal of time to build personal relationships with each religious community leader, subsequently allowing for the development of a mutually beneficial research agenda. In the second PPCC phase, in particular, I came to discover how much the site visits were embedded in a complex set of relationships that included overlapping political circles, from the classroom to the college to the city to broader national and international historical and contemporary contexts. These multiple circles have constantly influenced, in ways positive and negative, known and yet unknown, the results of PPCC’s two phases as an integrated research, teaching, and service project.

¹ Video clips of these and other student presentations during the symposiums of 2000, 2001, and 2004 are available on the PPCC Web site under the section ‘Resources’: oak.conncoll.edu/%7Eppcc/. ❧

Spotlight on Teaching Solicits Guest Editors and Articles

AAR members interested in guest editing an issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* are invited to submit the title of a theme focusing on teaching and learning in the study of religion, along with a succinct description (500 words) of the theme’s merit and significance, to *Spotlight’s* general editor, Tazim R. Kassam. In addition to issues devoted to specific themes, problems, and settings, *Spotlight on Teaching* will also occasionally feature a variety of independent articles and essays critically reflecting on pedagogy and theory in the field of religion. Please send both types of submissions to:

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