

Laura Duhan-Kaplan
Vancouver School of Theology

Teaching and Learning Statement
Prepared for the American Academy of Religion, 2021

Students at our seminary are *not* starry-eyed about religion. Most have been part of religious communities for years. There, they have seen care and abuse, generosity and greed, principled and self-dealing behaviors. They want religious organizations to do better. And they hope to be change agents. So, with courage, they come to learn, heal, and create community. As a teacher, I try to support them with carefully designed learning environments. But I'm also open to surprises! Sometimes that's when great learning happens.

Three of the educational theories I've studied are especially helpful. *Critical pedagogy* is a great model for encouraging future change agents. In my classes, we avoid "banking" education, i.e., merely depositing information. Instead, we focus on "problem-posing" education. We use course material to address themes in our lives. Together, we try to see new possibilities in familiar realities. *Trauma-informed teaching* supports students as they change. We explore themes in a way that is participatory but structured. Boundaries help students feel safe. Consistently, I model an accepting environment, amplifying what is good, and contextualizing what is troubling. Even while mediating disputes, I express unconditional positive regard. Principles of *interfaith dialogue* help us create a classroom community. We aim at empathy, understanding, and mutual respect. But we also acknowledge tensions within and

between traditions. Thus, we come to recognize different histories and different ways of knowing.¹

My style of teaching is process-oriented, but it has not always been. Years ago, I taught philosophy. At first, I focused on teaching the ideas of great philosophers. But I soon realized my students didn't care so much about those ideas. Instead, they wrestled with their own existential questions. They hoped philosophy would help them find answers. So, together, we began to use our own lives as philosophical case studies, doing what I called "narrative philosophy."² And now, as a teacher of religion, I always pay close attention to *why* students choose to study.

Paying attention to students' goals helps me design each course a little bit differently. Sometimes students seek a specific skill set. For example, students who take my Midrash course want to understand and apply a particular tradition of Biblical hermeneutics. So, we gradually learn the analytical and narrative tools of classical midrash. At each class meeting, we apply them in real time, studying a section of Torah. For a final project, each student creates an extended original midrash.³

Sometimes, students want to grow into their professional sense of self. For example, some of our students hope to be public intellectuals, contributing to religions' role in public life. For them, I designed our inter-religious studies conference and an elective conference-based course. Each year, since 2016, I have organized a conference

¹ In the presentation, "Healing Social Trauma: Activist Education in Graduate Theological Study" (Religion and Activism Conference, May 26, 2021), I show how I apply these principles in the course Sacred Texts and Oral Traditions.

² In my "Autobiographical Writing in the Philosophy Classroom" (*Teaching Philosophy* 29:1 March 2006), I place the technique in the context of educational theories.

³ Learning from my students how to explain midrash clearly helped me write *Mouth of the Donkey: Re-imagining Biblical Animals* (Eugene, OR: Cascade), 2021.

around a topic in current events, e.g. violence, medical assistance in dying, activism. For three days, the school becomes a think tank. Students, faculty, postdoctoral research associates, and visiting scholars offer papers and workshops.⁴ Students in the course also meet before the conference to read, write, and share preliminary thoughts. Afterwards, they reflect on new learning, and discuss structured responses to scholarly papers. Then, we send their responses to the presenters, starting a dialogue—and, in a few cases, new friendships and collaborations.

But sometimes a group of students don't share goals. And they learn together by finding their way through conflict. As they did, for example, in my course on Religious Pluralism in our Indigenous Studies Program, during the first summer that non-Indigenous students were allowed to participate. I chose a 5-stage model of interfaith journey from the superficial, to the challenging, to the shared. Around it I carefully built a curriculum—which I did use, but with improvisations!

It's the first day of the five-day course. As soon as I meet the 25 students, I realize that they are the most diverse group I have ever taught. They are Indigenous, non-Indigenous, urban, rural, high school graduates, advanced degree holders, twenty-somethings, sixty-somethings. For some students, the course is a form of first contact. Still, I am surprised on the second day when students send me anxious late-night emails. After class, the emailers say, there was a misunderstanding. One student wondered about "those people," meaning non-Christians. Another replied with, "How dare you divide our class into 'us Indigenous people' and 'those Europeans'?" The more other students tried to mediate, the worse it got.

⁴ In the first conference anthology, one-third of the chapters are written by students. Laura Duhan-Kaplan and Harry O. Maier, eds. *Encountering the Other: Christian and Multifaith Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 2020.

So, on the third morning, I ask students to talk about what is easy and what is difficult in interfaith encounter. Outside of class, the program director and I meet individually with stressed students. We listen to every perspective. On the fourth day, our class has lunch together and we share stories about our childhood neighborhoods. On the last day, we plan a multifaith ritual. And students realize: together we did the work to move from the superficial to the challenging to the shared. We didn't just study religious pluralism; we lived it.⁵ In small but important ways, we learned, healed, and became a community.

⁵ I reflect on this teaching experience in "Beyond 'Us' and 'Them': An Inter-Religious Journey," in *Quest for Respect: The Church and Indigenous Spirituality*, Intotemak Magazine Special Issue, Spring 2017: 130-132. The experience inspired me to co-edit with my Indigenous colleague Ray Aldred, *Spirit of Reconciliation: A Multi-Faith Resource*. (Toronto: Canadian Race Relations Foundation), 2020.