

Statement on Teaching

Martha J. Reineke, Ph.D., Professor of Religion
University of Northern Iowa

Principles That Guide My Teaching: The touchstone for my teaching is the *Bassoon Concerto in B Flat Major* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. A concerto may seem an odd choice for a professor of religion. Let me explain. As a high-school student of bassoon, I participated in a yearly competition at which I played a selection from the classical repertoire chosen by my teacher. One year, a dismayed competition judge took my teacher to task: “Why did you choose such a difficult piece for Martha? Last year it was Weber; this year it’s Mozart. Anyone can see that she is struggling. Martha should play pieces for the intermediate student. *Falling Leaves* would be perfect.” Defending his choice, my teacher asserted: “Martha is a better bassoon player for taking on Mozart than she would be if I had assigned her *Falling Leaves*.”

Years later, preparing syllabi for my first college courses, I adopted my bassoon teacher’s philosophy. In “Faith & Modern Thought,” I assigned compelling works by Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Engels. Mid-semester, I found myself laboring late into the night over a dense passage by Hegel and questioning my course assignments. Consumed by exhaustion and self-doubt, I reconsidered my pedagogical convictions. But, in their course evaluations, student cited Hegel as their favorite author. Several volunteered that reading him had been the best learning experience of their lives. I moved forward with the *Bassoon Concerto in B Flat Major*, not with *Falling Leaves*.

If “concerto” is the touchstone for my courses, “conversation” is the leitmotif. I design courses as if I am hosting a dinner for friends. Sharing this metaphor with my students, I encourage them to gather around a “table.” Each text is welcomed as the voice of a “dinner guest” who has joined us for a stimulating discussion. As the semester progresses, no text/dinner guest leaves us, and I encourage students to assume leadership in facilitating interactions among our texts/guests. Central to student learning is small group work (six groups of six students each). Students come to class with written responses (1-2 pages) to question prompts keyed to portions of an assigned text. Each group discusses the homework; group clerks share significant ideas with the class. I help draw students’ thoughts into a sustained discussion with each other and with the texts.

So also is my grading a conversation with students. With their first essays, I offer an initial detailed assessment of their writing and analytical skills. Responding to my suggestions for improvement, on subsequent exams, students submit writing goals for their essays. As I prepare to read each new round of essays, I review each student’s goals and my comments on their previous work. My conversation with each student continues with new sets of comments and goals. A pocket-folder system provides a visual cue for first and second-year students, many of whom are unfamiliar with a developmental approach to writing. They store documents that comprise our conversation about their writing in the left pocket and place their newest drafts and/or essays in the right pocket of the folder.

Three Commitments That Shape My Teaching: First, I aim to become a more effective teacher each year. For example, in some courses, I now supplement documentary films with “home movies” of religious practices posted on YouTube by families from around the world. A resource whose features I could not have imagined when I began my teaching career, YouTube affords my students substantive opportunities to strengthen their nascent skills in ethnographic inquiry as they observe practices ranging from ancestor worship in Singapore to a Seder in a New York City apartment. Another example of my commitment to enhanced teaching effectiveness is my annual “back to school” present to myself of a book on teaching and student learning. Workshops, in which I participate as a facilitator or participant, also support my reflective teaching practice and insure ongoing “ah-ha” moments in the classroom. For instance, a recent workshop with Susan Wolcott shed new light on critical thinking. Adopting Wolcott’s developmental approach, I redesigned classroom assignments in order that students more successfully build their critical thinking skills across the semester.

A second fundamental conviction links my courses in the religion major with the enduring passion of my scholarly life: to understand the relationship between violence and religion. Introducing my students to leading voices in continental philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, I support learning that prepares students to analyze aspects of their own lives from a new vantage point. Intending that their encounters with theorists such as Girard, Kristeva, and Kearney deepen students’ capacity to comprehend and care about religion and violence, I aim to prepare them for leadership in a world that desperately needs persons committed to building a less violent and more just society.

Above all, I am committed to championing the value of the study of religion in public higher education and to promoting religious literacy as a vital outcome of liberal education. Playing a critical role in educating students for effective leadership and successful careers in a global society, my Liberal Arts Core course, “Religions of the World,” prepares students for informed civic engagement supportive of religious tolerance that is a defining feature of our democracy. I aim for my students to accord their fellow citizens “equal rights, to treat them with respect, and to perceive them as ends not as means” (Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*). With state legislatures, parents, and students increasingly ascribing to public higher education a narrow economic value, I emphasize that knowledge of the world religions builds intercultural competence that undergirds successful economic development and supports strong communities. In the absence of this knowledge, graduates of public universities can enter the workforce unprepared to communicate effectively with others and insensitive to key aspects of the diverse communities in which they live and work. I mine the local newspaper for examples of miscommunication: ruptured relations between the Des Moines Police Department and the Asian community after police officers mistake the burning of ritual currency during the Asian New Year for an attempt to destroy evidence of a counterfeit money operation and outrage in Postville when Jewish residents erect shoddy backyard shacks [*sukkot*] in violation of local building codes. Sharing such examples with students, I emphasize that “Religions of the World” is on-the-ground learning on which they will find themselves relying as leaders in their workplaces and communities.