Katherine C. Zubko  
University of North Carolina Asheville  
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy has undergone significant change over the past 5 years. On the ground teaching experience, leading the data work and co-editing the Humanities’ Readers the past four years, facilitating a 15-month Humanities SoTL faculty working group, and conversations with colleagues at UNCA and further afield have reshaped how I approach the learning process to meet the needs of our current students.

Looking back to earlier teaching philosophy statements, I viewed my passion for the subject matter as crucial to good teaching. Instead of a false separation between research and teaching, I envisioned both the inquiries and methodological approaches of my research as integrative tools that informed and constantly improved classroom pedagogy. This led to the development of courses that allowed exploration through comparison of religious ideas and practices, carefully contextualized historically and within the lived experiences of regional communities in South and East Asia and North America.

What I’ve come to realize is that passion only goes so far. In my classes, I usually have a handful of majors and minors, but the majority of students in my classes are there to fulfill a general education requirement. While my research still informs my teaching, it does so now in ways that speak to this broader understanding of who is in the room, in particular by shaping a student-centered approach that places student-inquiry first, seeks student collaborations in shaping their own education, and aims to invite students’ whole selves to our shared work, no matter their disciplinary educational path. Student agency is more central to my approach now than when I was a new teacher, because I had not gained the confidence or skills to know how to structure and implement this approach at that time. With every new class, I continue to learn new ways to adapt to make more and more room for student creativity, growth, and inclusivity.

To make clear the types of shifts that have happened, let me first note that my disciplinary research is on a Hindu storytelling dance form in South Asia, but has been adapted by people of other religions, with the consent of their teachers, to dance their own experiences and sacred stories. In my first few semesters, I developed a course on Religion and Dance in South Asia that included a studio portion, thus directly aligning with my own scholarly trajectories. I love teaching this class and enjoy the transfer from my embodied research into embodied pedagogies that this format allows, and yet, it is a specialized upper-division course that students self-select if time and interest allow.

What I’ve learned about embodied pedagogies as a way to invite students’ whole selves into their learning processes and amplify diverse ways of knowing (hooks 1994, Rendon 2014, Berila 2016, Ng 2018) is an approach that I now embed in other courses as a way to question canons and privileged (often Eurocentric) ways of knowing, as well as validate what students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences are bringing to our shared learning environment. In re-envisioning the first-year courses for Religious Studies, I have developed a course on Sensing Religion that includes embodied exercises alongside anthropological source materials that focus on the lived experience of religion through the different senses. Part of this work includes an “unlearning” related to why our own bodied knowledge has primarily been dismissed from academic contexts, that involves examining Platonic, Christian, and European Enlightenment frameworks that have created the categories of what counts as the most valid forms of religion, as well as its study, within an assumed mind(soul)/body dualism. It is one thing to discuss the critiques, and another to disrupt the educational model it is built on and invite students in introductory courses to bring their own embodied knowledge to their analyses, especially in ways that support student-centered, multi-modal inquiry, rather than professor-centered passion.

Even though I was trained in textual (Sanskrit aesthetics) and anthropological methods as part of the interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies, I have further embraced and applied anthropological methods to aid pedagogical strategies in not just my classes, but also more broadly in the Humanities Program curriculum, SoTL working group, and First-Year Experience Pilot. As a mid-career scholar-teacher who was appointed NEH Distinguished Professor not to carry out my own specialized disciplinary research, but in
order to facilitate projects related to faculty development in projects related to supporting SoTL and decolonizing pedagogies, I have had the great honor of devoting attention to the development of my colleagues’ pedagogical toolboxes. I was inspired by my time serving as a member of the steering committee on the “Teaching Religion Unit” within my primary professional organization, seeing the ways I could have a wider impact in my discipline, and wanted to do similar work on our campus, and especially within the Humanities Program. In terms of the four-year Humanities Reader revision project, I spearheaded a data-driven process to collect faculty and student experiences and desired learning support features (through surveys and focus groups) to inform both the shape and diverse content of the curriculum, redeploying my anthropological skills to nudge faculty to think through why and how to better support student engagement for all our students with these sources before they ever walk into the classroom.

A particular active-learning strategy featured in the three volumes of the Readers that I developed are PARs (Primed and Ready), brief questions that bookend each source material to help students connect to their own knowledge and then consider how reading the source has informed that position or understanding afterwards in preparation for class discussions. This was in response to faculty noting the passive mode of student preparation for class discussion (passing their eyes over the material without processing in advance), and students, especially those who have less confidence or experience in discussions, wanting to have a way to begin to make a contribution and be heard. The feedback loop on PARs was overwhelmingly positive and faculty have already begun using these strategies to create a foundation for more productive and inclusive discussions across all three courses from earlier drafts of the Reader materials (over 50 sections of the first three HUM course sequence offered every semester).

The experiences I had with this type of data-informed curriculum work helped me to lead an NEH-funded focused working group for faculty wanting to learn how to collect and use data to support their pedagogy and write about it as part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Helping faculty learn how to partner with their students more directly in gathering solid feedback that informs future iterations has been a great privilege, as our faculty do amazing work in the classroom and need to be presenting and publishing more on their teaching expertise!

On a final note, editing the Reader introductions (145 written by over 50 faculty and staff) with my co-editors has been a humbling experience, in part because of my own growing awareness of the ways that contextualizing frameworks and language around experiences of race and indigeneity are incredibly important to take care with, and how hard it is to uproot assumptions. While I worked to center intersectional experiences of race and indigeneity in my own Theories and Methods in Religion course this past fall, decentering 19th–20th century white male scholars, at the same time I was collaboratively creating comments to send back to Reader contributors to help illuminate problematic language while trying to defuse (white folk) defensiveness and invite opportunities for growth. This is the work and was worth every hard email exchange and zoom call, keeping in mind wanting to create spaces of belonging and connection for all of our students of all backgrounds. This is the student-centered work of inclusivity that is the most central guiding principle of my teaching philosophy, which is always the question on my mind now that governs my teaching decisions: Will all my students feel seen and heard? I hope that my activities and content help to answer that question in the affirmative.


