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ARTICLE

Integrating Workforce Competencies into Introductory Religion Writing Assignments: A Suggestion for Addressing a Pedagogical Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Taking up the suggestions made by Eugene V. Gallagher and Joanne Maguire in their article, “Teaching Religion to Undergraduates in the 2020s: A Preliminary Reconnaissance” (2020), this essay addresses one means of thinking about writing assignments in introductory religion courses at the undergraduate level with “broad goals” and “institutional mission” in mind. The essay begins with a description of the institutional context and then describes an argument-analysis writing assignment for a general education religion course that attempts to draw out the “workforce competencies” developed in the exercise. Framing assignments explicitly in terms of the workforce skills students will hone offers teachers the ability to display the transferrable skills they help students develop and provides an avenue to connect assignments to the institution’s mission statement.

KEYWORDS

assignment design, institutional mission, workforce competencies, writing in introductory courses, writing in general education courses

Introduction

During a recent undergraduate commencement ceremony, the student receiving the outstanding graduate award for the highest overall GPA gave a speech in which she lamented the “pointless assignments” students had to endure in university classes, as her classmates cheered in response. I was crushed. I have no doubt that students view many assignments across the university curriculum as little more than busy work. But I also suspect that the teachers who assigned the activities had specific goals in mind. I suspect those teachers desired students to come away with a new understanding of an issue, to hone skills that will benefit their students beyond the course, and to

assist students in becoming better informed citizens regardless of the vocations they pursue. Perhaps one problem is that we, professors in religious studies, are not always clear about the skills we want students to develop in our assignments and instead lean into discipline-specific language that fails to connect to students' vocational goals.

In their essay, "Teaching Religion to Undergraduates in the 2020s: A Preliminary Reconnaissance," Eugene V. Gallagher and Joanne Maguire utilize L. Dee Fink's subcategories of situational factors to be considered in the backward design of course curriculum ([Gallagher and Maguire 2020](#), 9–10; cf. Fink 2003, 63). They draw attention to the need for teachers of religion to design courses that are "mission-sensitive" or "mission-aware" and take seriously the implicit and explicit promises universities make to their students (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 15). In what follows, I describe a writing assignment for an introductory general education religion course that I redesigned at the insistence of the university administration to focus on workforce competencies across the curriculum. The result of this redesign, I suggest, offers one way of addressing Gallagher and Maguire's encouragement to devise religion courses with broad goals and institutional mission in mind, and addresses how the skills learned in the course connect to potential vocations outside of religion.

Institutional Context

I serve on the faculty at Claflin University, an historically Black university in South Carolina that has always been a place of inclusion and opportunity, especially for underserved populations. The university was founded as a liberal arts institution where anyone, regardless of race, gender, or creed, would be welcomed to receive an education. The institution stood firm during the Reconstruction and Civil Rights Eras to become a place "dedicated to providing a student-centered, liberal arts education grounded in cutting-edge research, experiential learning, state-of-the-art technology, community service, and life-long personal and professional fulfillment" ([Claflin University 2021](#)).

Like many institutions of higher learning, Claflin faces the challenge of students who desire to major in what they deem "marketable" areas of study (Davidson 2017, 136). Parents of students also desire to see their children attain well-paying jobs and to see a return on their investment in education; thus, a number of parents encourage students to major in STEM-related fields (see [Gallagher and Maguire 2020](#), 10–11; cf. Donaghue 2018).¹ Gallagher and Maguire categorize these kinds of pressures as "external factors" facing higher education institutions. As the authors state, parents, students, and the general public bring their own expectations to the teaching and learning process, and universities feel the need to respond and demonstrate the benefits of their degree programs (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 10).

Because Claflin is an "access" institution, a number of students arrive on campus with a need to develop their reading and writing skills. General education courses in religion present prime opportunities for students to exercise their abilities to read and understand arguments, make judgments based on evidence, and formulate those judgments in a clear and coherent manner—all of which are skills necessary to excel in a variety of vocations. Religion courses are not often viewed as prime places for developing workforce competencies that prepare students for a competitive job market. Religion faculty thus have the opportunity to think about how to frame the skills students cultivate in their courses in ways that address external expectations of various parties and help students see the benefits of the study of religion beyond content alone (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 12).

Workforce Competencies and Writing in Religion

Many institutions of higher learning and departments of religion include as part of their mission statements the goal of developing people who are globally engaged, effective leaders, and productive and informed members of society. Yet often the forms, the specific assignments, and the skills necessary to achieve these goals remain unstated and are left to individual professors to determine. What is more, universities are trying to meet their objectives in a shifting landscape in which students expect their courses to "prepare [them] for the world beyond the academy" and have their own ideas about

¹ For recent trends in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred and fields of study from 2005–2016, see the National Center for Education Statistics (2018).

what that means (Davidson 2017; cf. Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 10; [Yamada 2020](#)). In religious studies, we often speak in terms of helping students in general education courses develop transferrable skills, such as critical thinking, making judgments, clearly expressing thought in oral and written forms, understanding and empathy, and so forth; however, the connection between the content, the skills learned, and how those skills benefit a person in a competitive job market beyond graduation tends to be implicit rather than explicit.

For instance, the university at which I serve publishes student learning outcomes in five primary areas with skills and content specified under each area ([Claflin University 2018](#)):

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| <p>1. Communication and Literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral, written, and communication skills • Digital literacy | <p>4. Leadership and Life Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic engagement • Ethical reasoning • Collaboration/teamwork • Community service • Engaging difference • Entrepreneurship • Financial literacy • Soft skills and professional development |
| <p>2. Knowledge Acquisition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts, literature, and fine arts • World civilization • Natural sciences • Quantitative studies • Social sciences • Individual disciplines | <p>5. Global Citizenship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural sensitivity and awareness • Sustainability • Awareness of global issues • Social justice |
| <p>3. Intellectual Acumen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Rational reasoning • Quantitative literacy • Synthesis and integration of knowledge | |

The institution communicates these learning outcomes through literature and its website; however, these objectives are rarely matched directly with learning goals in specific courses. Connecting such broad outcomes with more narrow and specific goals in each class and each assignment, as suggested by Gallagher and Maguire, offers an opportunity to connect the dots.

As an institution affiliated with mainline Protestant denomination, the university's education curriculum requires students to take two religion courses. Students have a list of classes from which they can choose to fulfill this requirement; many of them elect to take Introduction to Biblical Literature, which I teach regularly. Each fall and spring semester I teach at least

two sections of Introduction to Biblical Literature, a class that serves, according to the university catalog, as “An academic study of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) from a literary, historical, and contemporary perspective.” Each section routinely has thirty to thirty-five students enrolled.

The vast majority of students I encounter in this course do not plan to major in religion (or even in the humanities). Yet, as many in the guild will affirm, all students need to learn how to assess arguments and evidence, make sound judgments, read carefully, and express their views in writing. In a 2013 study conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), researchers aimed to discover “the most essential skills for the twenty-first century workforce” (Burrus et al. 2013, 1). Of the fifteen components studied, five skills rose to the top as the most prominent indicators of success:

1. problem solving (judgment and decision making; complex problem solving)
2. fluid intelligence (information ordering; mathematical reasoning)
3. teamwork (cooperation; concern for others)
4. achievement/innovation (innovation; originality)
5. communication skills (oral expression; written comprehension) (Burrus et. al. 2013, 27–29)

Arguably, each of these, with perhaps the exception of “fluid intelligence,” are skills students develop in religion courses. In particular, deficiencies of communication skills among students in general education classes demand that teachers take time to assist students in developing proficiencies in this area (see [Gallagher and Maguire 2020](#), 13; cf. Arum and Roksa 2011).

Over the past few years, I made attempts to revise writing assignments to address the goal of pushing students towards processing complex information, solving problems, and expressing their ideas on the page. I have assigned short reflection papers on passages of primary texts based on a prompt; asked students to write creatively as a character in a narrative or in the context of the ancient audience hearing the text (see [Ryan, 2019](#)); required students to craft an essay on how a text or issue from the course intersects with a current event in the news; and assigned more traditional textual analyses of primary documents. With a growing interest at the university on infusing workforce competencies into general education courses, I rethought my approach to writing assignments yet again. This time, I took steps to frame assignments in terms of workforce skills to help students see the benefits of assignments as transformational tasks and to help them understand how assignments can translate into other fields and vocational endeavors.

The following quote from Gallagher and Maguire offers a key text that captures the emphasis of my approach:

If we know that our goals for students are, above all, to teach them how to navigate a complex world as responsible citizens, then our focus in the classroom should be on fostering those skills involved in such navigation. This will require a shift for many teachers, who will have to revise their courses around skills rather than content and think deeply and carefully about the broader implications of what they are actually teaching. ([2020](#), 17)

In an attempt to revise an assignment “around skills rather than content,” I devised an argument-analysis paper. Students in the course are assigned a scholarly article to read and analyze. I choose an article each semester that I deem more accessible to introductory readers and ask them to determine the thesis statement/main point of the argument, the significant pieces of evidence the author marshals in support of the thesis, the strength of the argument, and finally how the article might connect to our discussions in the course.

I provide a handout early in the semester with step-by-step instructions, a grading rubric, and the goals of the assignment. I make the document available online in the LMS and distribute hard copies in class. We spend several entire class sessions – spaced over several weeks of the course – analyzing the scholarly piece together, discussing the mechanics of writing essays, and walking through the parameters and expectations of the assignment. I find it is best to go over the instructions

with students early in the semester so that the broad objectives and goals of the course (found in the syllabus) are fresh in their minds and more easily paired with the assignment. Using the goals listed below, we talk through the importance of developing skills that can be applied in different disciplines and vocations:

1. To become proficient in reading and understanding complex arguments
2. To understand proper uses of evidence to support an argument
3. To determine the merits and demerits of arguments
4. To consider differing viewpoints charitably and sympathetically
5. To formulate ideas and express a position cogently in writing

Expressing the goals for an assignment provides space for teachers to connect the work in the class to the mission statement of the university, as Gallagher and Maguire suggest. In addition, the students and I take time to imagine how the goals of the paper might convert to their own fields of study or the jobs they hope to land post-graduation. This exercise offers a forum for students to make connections to workforce competencies that often remain unstated in religion courses.

I also scaffolded the assignment in several smaller submissions to help students read and understand the assigned article and work on smaller pieces of the essay. For instance, in the first submission I ask students to read the introductory and concluding sections of the article and decide what they see as the thesis; students then write only an opening paragraph for their essay that introduces the article and states what they see as the thesis based on their reading thus far. About two weeks prior to the submission of the introductory paragraph, we spend an entire class session talking about the main argument of the scholarly piece and how to construct a strong introduction to an essay.

Delimiting the initial reading to the beginning and end of the piece helps students locate the thesis without getting overwhelmed with the evidence used throughout the article. When entering students must read and understand a full scholarly piece, some become confused about the main point when they get into the weeds of evidence and when authors bring in conversation partners with whom they agree or disagree. Starting with the introduction and conclusion of the scholarly essay allows students to focus on the main point the author makes before proceeding further. Additionally, this initial step alerts students to an effective way of approaching complex arguments and offers a strategy for reading in other courses. After submitting the introductory paragraph, students receive feedback on this portion of the essay and have the chance to revise prior to turning in the next stage of the scaffolded assignment.

Armed with an idea about the main point of the article, students move on to investigate how the author supports the thesis with evidence. Students next read the remaining parts of the article at this point, outline the argument, and submit the body paragraphs for their essay, which elucidate the most significant points of evidence used to support the thesis. Prior to turning in this second part of the assignment, we again spend time in class in a workshop format discussing the article and how to write in a structured manner with transitions in our own essays. Students again receive feedback on this second stage before moving to the third step in which they combine the introduction and body together in the final draft with a conclusion.

In this last stage, we again spend class time workshoping the essays, discussing how to write effective conclusions and draw pieces of the arguments together. Students then turn in the completed assignment—an essay that analyzes a scholarly argument with an introduction, body, and conclusion. In the concluding section, I encourage learners to offer their thoughts on the merits and demerits of the argument and the strength of the evidence they noted in the body of their essay. I also invite students at this point to place the piece in conversation with what we have discussed in the course.

To be sure, such an assignment on a single article requires that I sacrifice breadth of content and discipline-specific issues in favor of more depth and time spent on one topic. In this case, less is indeed more (see [Galindo 2019](#)). Editing the course content to devote time to a single writing assignment is indeed a challenge, because I have a number of topics

and texts that I deem important and helpful for students to learn. Yet I also find that the skills developed in the project are worth class time and hold potential to foster workforce competencies that show students the benefit of a religion course beyond learning content alone. Students tend to respond more positively to the task when we discuss the reasons for assigning the project and how it might apply to their vocational pursuits. Further, students come away with a sense of accomplishment that they read, understood, and wrote about a sophisticated scholarly argument.

Conclusion

Gallagher and Maguire rightly note that “the task for teachers of religious studies is not to induct students into the ins and outs of a discipline that very few of them will ever participate in at an advanced level”; rather, the task is “to show them and help them practice some of the characteristic modes of thought and analysis that the discipline of the academic study of religion can bring to bear on virtually any topic” (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 17). The argument-analysis paper described above offers one example of an assignment that teaches transferrable workforce skills and provides opportunity to align an assignment explicitly with the institutional mission. For those teachers who have dedicated their lives to the study of religion, showing restraint with our material is a difficult task. But with a focus on course design that takes seriously the implicit and explicit promises made in mission statements and considers ways to foster workforce competencies, religion courses can build the bridges Gallagher and Maguire suggest “between the goals which general education courses are purported to serve and the design of courses to fulfill such goals” (2020, 16).

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