

Experiential Learning and Skills Transfer: An Anticolonial Response to Jones and Meyer¹

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An interreligious educator with anticolonial commitments considers the role of interreligious experiential learning in the co-development of students' ability to learn skills and transfer their learning to environments beyond the classroom.

Keywords: anticolonial, interreligious, pedagogy, experiential, interpersonal

Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer present an interfaith case study across ten courses observed for pedagogy towards interreligious engagement and education. Jones and Meyer distilled seven themes across the various interreligious courses and expounded on them in their article. As an interreligious educator with anticolonial commitments, I found Jones and Meyer's study a compelling picture of how colleagues across the field teach interreligious studies. Collectively, their seven themes address the tenuous space of how teaching and learning in interreligious studies hold together the role of theory and the application of theory through skills building and practice in the daily rhythms of self and community. What follows is a response to Jones and Meyer's research and detailed naming of how the experiential, personal, and interpersonal co-develop students' ability to learn skills and transfer learning impactfully beyond the classroom.

Jones and Meyer name the power of the experiential classroom in interfaith teaching and learning. I teach in both solely Christian and entirely interreligious classrooms. Students in seminary classrooms bring in their personal faith, perspectives on professionalization through vocation or "call," and are desirous of encountering people of different religious traditions through theological, and religious practice lenses. In teaching interreligious life and learning in both interreligious and Christian classrooms, I have observed the significance for students to participate in multiple interactions with people from different religious or spiritual traditions. Over several years, student evaluations in the seminary classroom consistently name face-to-face or virtual engagement with faith leaders and community members of different cultures and traditions as a critical moment of learning in the field of interreligious studies and personal growth. As part of their engagement with people of religious difference through site visits and guest speakers, students name the significance of learning about the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and how behaviors and practices within religious and interreligious communities either increase or decrease possibilities and realities of equity.

The experience of teaching and learning experientially through interreligious engagement are both similar and different for theological education and religious studies classroom. In the theological education classroom personal religious commitments and beliefs are ever at stake in the unmaking of things like exclusive theologies. For some Christian traditions, like more conservative evangelicalism, theologically exclusive beliefs systems within the student's personal

¹ This essay is part of a series of responses to the article by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022): 9-34. To view the entire issue, visit <http://irstudies.org>.

life can be challenging when attempting to encounter people of different religious traditions without what might be construed as dehumanization or paternalism. For instance, more theologically conservative students might decline to participate in a site visit altogether, or they might share during a discussion that they felt spiritually challenged when visiting another house of worship. The act of visiting and observing might be experienced as betraying a theological commitment to religious purity. The acceptance of the religiously different person and tradition with the suspension of theological and personal judgement is difficult for some in the theological education classroom. How does one suspend core evangelical belief systems about Christian religious authority when the practice of such a belief requires suspicion of other religions? However, when students are willing, such dissonant spaces also make for deeply engaged, rich conversations around the practices of both theological and social exclusion and inclusion and the intersections of racialization, power, and privilege via white and Christian supremacy. In religious studies classrooms where students might be of different religious traditions or no tradition at all, the lenses used might be less invested in personal religious commitments and more on understanding religion in society. However, conversations might still emphasize the experience of religious life in society amid systems of structures of white Christian supremacy and American exceptionalism.

Designing interpersonal interreligious and intercultural experiences can be tenuous. If educators are not careful, student learning can occur on the backs of minoritized people, even introducing or reintroducing trauma into a community regardless of intent. A crucial part of guarding against potential harm in personal interactions and site visits with communities of religious and cultural difference is first to help students consider the ripples they create in already minoritized communities through their posture, presence, and their pre-existing biases. Therefore, building towards those new and unfamiliar experiences—including site visits, guest lecturers, and other challenging encounters—must include critical self-study and assessment of power, personal narratives, and the construction and perpetuation of bias internalized and practiced. Critical self-study includes learning to understand and lean into human complexity, including identity formation, community belonging accountabilities, and developing discomfort with binary ways of understanding religion, society, and self.

Educator Carol D. Lee writes about culturally sustaining pedagogies and discusses the importance of teaching students to understand and appreciate the complexity of communities and identities towards deeper engagement in learning across cultures. Lee argues for helping students, “conceptualize the multiple cultural communities with which students may identify and figure out which of these community identifications and their attendant resources may be most useful for particular targets of development that the pedagogy hopes to foster.”² Students need to arrive at a more profound acceptance and understanding of their complex formations, including religious, spiritual, racialized, gender, sexuality, and cultural formations. In doing so, students possess a more significant potential to transfer those self-critical observational skills to less harmful engagements with people of religious and cultural differences. Human complexity becomes the norm while binary assumptions and compartmentalized ways of thinking about the world, and other people, including through supremacist ideologies, become a problem.

² Carol D. Lee, *An Ecological Framework: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 267.

I find scaffolded classroom content and experiences toward personal interaction with people from different religious communities influential for impactful learning and better-directed interaction with community leaders, guest speakers, and site visits. Strategically building towards personal engagement with people and communities of different cultures and religious traditions makes it more possible for deep learning to occur for students. When teaching mostly dominant culture students, including white and Christian students, careful steps toward personal encounters are crucial to mitigate the risk to global majority peoples and peoples of minoritized religious traditions. Several steps and assessments must be taken with students to ensure harm reduction in the engagement of communities and people of difference. Before person-to-person or class-to-community engagement, educators can strive to ground the course in teaching and learning about white supremacy, Christian supremacy, and American exceptionalism. I engage students in exercises about power differentials in public and private life towards these aims. In the interreligious classroom, grounding courses in a baseline understanding of white supremacy, Christian supremacy, American exceptionalism, and power and privilege pushes back against knowledge and resource extraction. Knowledge and resource extraction are intrinsic to colonial enterprises and colonially seeded educational models. Information and resources are removed and disembodied from people, their lives, collective histories, cultures, and traditions and refashioned to function for purposes or people completely apart from where said knowledge or resource originated. Grounding pedagogy in earning for co-production rather than extraction is a more equitable way of being in interreligious life together across human differences.

In a move away from disembodied learning, it is pertinent for interreligious educators to begin by emphasizing and teaching humanization across cultural, geographic, and interreligious difference. Humanization includes that of religious communities and all people against the constant barrage of dehumanization and erasure of global majority peoples and minoritized religions within U.S. Christian hegemony. The how-to and why of humanization is important to ground experiential design in the interreligious classroom. Humanization as a teaching tactic addresses white supremacist and Christian supremacist socio-political codes. Humanization also works to untangle confluences of race and religion in the United States and educate against ever-rising anti-Muslim bigotry, anti-Semitism, anti-Blackness, anti-Asian violence, and anti-immigrant sentiment; in other words, harm reduction.³

Intrinsic to a humanization strategy is helping students understand their biases and how biases are formed, sustained, and perpetuated when it comes to people’s experiences across religious and cultural differences. Bias guides our human interactions and, unless given skills and strategies to examine personal bias, might engage their learning with religious differences in unhelpful ways. Bias can also occur in complex ways in the interreligious classroom. Jones and Meyer note the tendency for religious bias to frame interactions when describing students on a site visit who perceived an Indian Hindu practitioner who was presenting as more authentically Hindu and therefore a more suitable presenter of the Hindu tradition, while a white convert presenter was perceived as inauthentic because of his convert status and white identity. Students received the white Hindu practitioner’s presentation as lacking and less authentic. They were more engaged with the Indian Hindu practitioner overall because of his perceived “authenticity”

³ Falguni Sheth, “The Racialization of Muslim in the Post 9/11 United States,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190236953.013.49

and closer alignment with what students saw as both a racialized Indian and religious community. Although on the surface, it may appear that these students are engaging in the practice of undoing the privileging of white voices in interreligious engagement, Jones and Meyer observe that it is more complicated. In Jones and Meyer's experience, the Indian Hindu presenter was an unresponsive and unthoughtful teacher who was not interested in addressing the students' questions or engagement. At the same time, the white Hindu convert presenter set the stage for a mutual teaching and learning experience.⁴

Orientalism functioned through unconscious student bias, resulting in students perceiving the Indian Hindu presenter as a more authentic representative of the tradition because of his racialization and the type of insider knowledge this signaled, regardless of the quality of teaching. Unconscious bias inhibited students' ability to critically engage both presenters. In this case, Orientalism appeared in complex ways that interpreted the racialized Indian presenter as more exotic, foreign, and therefore more authentic to a religion that students interpreted as "other" in a white Christian normative United States context. Orientalism played into unconscious bias and racism through the uncritical and shallow engagement of the Indian practitioner's pedagogy because authenticity was attributed to him via his racialization. His racialization, which aligned with what students perceived as "correct" for a Hindu person, allowed for the entire experience of his teaching to be taken in as performance of racialized religion rather than engaged teaching and learning. As an Asian American woman of color, I cannot count all the times my scholarship and pedagogy was engaged in uncritical ways by dominant culture scholars because it was perceived as exotic, a curiosity, and "other." Racism in the interreligious and intercultural classroom can show up as this refusal to engage BIPOC as equal partners, critically and carefully in the larger ongoing scholarly conversation. Instead, ultimately holding BIPOC to lesser standards as an act of faux equity that only serves to norm whiteness and Christianity once again in interreligious education.

It is possible that students' bias, and their choice to emphasize who was presenting rather than what was presented, created a setting where Orientalist biases went challenged. I also wonder about the impact the site visit had on both practitioners who met with the students in the class and whether the student's biased interactions perpetuated harm within a religious context not their own, and in a religious community with already fraught understandings of conversion. Having students realize their bias during a debriefing after a site visit is too late. Harm potentially occurred in how their Orientalism presented itself during their site visit with the two Hindu presenters. I wonder about strategies for mitigating the potential harm to hosts at sites via student engagement through a pre-study and strategies for understanding and self-reflexivity around bias.

Teaching the interwoven nature of culture and religion in people's lives is also essential for the harm-reductive engagement of people and communities in interfaith classrooms. Interwoven culture and religion are the distinct understanding of how cultures impact religions and vice versa, how religions impact culture within different communities. A danger in courses teaching religious differences is how culture for dominant culture people shows up as a subtext to their religious identity. Dominant cultures are normed into dominant religious traditions and seen as one and the same. This unconscious blending of dominant culture and religion then gets

⁴ Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022), 12

mapped onto the ways culture and religions interact in people’s lives of the global majority and non-Christian religious traditions in the United States. In Jones and Meyer’s example from Womack’s classroom, students struggled with what they understood as the patriarchy within the lives of women from the Nation of Islam.⁵ Students reacted to what they understood and interpreted as patriarchy by mapping their own experiences with institutional Christian patriarchy onto the lives of Muslim American women. How culture shows up and interacts with religion is different for every tradition. Teaching students to observe and understand how white Christian norming works in U.S. socio-political life before they engage with religious difference, whether through textual representation or face to face interaction, might work to prevent such learning from occurring and reoccurring at the expense of racially and religiously minoritized peoples.

As a sub-categorical theme, Jones and Meyer recognized skills development as part of the pedagogy across different interreligious classrooms. Their study emphasized skills development through instructors who intentionally honed skills for interfaith life and learning outside of academic life. It showed that skills-building encompassed religious literacy, site visits, and auto-ethnographic practices. Jones and Meyer described the importance of classroom dialogue for students to develop skills.⁶ In my teaching, I notice the need for students to transfer knowledge and understand via skills development in interreligious life and not simply the performance of mastery of content. Ideally, students’ work and class participation develop transferable relational skills and skills in conflict and crisis management. Knowledge transfer is a skill or perspective gained and applied to one situation and applied to different situations across life experiences. In *Learning That Transfers*, Julie Stern and colleagues describe pedagogy that prioritizes learning transfer as, “the more knowledge we gain and assimilate into our schema, the more capable we are of learning increasingly abstract and complex concepts. This is especially true once we begin to develop expertise in a particular domain or discipline.”⁷ Jones and Meyer go on to describe the way students develop skills that transfer to other areas of life and learning as a response to pedagogy designed to emphasize transference through the conceptual structure. “We make visible the relationships between the concepts in each field and teach students to intentionally draw upon these patterns and structures when interpreting new phenomena...we can increase students’ ability to remember information, apply skills, and transfer their learning flexibly and creatively to solve problems in the real world.”⁸ Successful teaching provides students with opportunities to develop transferable skills that address concerns across lived experiences. Pedagogy designed to help students gain skills that transfer to real-life situations in interreligious engagement is a hallmark of interreligious courses, teaching, and learning. Although interreligious courses teach religious literacy, students’ abilities to conceptualize religious literacy beyond text or individual representation serve to anchor their ability to transfer skills like power assessments, asset development, self-reflexivity, and conflict management. Skills gained in interreligious classrooms can and should transfer to relationships with people of religious and cultural differences towards peacebuilding and collaboration towards justice.

⁵ Jones and Meyer, 13.

⁶ Jones and Meyer, 27.

⁷ Julie Stern, Krista Ferraro, Kayla Duncan, & Trevor Aleo, *Learning That Transfers: Designing Curriculum for a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2021), 8.

⁸ Ibid.

A skill named by Jones and Meyer as pertinent to sustaining healthy interreligious life is the ability to dialogue across human differences, including but not restricted to religious, racialized, and ethnic differences. I resonated with the way Jones and Meyer emphasized the significance of modeling dialogue and facilitation as one modality of teaching well in the interreligious classroom. Jones and Meyer mention how professors who participated in the study pointed to teaching dialogue skills and teaching professional skills.⁹ I would affirm and expand their argument to describe dialogical skills as both professional skills and life skills. A unique aspect of interreligious education is teaching students the importance of living, behaving, and believing around shared commitments about human differences and collaborative work towards justice. Internalized postures go well beyond professional life and into one's personal life. When teaching interreligious education, every interaction between teachers and students is an opportunity to model navigation of conflict, crisis, difference, and solidarity. Students notice how interreligious educators are teaching skills development. They recognize when educators are practicing their commitment to the strategies we teach through pedagogy. The interreligious educator must remain hyper-vigilant about how one takes up space in the classroom, engages students' differences of opinion and beliefs, and facilitates both potential and actualized conflicts. As Jones and Meyer note, interreligious educators often have training in dialogue, conflict mediation, and other skills that undergird their academic professionalization. Standard supplementary skill sets applicable to interreligious classroom pedagogy design are significant findings. Utilizing facilitation and conflict mediation skills as crucial to classroom design may not consistently be the case across Higher Education academics in all religious and theological fields. The interreligious classroom connects the sinews of practice and theory for students through the wide experiences and skillsets of the interreligious educators. I find it helpful to frame students' engagement with interreligious life and learning as an intentional bridging of theory with skills accountable to communities. In course design, I regularly lean on contacts and relationships with interfaith groups, community and faith leaders, and practitioners as co-instructors so students can observe and connect with the different ways interreligious communities and activism are built and sustained. I also regularly engage colleagues with whom I hold religious and political differences. I am cognizant that students observe those different perspectives and how the two of us choose to engage in dialogue together over those same differences.

Jones and Meyer, in their study of interreligious pedagogies, offer interreligious educators a rare glimpse into the common themes, strategies, challenges, and designs across divergent classroom contexts. Their study is an exciting example of research that will foster deeper connections across communities of interreligious educators. Their work reminds us that despite the many differences our classrooms hold, there are many points of similarity we experience while teaching in our different contexts. I am especially struck by how common it is for interreligious educators to bring the experiential together with skills building. It is encouraging to see how we might teach the assessment power, understanding of white supremacy, Christian supremacy, American exceptionalism, racism, religious bias, and become familiar with the complexity of human identity as anticolonial approaches to undoing binaries. In the silos of the academy, this study reminds interreligious educators that we are, in fact, co-working towards common goals. We work in conjunction with one another, seen and unseen, to continue teaching students to co-develop transferable skills beyond the classroom and professions to their values and

⁹ Jones and Meyer, 26.

commitments about religious and cultural differences towards a deeper understanding of human differences in our shared interreligious world.



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