

**Teaching Statement: Jill DeTemple**  
**Southern Methodist University**

On November 28, 2012, something extraordinary happened in a world religions class I had been teaching regularly since coming to SMU seven years before. I opened the classroom door to find a student preparing for his group presentation, scheduled that day. He was putting the finishing touches on his Gaia outfit and loading the presentation, in *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* format, onto a computer. He and his teammates went on to explain the history and teachings of the Church of all Worlds accurately, intelligently, interactively, and in an unprecedented manner. They didn't ask my permission ahead of time. They displayed deep knowledge of a subject and of religious studies research methods. They took a tremendous risk. Somehow, we had created a classroom environment that allowed them to do so.

I was thrilled, and also baffled. What was I doing so differently from the first times I taught the class, when students showed little interest in the subject matter? Students in those early classes did well, but I'm not sure they retained much, or could find a way to use what they knew. The young man dressed as Gaia, on the other hand, landed the ambulance company for which he works a million-dollar contract. He noticed a small statue of Krishna on a hospital administrator's desk and engaged her in conversation about Hindu iconography, scripture, and children's comic books. He remembered what he knew. He asked curious questions. He impressed the heck out of that hospital administrator.

What I am trying to do as I teach is to craft productive spaces of encounter where students can engage the complexities of religious materials, histories, identities, and actions with curiosity and confidence. This is tricky business. When I first started teaching, I presumed that my fascination with religion would carry over via some kind of contagious magic to my students. If I prepared well, came into class with an outline and active learning exercises, my assumption was that they would be interested and learn. That did work sometimes, but it also left many students out in the cold. They could see that I loved studying religion, but could not understand why they might, or why they should. They got their grades and left, pretty much unchanged by their experiences.

As I grew more reflective about teaching through conversations at the Wabash Pre-tenure workshop, and with SMU colleagues in various Center for Teaching Excellence events, I became more aware of the need for two key concepts that now inform the ways I design, deliver, and evaluate the efficacy of my classes. The first of these is the power of great questions. Deep learning – learning in which students pursue an idea out of committed self-interest – starts with curiosity. To spark that curiosity, I begin classes with a set of questions that come at core content from a variety of angles. Is cake a ritual object? Is evil the same all over the world? As the semester progresses, we keep asking questions, and are attentive to the questions others we encounter are asking. Good questions allow me to link course content to the greater world, especially as many of my classes have community learning components, and empower students to interact with the material, each other, and people and things they encounter in daily life. I know I've been effective when they approach new topics by asking deep and curious questions in class, on class discussion boards, or in conversations they often initiate well after a semester is over.

The second concept I have come to embrace is that of structure. While I always prepared for class, I was never particularly overt about crafting spaces where we encountered each other and ideas coming from course materials, individual experiences, or outside events. After a 2014 session

in which we couldn't find a way to talk about the unrest in Ferguson, MO, however, I began to explore structured dialog as a tool that establishes more secure spaces for speaking, listening, and intellectual exploration. The structure of a dialog, in which everyone is given equal time to speak, and in which students practice listening to understand and speaking to be understood rather than to persuade, has allowed my students to approach difficult topics in ways I couldn't have imagined previously. As a piece of a larger research project, I am piloting regular dialogs in my courses, and have been amazed at the deeper levels of engagement students have exhibited in everything from careful reading to weekly discussion posts that take on deep and difficult issues such as race. Because they are given a place to speak, and a way to listen, they do both. They exhibit the kind of curiosity and complex thinking I always thought were the hallmarks of good teaching, but did not know how to foster because I was focused too much on my role as knowledge bearer, and not enough on my role as facilitator. When I practice teaching as facilitating, I am more likely to get out of the way, and students are empowered to use what they know. They more easily make connections between classroom conversations and outside events. They understand why what we do has relevance for them. Because they are given time to reflect, they know that they have learned something, and can articulate it.

Were I to have a talk with the 2005 version of myself, then, I would counsel that while preparation and enthusiasm are good things, neither of these empowers or encourages students to deeply engage with the complexities of religion. There needs to be a structure in place that allows students to encounter and reflect on course materials, and the feeling of wobble that can come from meeting new ideas. Helping them to listen and speak, as well as to read and write, goes a long way in helping them to deeply, meaningfully learn what religion is, and how to meet it in a changing and complex world.