



THE WABASH CENTER

**JOURNAL ON
TEACHING**

TEACHING TACTIC

Ditch the Site Visit, Assign an Interview

Kevin Singer

College of DuPage and Waubonsee Community College

The context

For the last seven years, I have taught world religions courses at two large community colleges in the western suburbs of Chicago.

For the last three years, I have taught exclusively online. My students are local to the suburbs and are typically of traditional college age with a few adult learners mixed in.

The pedagogical purpose

Like many world religions professors, I asked students to observe the happenings at a place of worship and write about it. After several years I became tired of reading the same mundane, unsurprising reflections. Early in my career I noticed that students who had personal relationships with people of other faiths were exponentially more curious and enthusiastic about the course material. This gelled with [survey results](#) that those who have personal connections with someone in another religious group are more likely to be favorable toward that group. As Diana Eck [argued](#), exposure to diversity alone is insufficient to inspire productive exchanges across lines of difference; dialogue and interpersonal encounter are a must. I found that an interview with a religious or spiritual leader invites more critical thought and more active participation than an observation, as well as opening a personal connection. The interview is a memorable encounter that students draw inspiration from in course assignments and dialogue.

Description of the strategy

Students identify a religious or spiritual leader in the local community to interview. If the student does not know someone, their classmates and I make recommendations. I have found that leaders with official roles and significant leadership responsibilities solicit the most insightful and credible responses to students' questions. Students then develop questions based on content covered in the course. Typically, questions pertain to the interviewee's beliefs on the afterlife, science, politics, and pressing social issues like homosexuality, immigration, abortion, climate change, and gender. Students must perform the interview in person or over the phone and summarize the interview and their impressions in two to three pages.

Why it is effective

The change from observation to interview quickly paid dividends for my students. Interviews generated heightened curiosity and appreciation for the course content. In course evaluations and final exams, students frequently referenced the interview as a transformative moment in their learning. An opportunity to ask their burning questions resulted in many of their presuppositions being challenged and reevaluated. This resonates with findings that both [safety and bravery](#) are needed for students to become more appreciative of other worldview groups.

Next semester, assign an interview instead.