Religion in the university classroom

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There is a tendency for discussions about religion in university classrooms to go horribly awry, particularly in relation to current and historical events, science and aspects of social living. Our acutely secular society is critical and nervous about religion in the classroom. Teachers and students, who might otherwise exercise respect and empathy towards others' personal beliefs and values, feel able to justify expressing extremely critical statements or being quite dismissive about an individual's comments of a religious nature. Similarly, teachers and students may feel so threatened by discussions about religion that they prevent students from using the frameworks offered by their religious and spiritual beliefs to explore curriculum ideas and related issues.

Thinking about the link between Teaching and Religion

Why are we so afraid of bringing religion into the classroom? One possible reason is that we are cautious of the passionate over-zealousness that can cloud and distort rational academic discussion. This emanates from a secular education system that until recent times (1970s) has neither encouraged nor included religious discussion. This fear of the over-zealous fundamentalist is compounded by a tendency to conceptualise the 'other' as stable and unchanging.

The problem in barring discussion about religious beliefs in the classroom is that such knowledge and belief frameworks constitute the core of many students' prior learning. As such, cognition scientists tell us, students are likely to filter all subsequent learning through these beliefs.

What learning responses then are possible for students whose strongly held religious beliefs are challenged by what they are learning in the classroom? In a closed classroom where the use of one's own experiences is discouraged, possible student responses include:

- rejecting or discounting the new learning because it cannot be integrated with the existing knowledge schemata
- 'surface' rote learning in order to reproduce theoretical concepts in assessment
- rejecting old learning and personal beliefs which can cause students stress and confusion in their personal lives

By contrast, in an open classroom the learning environment actively utilises students' prior knowledge, life experiences and belief frameworks. Here, possible learning responses include:

- critical reflection on personal taken-for-granted assumptions leading to an understanding of the contradictions and challenges inherent in comparing new concepts with prior knowledge and beliefs
- an openness to the ideas of others and extensive student-teacher classroom interaction
- intentional development of student evidence-based reasoning and ethical and moral reasoning

The following statement from a participant in an educational evaluation focus group provides an argument for adopting these principles.

The student's explanation for why he felt he had learned well in a class was that:

"The teacher set up an atmosphere of group work collaboration and mutual respect. She collaborated with us in our work and listened to us and modelled accepting behaviour and made it clear that a similar standard was expected of us. She encouraged us to take responsibility for our learning and to explore our reactions to the curriculum content. This meant that one day I really listened to a Fundamentalist Christian, something I could never imagine doing, and heard her explanation of why she felt so strongly about and could never accept abortion. I did not have to change my beliefs, but I found I was able to understand how she thought and could empathise with her feelings about it. It was a real learning experience for me on many levels. I also was able to articulate my own beliefs more fully and understand more deeply why I felt as I did. I think we both changed our thinking a bit that day."
(cited in Orrell 2002)

The development of ethical and moral reasoning

In his study of the development of ethical and moral reasoning, Perry (1999) provides a detailed and complex description of nine levels of ethical and moral reasoning in university and college students. For Perry, the teacher's task is to provide contextual challenges that enable students to progress through these nine levels of reasoning development, from black-and-white thinking to a more principle-oriented approach. Orrell (2002) reduces these nine steps to five global thinking stages that can be observed in students' spoken and written discourse.

The first level of reasoning is Dualist Thinking. At this stage the student engages in black-and-white, absolutist thinking. Something is either right or wrong and it is so because authority has said it is so. The authority can be a textbook, the media, a hero, a parent, a peer, a teacher or a religious leader. Anyone who has tried to enter into a discussion with someone who is functioning at this level will instantly recognise it. The second level is Multiplistic Thinking. At this stage students recognise that there can be multiple viewpoints on a matter. However, they believe that there is an ultimate truth that can be discovered, and this once again resides in authority. Such students' written texts and discussions are retellings of others' ideas ie polemic. The third is Relativistic Thinking. At this stage students accept that there are multiple truths and realities, grounded in competing and contrasting histories and interests. They can accept that two competing ideas or positions on the same matter can be equally valid for different people. However, they still reserve the option that principles will determine ultimate truth on some matters eg female circumcision. Such students' texts have well developed descriptions of positions, but often fail to draw clear conclusions.

The fourth level of reasoning is Commitment. At this stage students are able to explore multiple realities and the rationales that support them. The main growth here is that they are now able to take a position on the issue, providing their own rationale and using evidence. Such thinking is evident in papers that attract high grades because they go beyond mere descriptions of ideas and research and collections of quotes to embody a crafted argument that arrives at a well supported conclusion.

The advanced level is Limited Commitment. This stage is not dissimilar from the previous one except that at this stage students take a position knowing and accepting that it may be temporary because subsequent evidence may cause them to reassess their viewpoint.

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Orrell (2002) argues, in light of Perry's theory of development of ethical and moral reasoning, that it is important that students feel able to disclose their personal experiences and their religious and spiritual beliefs in classroom discussions.

How can an individual student move beyond polemic, encyclopaedic or relativistic thinking, develop their own position and a rationale to support it if they do not explore their prior assumptions and listen respectfully to the elaboration of the strongly held views of others? Equally, religious groups would do well by their students to support their exploration of alternative world views and beliefs and set them free to seek their own evidence and rationale to support their own religious and spiritual beliefs. (Orrell 2002)

Strategies and tips for designing a culturally inclusive teaching and learning environment

Create an open and inclusive study environment

Drawing on Boice's First-Order Principles, (Boice 1996) three principles can guide classroom interaction and create an open study environment, inclusive of exploring one's religious and spiritual beliefs and personal value positions in the context of the curriculum.

- The teacher must moderate classroom incivilities at all times. This includes establishing ground rules for classroom discussion such as respect and a fair hearing for all.
- Both teacher and students must moderate over-attachment to their own ideas.
- Both teacher and students must moderate over-emotional reaction to criticism of their ideas.

Make the class a safe place for all students

- Establish a classroom in which teachers and students demonstrate mutual respect.
- Manage behaviour that might stimulate 'classroom incivilities':
  - teacher incivility includes prejudice and neglecting the needs of individual students or groups of students
  - student incivility can manifest as poor punctuality, lack of preparation for or non-participation in classes, disruption of classes, distraction of teacher and fellow students, and cheating.
- Establish inclusive class ground rules that safeguard against racism and harassment.
- In small classes, guide students to negotiate their own code of conduct.
- In larger classes, provide a framework and ask for student feedback and ratification of ground rules.
- Define how class members discuss issues, especially potentially sensitive issues eg 'people must have valid support/evidence for what they say'.

For strategies for managing classroom incivility see Boice, R. (1996) First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Establish clear expectations in the classroom

- Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work.
- Check that your students understand the Australian university context and what is expected of them.
- Clarify the format and purpose of the particular session type you are teaching and the type of student participation expected.
- Explain the written topic outlines, objectives and outcomes that are provided to students, checking that everyone understands.
- Teach appropriate citing, referencing and how to avoid plagiarism in papers. Provide relevant information and resource sessions if necessary.
- Make your marking scheme quite clear. Let students know if the emphasis is on communicating information and ideas or on language accuracy. Sometimes students can be anxious about being penalised for poor English expression.

Reviewing religion in the university classroom

Use this self-reflection tool to consider the manner in which you create a 'safe' learning environment where students can explore ideas. (scale from 1-5 – 1 indicating limited and 5 indicating highly evident)

To what extent do I?	12345
Create a study environment where students feel comfortable to discuss religion in relation to curriculum activities	
Establish classroom norms with students to moderate incivilities, such as over-emotional reactions to ideas and over-emotional reaction to criticism	
Promote developmental learning by assisting students to shift from black– and-white thinking to more principled thinking	
Consider significant religious dates when devising timetables for exams, assessment deadlines and field trips	
Incorporate equal opportunity principles with respect to religion in my dealings with students	
Incorporate equal opportunity principles with respect to religion in my dealings with other staff	
Am aware of the dominant religions that are present within the student body	

Treat diversity positively

- Avoid over generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative) eg 'all Asian students are quiet in class'.
- Don't expect any individual student to speak as a representative of his/her culture.
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource.
- Plan opportunities for all students to contribute input related to their own culture (but avoid making any student a cultural representative).

For more information, see General Information Folio : Culturally Inclusive Environment and Teaching and Research Folio: Designing Culturally Inclusive Classrooms.

Flinders University is the original author of this folio.

Respecting religious and cultural diversity at USC

Religion and Equity Policy at USC

The University's Equity Policy is inclusive of the diverse elements associated with culture – age, race, religious belief, political belief, marital status, sexuality, gender, pregnancy, disability or impairment.

The Equity Policy states:

'The University will promote social and cultural cohesion by respecting and valuing the diversity of staff and student backgrounds and cultures through teaching and management practices and in the provision of administrative and other services on campus.'

The following information may assist in creating an environment that is considerate and respectful of the religious and cultural traditions of staff and students at USC.

The University has established a quiet reflection room for the benefit of staff and students, in support of the pursuit of their diverse religious and spiritual views, beliefs and practices.

This is intended to provide a space on campus for quiet reflection, meditation and multi-faith prayer. Contact Student Life and Learning for the location and opening hours.

Religious observance

Where it is reasonable and practicable to do so, flexible work and study arrangements can be made to accommodate the religious obligations of staff and students at USC. Examples include:

- negotiated flexible work/study arrangements between heads of departments/supervisors and staff and students whose religion requires them to pray at certain times of the day or to attend other religious ceremonies at particular times of the year
- consideration of the main religious festivals when determining examination dates, assessment dates, field trips and arranging placements
- consideration given to student requests for extensions to accommodate religious observance

References and resources

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: Human Rights Brief No. 3: Freedom of Religion and Belief www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/briefs/brief_3.html

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2006) The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986 (Cth): its application to religious freedom and the right to non-discrimination in employment www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/religion/religious_guidelines.html

Boice, R. (1996) First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

USC Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice www.usc.edu.au/staff/cdip

Orrell, J. (2002) Flinders Interfaith Forum – Religion in the University Classroom www.flinders.edu.au/religiouscentre/interfaith_forum/2002/classroom.php Accessed November 2011.

Perry, JWG. (1999) Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Victorian Government Better Health Channel: Food Culture and Religion www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Food_culture_and_religion?OpenDocument