



THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

## DESIGN & ANALYSIS

# Responding to Political Hot Points in Real Time: A Twitter Thread

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### ABSTRACT

Professors have an obligation to respond in real time to politically charged events in society, whether they are in the news or in our students' lives on campus (or both). So how do we do that without replicating our own biases and/or confirming our students' worst stereotypes of us as teachers? In a Twitter thread, with research-based supporting materials, I discuss the reasons why we should engage our students in conversations about politically-charged events and some of the best practices that I have discovered for doing it. I apply my practices to several complex, controversial current events: national anthem protests at sporting events, the Indigenous Peoples' March confrontation, and a racist incident on my own campus.

### KEYWORDS

Twitter, politics, citizenship, theory

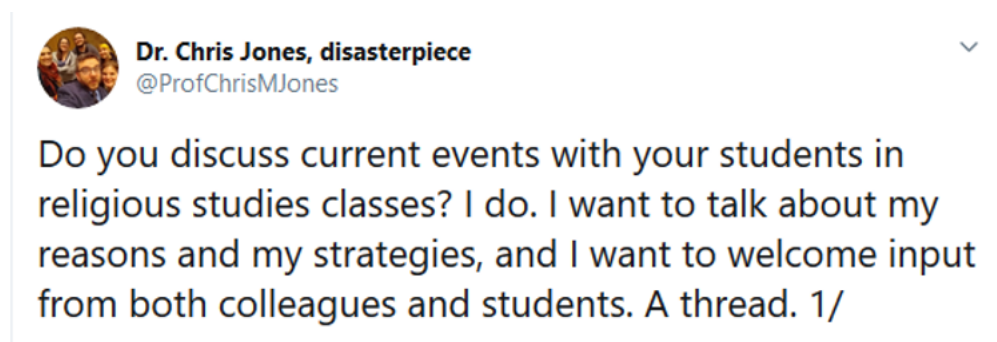
This essay is about the challenges that we face, as scholars of antiquity, when we teach classes outside of our areas of expertise in the midst of highly charged political events. Though I am formally trained in the study of ancient Semitic philology, I now rarely teach topics directly related to that material. Unlike the other authors in this issue, then, I am not going to be discussing how I relate the contemporary to the antique. Rather, I will discuss the ways that my background in Jewish texts of the early first millennium has prepared (or not prepared) me to administer and operate a religious studies program at a regional public university near the geographic heart of the United States at the end of the second decade of the third millennium. In short: my students, like any others, need teachers who can guide them in assessing multiple sources of incomplete information for credibility and who can model an even-handed (but not dispassionate or disengaged) approach to unfolding controversies.

I have been on Twitter (follow me [here!](#) [\[Jones 2020\]](#))<sup>1</sup> since 2009, and active since 2011. My engagement with [#AcademicTwitter](#) has had an incalculable impact on my teaching practice because it connects me with a vast network of teaching professors across the world. I have learned by quietly reading what others post (Stommel 2019), by actively asking for help with pedagogical problems ([Jones 2019](#)), and by sharing my own developing practices with others ([Jones 2019](#)). I often use Twitter to engage students and colleagues in discussions of teaching. I do that in part because I am the only faculty member in religious studies at my institution. It helps me to form connections with colleagues at other institutions. It also helps me to market the program in religious studies to students at my institution. In short, Twitter has been a professional lifeline of sorts for me.

<sup>1</sup> The URLs for Dr. Jones's individual tweets are available online at <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabashcenter.v1i3.1483>.

In May of 2019, following a particularly challenging year of teaching, I sent out a series of tweets (see Figure 1) about teaching political hot-button topics in real time in my courses “Introduction to Religion” and “World Religions.” You can see the original thread [here](#), with comments and animated gifs, and you are invited to use the thread to continue the conversation in real time (I will gladly respond on Twitter).

Figure 1



One of the first challenges that we face in engaging our students about current events is our own perception that they are politically ambivalent and disengaged (see [tweet](#)). This is actually not true. On the contrary, our students are radically engaged, though not necessarily in ways that help them to understand what is happening around them. Smartphones have fundamentally changed the relationship between the college classroom and the outside world. I’m not talking about students using (and abusing) their phones in the classroom—that debate rages on elsewhere ([Kelly 2018](#); [McKenzie 2018](#); [Lynch 2017](#); [Bahrampour et al. 2018](#); [Ashby 2017](#)). Instead, I’m concerned with the ways that our phones keep us (faculty and students alike) wired to the 24-hour news cycle ([Gottfreid 2020](#)) and allow us to customize that news cycle to our own political preferences ([Schmeiser 2017](#)). We become aware of newsworthy events as soon as they happen ([Bishop 2017](#)), and we are immediately immersed in commentary (via official news sources and our online social networks) that reinforces our prior perceptions. Our students, like us, are constantly aware of political issues ([Zinshteyn 2016](#)), and they are also constantly afraid of offending other people by talking about them.

As teachers in the liberal arts tradition, we literally exist to prepare our students for preparation in a free, democratic society ([tweet](#)). In an era in which we must constantly justify the existence of liberal arts curriculum in higher education ([Strauss 2018](#)), we need to emphasize what liberal arts professors alone can do. We cannot fulfil that mission if we don’t talk about current political events with our students. One of my formative influences as an educator (and as a Wisconsin Badger) is William Cronon’s (2016) classic essay “Only Connect. . . The Goals of a Liberal Education,” and for that reason I have always understood religious studies not as an escape from worldly issues (à la the Huston Smith “great insights of the world’s religions” model) but rather as one of many points of access for students who want to better understand complex human motivations.

Of course, for academic teachers whose employment is precarious (adjunct, limited term, continuing lecturer, and pre-tenure), the Huston Smith model can be much safer precisely because it avoids contemporary controversies. Teaching about the intersections of religion and politics in an age of radical polarization is professionally dangerous ([tweet](#)). It’s hard to overstate this point. Outside of super-elite institutions, the classic liberal arts majors are in freefall ([Buurma and Heffeman 2018](#); [Felder 2018](#)). We have powerful, motivated political opponents and few political allies ([Harris 2018](#)). All of the momentum in higher education is towards gutting our programs in favor of STEM and pre-professional curriculum ([Kiley 2013](#))—despite evidence that our majors go on to successful and lucrative careers ([Carlson 2018](#)). There is no safety in silence. Our best hope of saving our programs is to make ourselves indispensable to our campuses. And if we’re doomed anyway, we should at least go out with our integrity intact.

That having been said: I am a straight, white man in a tenure-track position. I have one of the most secure jobs in academia, even without tenure: because of my identity, I get better student evaluations ([Flaherty 2018](#)), and I enjoy unearned respect

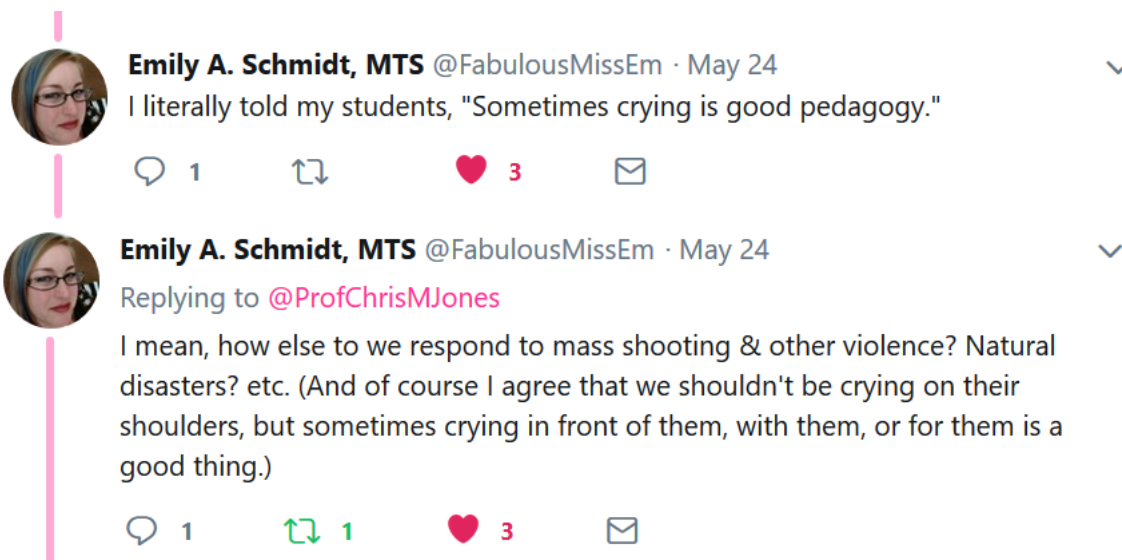
from my colleagues and administrators ([Jones 2018](#)). I won't presume to tell anybody else what to do, but I regard it as a professional obligation for somebody who inhabits my particular kind of body to teach difficult and dangerous topics in the classroom ([tweet](#)). So the rest of this piece will be devoted to my approach to addressing political hot points in the classroom: how I draw upon my background as a scholar of Jewish antiquity, how I integrate (or do not integrate) real-time political events into class curriculum, and how I have succeeded and failed in those efforts. The political hot points I will be discussing are Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem protests ([Longman 2018](#)), the Tree of Life massacre ([Robertson, Mele, and Tavemise 2018](#)), the Indigenous Peoples' March confrontation ([Associated Press 2019](#)), a racist incident on our campus ([Moore 2019](#)), and the murder of a student at a house party ([Hrenchir 2019](#)).

## Specific Teaching Strategies

I do not believe that it is necessary that we be dispassionate about the topics that we address in class ([tweet](#)). I have had profound emotional investments in all of the hot issues that I've talked about with my students in the past two years. In each case, I prepared as extensively as time allowed, making sure that I controlled the relevant data and that I had anticipated a wide range of ideological responses from students (particularly responses that might upset or offend me). Visualization ([Vilhauer 2018](#)) is a technique that I've picked up for managing my own anxiety. I am not a psychologist or a mental health professional, however, so seek a therapist's advice before trying it yourself. On that note, I sometimes tell students that I see a therapist, not to overshare or to center myself, but to destigmatize mental health care for them ([tweet](#)).

The core principle for self-disclosure in the classroom is that it cannot be part of your own self-care—it must serve pedagogical goals ([Mazer 2017](#)). In response to this thread, my colleague Emily [Schmidt \(2019\)](#) put it especially well (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



The same principle holds true of political biases. When I presented on flag protests, the Tree of Life massacre, and the Indigenous Peoples' March confrontation, I told students about my own political predispositions as a political progressive. This is for two reasons: (1) as a teacher with disproportionate power over my students, I feel ethically obligated to disclose my biases if they might affect classroom discussion, and (2) I don't want conservative students, in particular, to think that I'm trying to covertly change their minds ([Smith 2019](#)). Putting my biases front and center allows me to show students how I control for my own biases in my teaching practice.

All five of the hot issues that I discussed with my classes last year involved violence (physical and/or verbal) against minoritized people.<sup>2</sup> Such incidents can take an immediate emotional toll ([Williams 2015](#)) on students who share identity with the people targeted by this violence, and that toll can be amplified when the incident is relived in the classroom ([tweet](#)). It is always a best practice to inform students ahead of time if a topic in class may profoundly upset them, and to give them multiple options for engaging with it (that's why I am an ardent supporter of trigger warnings, properly understood and deployed)([tweet](#)). During class, be deliberate and judicious in your use of graphic details, and always warn students first. While you may want to reinforce the realities of structural violence for students unaffected by it, always prioritize the well-being of the students who are affected by it.

In several cases, I chose to devote full class sessions to current events—essentially bumping the content scheduled on the syllabus to the next session. In each case, I tried to use course concepts to engage the issues, both to maintain continuity with the class and to model the ways that specific disciplinary modes of thought help us to understand our world ([tweet](#)). I used a full session of my “Intro to Religion” class in Fall of 2018 to discuss the practice by athletes, initiated by Colin Kaepernick, of kneeling in protest during the playing of the national anthem before sporting events ([tweet](#)). John Carlos had just appeared on Washburn’s campus for a talk ([Anderson 2018](#)); meanwhile, an attempt to bring Kaepernick to campus in 2016-2017 had not come to fruition. I wanted to give students an opportunity to reflect on both men and their protests, and why Carlos is an acknowledged American hero while Kaepernick remains deeply divisive ([Layden 2018](#)). In class, I showed students iconic images of Carlos at the 1968 Olympics and of Kaepernick in 2016 ([tweet](#)). I asked students first to discuss, with pre-assigned small groups, what the American flag symbolizes, and then how its reference points intersect with deeply held American myths. Then we talked as a class about the various strategies that Americans employ to effect and sustain the flag’s status as a sacred symbol. The key discussion was then what, specifically, is symbolized by Carlos (and Tommie Smith) giving the Black Power salute during the Olympic flag-raising ceremony, and by Kaepernick kneeling during the anthem ceremony before American football games.

Another time that I diverted the course schedule to accommodate a current event was in the Spring of 2019 in my “World Religions” class. We were halfway through our unit on Yoruba traditions. Following a highly publicized confrontation between Black Hebrews, Indigenous Peoples’ March participations, and March for Life participants in Washington, D.C., in early 2019, I devoted a full session of my World Religions class to a discussion of the incident (see the linked [tweet threads](#) for details). Because this incident specifically involved an individual wearing a MAGA hat ([Darby 2019](#)), I knew that the discussion ran the risk of inviting political polarization (rather than productive dialogue). My strategy was to lay out the facts as clearly as possible and to let students watch clips of raw ([tweet](#)) video ([tweet](#)) from the incident and draw their own conclusions ([tweet](#)). I drew on my training in ancient Jewish texts in a couple of ways: explaining the particular background of the Black Hebrews and their use of biblical typology to identify Native Americans (Gad) and white Americans (Edom), and discussing the power of deeply rooted symbols to create and reinforce identity boundaries. I was especially careful to avoid triggering the so-called “backfire effect” by giving students the impression that I was attempting to challenge their own deeply held beliefs ([tweet](#)).

The final example of a time when I simply replaced scheduled class content with a response to real-time news was following the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre in November of 2018. This is also the presentation that most closely drew upon my training in ancient Jewish texts, both in its specific content and in its consciousness of the ways that deep history can inform contemporary events. To my students, it was just another mass shooting in America. Most had no idea about the history of anti-Semitism, let alone the particular connections between the shooter’s ideology and the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the contemporary American right. I presented students first with the facts, as plainly as possible, focusing on the victims and deliberately refusing to name the shooter or talk about his background more than was necessary. I did, however, show screenshots ([Web Archive 2018](#)) of the shooter’s social media postings, and his repeated references to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory ([Lind 2018](#)) that immigrants are meant to replace white Americans. I used anti-Semitic cartoons to reinforce the history of anti-Semitism in the United States, and then I highlighted echoes of that theory in the rhetoric of contemporary conservative figures ([Marshall 2018](#); [Trump 2018](#); [Amato 2018](#); [Politi 2018](#); [Murphy 2018](#)). I invited students to make up their own minds about the degree to which this anti-immigrant rhetoric was connected to anti-Semitism.

Despite our efforts (and perhaps because of our efforts) students may express a range of emotions. Sometimes I have to overcome my preference for an orderly, civil classroom and reinforce space for students to process their reactions in real time ([tweet](#)). In that vein, I have found the distinction between tone policing and boundary maintenance helpful ([Miri 2016](#)).

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<sup>2</sup> Colin Kaepernick is specifically protesting police brutality against Black people ([Wyche 2016](#)); the Tree of Life Massacre targeted Jews ([Barrouguere 2019](#)); white students at the Indigenous Peoples’ March can be seen doing ironic tomahawk chops ([Mervosh and Rueb 2019](#)); the racist incident on Washburn’s campus involved a student using the N-word with the hard “r”; the murdered student was a Black male.

When a student speaks emotionally, ask yourself: is this student violating classroom policies? If not, let them finish, and then use breakout strategies to redirect the class without chastising the student. As it happens, in neither of these discussions did students become emotionally charged, but if that happens it may be necessary to follow up with students and take appropriate further actions ([tweet](#)).

Above all else: make sure that you err on the side of acknowledging when events outside of the classroom may be impacting discussions within it ([tweet](#)). Following the murder of a student last year, I had several students in class who had witnessed the shooting just thirty-six hours beforehand. Very few of them wanted to talk about it in class, but they were grateful that we acknowledged it and that we talked about resources available. On the flip side, one of my greatest failures as a teacher was the day of the Las Vegas massacre in 2017 ([Corcoran, Baker, and Choi 2019](#)). I learned of the shooting the morning before teaching my class, but I couldn't bring myself to talk about it because I knew I'd break down emotionally. I should have broken down anyway—I quickly found out that that's what was happening to my students, and they could have used an empathetic ally that day.

## Reflections

I did not debrief in any systematic way with my students after these sessions, in part because I did not anticipate publishing anything about these exercises. However, I can say that, anecdotally, students said that they were glad that we had these discussions and that they felt that they learned from them. Nobody expressed any disapproval of our classes going off schedule, and for the most part students seemed to be fully engaged in the discussions as they took place. In retrospect, I should have checked specifically with students whose identities (racial, ethnic, or religious) may have been at stake in these discussions. That was a mistake on my part, and one that I will not make again.

As for the pedagogical consequences of diverting the course schedule: because my general education courses are more skill-oriented than content-oriented, it did not have a significant impact on student learning outcomes. In each case, we used disciplinary vocabulary and content analysis techniques to understand what we were discussing. In the case of Kaepernick's protests, we employed the concepts of "myth" and "sacred," and I used examples from that class period in a review session leading up to a major paper. In the case of the Indigenous People's March, it provided another illustration of my World Religions course's core proposition: people's identities and motivations are messy and complex and play out in surprising ways, so we must pay careful attention to context and detail. These lessons, in short, became part of the curriculum, rather than intruding on it.

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