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TEACHING OUTSIDE YOUR FIELD

Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Unfamiliar Topics

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ABSTRACT

I discuss teaching as contingent faculty in the small college environment, having taught multiple topics outside of my research area. My essay focuses on resources for course preparation and how teaching unfamiliar topics can enhance one's pedagogical practices. Teaching an unfamiliar topic is an opportunity to thinking creatively about learning activities and to model lifelong learning.

KEYWORDS

syllabus, writing, interdisciplinarity, liberal arts

Teaching unfamiliar topics is a common task in a small department that offers a wide range of courses. Here I reflect on my experiences as a contingent faculty member in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Hastings College teaching outside my specialty. Hastings College is a small (approximately 1,100 students) college in Nebraska, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA). I started teaching there at the same time that I started my doctoral dissertation, first as a part-time adjunct, and later as a full-time instructor.

My graduate work was in philosophy of religion and Christian theology, and I started by teaching the Philosophy of Religion course. Being in a small combined religion and philosophy department, I later was asked to teach courses in areas outside of theology and philosophy of religion, such as New Testament, philosophical ethics, and an interdisciplinary first-year seminar. Some of the courses that I taught were clearly outside of my familiar areas. Others such as Introduction to Philosophy, World Religions, and Jesus in History and Tradition overlapped somewhat with my educational background but also included components that were less familiar for me. At that time, the college required all undergraduate students to take courses in certain areas for their liberal arts program. The requirements included taking one course in religion and one course in philosophy. Students could choose nearly any of courses in our department to fulfill their requirements, and they could take them during any year of their studies. Thus, in nearly every course I taught, the majority of my students were majoring in areas outside of the humanities and were studying religion or philosophy for the first time.

While teaching an unfamiliar topic for the first time may induce a case of imposter syndrome, being in this situation is quite common in small departments and small, teaching-oriented colleges. I recommend Therese Huston's book *Teaching What You Don't Know* (2009). Huston discusses how administrators' decisions and external accountability contribute to the increasing commonality of faculty teaching outside their areas of specialization. The book offers several strategies for planning and teaching new topics and drawing on the relevant knowledge that instructors do bring. Huston explains that the best teaching draws on students' existing knowledge and engages a few topics in depth with examples. One strategy that she recommends is backward course design. The backward approach starts with the questions that the instructor wants students to answer, which Huston points out are more likely to interest students when they are similar to the instructor's own questions about the material (2009, 57-69). Thus, the instructor who is new to the material may have an advantage over a topic expert in thinking of questions that will interest students, as well as noticing which specific topics may be especially difficult and where there are connections to background knowledge that the students may share. Huston's advice in *Teaching What You Don't Know* (2009) would be a helpful guide for any new instructors teaching outside of their field and especially helpful for contingent faculty members who often are balancing their teaching with other occupations and time constraints.

Although each specific course that I have taught outside of my specialization has presented its own challenges and opportunities, the practice of teaching new topics is generalizable. Of course, even before class begins, an instructor must become familiar enough with the topic to plan the class. There are several potential resources for doing this. Ideally a previous instructor at your institution will discuss the course and share their syllabus and perhaps other materials. Colleagues at other institutions, especially similar types of schools, are also helpful to contact. The Syllabus Project website from the Wabash Center, American Academy of Religion, and Society of Biblical Literature is helpful for finding syllabi ([Wabash Center 2021](#)), as is Google. As you read other professors' syllabi, knowing your own students and the role of your course in your institution's curriculum is important. Syllabi from other professors can be helpful for considering which materials and types of assignments may work well, but I find that they are best used as inspirations for building on your own pedagogical style and any related expertise that you personally can apply to the topic. Similarly, even if you already have chosen or been assigned the textbook or textbooks for your course, it helps to look at other textbooks for that topic to get a sense of the variety of approaches to it and perhaps find inspiration for classroom activities such as case studies, primary texts, or discussion questions. Again, though, knowledge of your own course goals and having a sense of what your particular students will bring to the course shapes how you use those resources.

In my experience, the unfamiliarity of a course outside my own specialty is an opportunity to shift into more creative thinking about learning activities that fit the particular student population rather than my preconceptions about the material. For example, in my recent introductory New Testament course at Hastings College, the graded assignments included both exams and out-of-class writing assignments. I wanted to make the assignments accessible to beginning students who might be intimidated by the course. Rather than standard exegesis papers, I assigned the students alternative format writing assignments, along with answering some of the questions included in the textbook (Ehrman 2017). John Bean's book *Engaging Ideas* (2011) describes the value of alternatives to traditional formal writing. Alternative assignments support both content learning and students' growth as writers (Bean 2011, 56-65). Bean provides several examples of alternative assignments including, in the study of religion, the assignment of taking on the role of a member of the Corinthian community and writing a letter back to Paul (Bean 2011, 119). Working toward the liberal arts program goal of improving students' writing skills, I included similar assignments for my students. Below are their prompts for writing a book review, a social media post, and letters.

Book Review:

Choose one of the four Gospels and write a book review of it. A good book review summarizes some of what the book is about (you may include "spoilers" or not), places the book in relation to similar books, evaluates what the strengths are and what the author failed to do, and recommends which readers the book would be especially suitable for. Your book review should show an understanding of the Gospel's unique themes/style, how it compares to the others, and the writer's emphases.

“Eyewitness” Facebook Post:

Choose one of the speeches in Acts and write a long Facebook post about it. Imagine that you witnessed one of the speeches (you can make up someone who could have been part of the scene and take on that role) and describe the context and tone in which it was delivered and how you and other people reacted to it. You should mention some of the relevant thematic emphases from Acts, showing that you understand the role of the speech in the book. Because this assignment takes the format of a Facebook post, feel free to use emojis or “stickers” and write informally.

Sending Mail:

Choose one of the epistles that we’ve read so far and imagine what sort of letter from the church might have prompted your chosen book as reply. Write this imagined letter to Paul. Connect your letter to the epistle by using similar letter writing conventions and describing some of the cultural context, community situation, theological concerns, and/or people that are key to the actual epistle. In other words, if your chosen epistle is the answer, you are writing the questions and showing that you understand what would have been significant to its audience.

Answering Mail:

Choose Romans or one of the Deutero-Pauline or Pastoral epistles. Imagine that the community decided to reply to the original author and you are writing the letter expressing their response (you may address the author as “Paul” even if the epistle is considered pseudonymous). Connect your letter to the epistle by using similar letter writing conventions and referring to some of the same situations, theological concerns, or people that the author was addressing. Your letter should show an understanding of what is important in the epistle and the context that it addresses.

These writing assignments were relatively engaging for students, as the different formats encouraged them to write creatively, and allowed me to evaluate their analysis of a passage in a focused way. In between the writing assignments and exams, I also gauged students’ understanding with in-class discussion activities, sometimes using Poll Everywhere to allow students to see everyone’s ideas combined.

Teaching a new subject also can revitalize our own passion, as faculty members, for teaching in religious studies or the humanities more generally. It is an opportunity to model genuine intellectual curiosity for students and to use genuine questions in the course. Beyond my department, thus even farther outside my area of expertise, I taught Hastings College’s interdisciplinary first-year seminar. One year the seminar was on *The Creative Life*, fitting a campus-wide theme. One of the main texts that I chose for the seminar was *The Creative Habit* by choreographer Twyla Tharp (2006). Because most of my students and I had very little experience studying dance, I believe that it was rhetorically effective for me to put myself on the students’ side in discussions when asking what *we* as non-choreographers could apply from Tharp’s writing and exercises. Students responded by thoughtfully applying Tharp’s ideas about creativity in ways that I had not expected, such as to their athletic training.

In my experience, students at small colleges usually are accepting of the fact that their instructors are not always specialists in the courses that they teach. However, a contingent instructor (along with any non-tenured faculty member or member of a minority group who senses that they are in a vulnerable position on their campus) can feel pressure not to reveal ignorance. I usually chose to tell my students when I was a non-expert while introducing the course or a particular topic and presented my situation positively. I would express my excitement about having the opportunity to teach a new course and mention how it connected to my background or other interests. Explaining how my main scholarly interests were related to the topic provided a way to talk about the wide range of interconnected subjects in religious studies or philosophy. Because most of my students had never taken a course in the subject before (and some were not enthusiastic about fulfilling their religion or philosophy requirement), I used my introduction to demonstrate that it was all right to be an outsider to the subject. I would also discuss how an understanding of religion (or philosophy) fit into the liberal arts, and when relevant during the semester I would draw out connections with students’ other courses and interests.

Because many institutions prize lifelong learning as a goal for their students, I believe that the students can benefit from being taught by someone who is not experienced with the course topic. Faculty members ought to embrace this opportunity to model learning as experts in a nearby field of study and to demonstrate that everyone is a learner.

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