

“MAKING IT REAL”

Taking learning outside the University in Studies in Religion

Studies in Religion

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THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA

Summary

- World Religions (RELN1000) uses experiential and place-based learning to deepen students learning about **identity, difference and humanity**.
- This project builds on the energy and enthusiasm of students who have participated in the course on World Religions, asking: who are our students and **what do they learn from the course?**
- The research was conducted collaboratively with former RELN1000 students through the **Staff-Student Partnership scheme**.
- The research had **wider social benefit**, with each participant contributing \$10 for donation to one of three local charities: Orangesky Laundry, ERaced, and DVconnect. \$300 was raised in total.

This type of learning is important in Australia as so much about religion seems based elsewhere - very far away - so being able to bring it home important. The course brought it back home!

Findings

- 1.1. Students came from a range of backgrounds and **each had their own story** for participating in the course.
- 1.2. While most students had some understanding of religion before the course, many had little to no understanding of religion and were guided by **curiosity** to fill this gap.
- 1.3. The course added practical value to their learning and for most the course was the only experience of **learning outside the university**.
- 2.1. Students' "**preconceived notions**" of other people were unsettled enabling a greater appreciation of difference and diversity.
- 2.2. The course deepened students' knowledge about **religious, spiritual and secular outlooks** that are fundamental to human existence and society.
- 2.3. Students came to view difference as positive and **integral to co-existing**.
- 2.4. The course helped to cultivate a wider learning trajectory about students' own **identities** within Australian multiculturalism
- 2.5. Students reported the course as fundamental to their **career pathways**.

Teaching and Learning in World Religions and Secular Life

World Religions (RELN1000) uses an experienced-based method of teaching to develop and deepen students' learning about different worldviews, values and traditions. Students are encouraged to visit particular sites in and around Brisbane to explore the complexity and diversity of religious expression today. These places include formal religious sites such as temples, mosques, churches or synagogues. But it also includes less conventional sites for exploring forms of religious, spiritual and secular life, including public and natural spaces, artists' networks and galleries, alternative medicine clinics (including "goat Yoga"), housegroups, concerts, beaches or sporting events at The Gabba. The course offers students an exciting opportunity to learn outside the university and to use observations of these places to deepen their understanding of the subject matter.

Studies in Religion deepens students' learning about difference and identity through experiential and place-based learning



Understanding Student Experience

This project used the course on World Religions (RELN1000) as a template for understanding the value of experiential learning for University students. This project builds on the energy and enthusiasm of students who have participated in the course on World Religions, which has involved students visiting religious and secular places of meaning across Brisbane and Queensland. It benefited enormously through a Student-Staff Partnership with students who served as partners in this research. Through focus groups, interviews, and a questionnaire, the research aimed to understand students' learning experiences, what worked well for them in the course, and how this contributed to their futures. The research had the further aim of promoting an ethos of goodwill and societal impact: Each participant was allotted \$10 for donation to one of three local charities: Orangesky Laundry, ERaced, and DVconnect.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited by email from records of class lists from Semester 1, 2018 to Semester 1, 2019 (totalling 170 email addresses) and through the UQ Studies in Religion Facebook and Twitter accounts. Students were emailed an advertisement detailing the study, which was also posted on the disciplines' Facebook and Twitter accounts. Seventeen participants were recruited in total for interviews and 16 completed questionnaires, equating to a 10 per cent response rate (a standard response rate for research). One-on-one interviews or small focus groups were conducted. Participants were asked about their experiences during the course, the role of the site visits on their learning, their self-understanding, their understanding of others, and for their future learning, career and personal goals. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and included a 13 question questionnaire. This research built on previous research conducted by the chief investigator.¹

The grading model in the University does not reward openness and empathy. It just reinforces criteria for a 7 that students just copy. The World Religions course was different.

¹Phillips, Elizabeth and Ryan J. Williams. 'It's not just an idea': Practicing the good life in a high security prison. *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*.



FINDINGS (I)

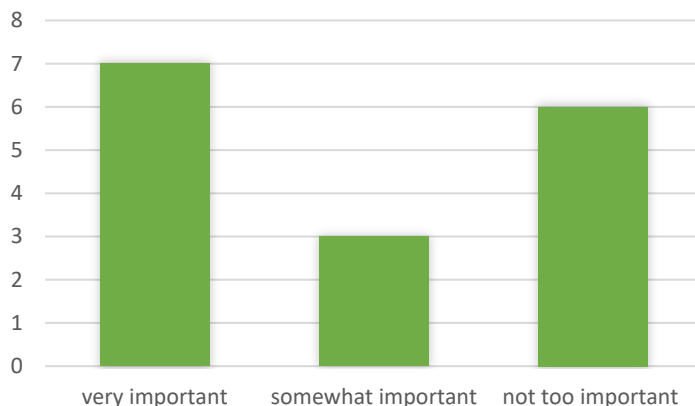
WHO ARE OUR STUDENTS?

1. REPRESENTING A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

The majority of participants were enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts degree with specialisations that included Studies in Religion, International Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, History, and languages (Spanish, Italian, French). One student was from a science background (Doctor of Medicine), and two students were enrolled in Business Management and Economics. Survey results showed that the majority (13) were between the ages of 18 - 29 with three students between the ages of 30 and 49. The majority were female (12) compared to male (4) and all students except one international student were domestic students.

Students came from a range of religious backgrounds, with five not identifying with a religious tradition or identifying as agnostic and the remainder identifying as religious: Sikh, Christian (Catholic, Anglican, and “Christian with Buddhist influence”), spiritual, Hindu and Buddhist. Students differed on their personal stance to religion (Table 1), with half of the participants seldom or never attending a religious service, one quarter attending infrequently (once or twice a month) and a quarter attending once a week (Table 2).

HOW IMPORTANT IS RELIGION TO YOU PERSONALLY? (TABLE 1)



HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES? (TABLE 2)



2. RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND MOTIVATION

Students came to the course with a range of knowledge about religion, with some indicating that they had little to no understanding of religion apart from their own. Table 3 shows that most students were “somewhat confident” with a quarter of students “not confident” about religion before the course.

I knew [other religions] were there, but we are stuck in our little worlds and don't go outside of them

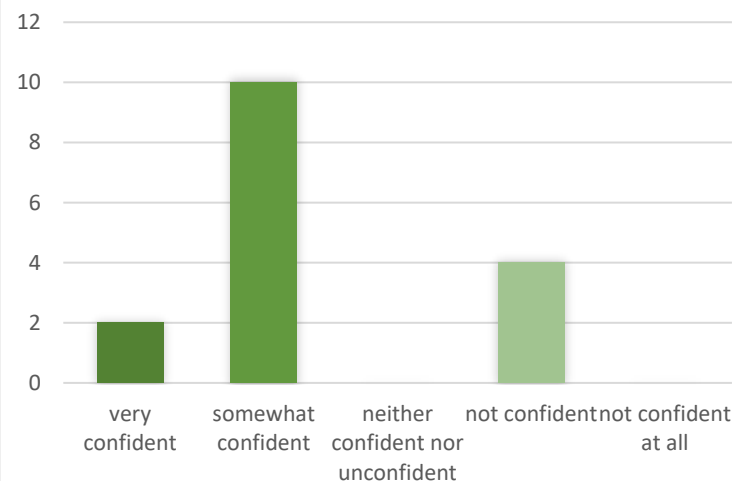
Before, I didn't even know what an imam was!

I knew nothing of Quakers except for Quaker Oats!

I had only heard so much about ISIS from the media and didn't know about Islam

I didn't realize Brisbane had so many Eastern traditions. It is way more diverse than I realized!

CONFIDENCE IN UNDERSTANDING RELIGION BEFORE COURSE (TABLE 3)



I had not had much exposure to religion. I only knew of Christians or not [Christian]. I knew there was a Chinese New Year

Some students who expressed some background knowledge on the subject from their previous study in high school pointed to the limitations they experienced:

The lectures built on knowledge from high school but also corrected that knowledge. In high school they just looked at the differences between Christianity and Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. If there was no Christian equivalent, then we didn't learn it!

Students enrolled in the course for different reasons, including a lifelong interest in the topic, a desire to confront ignorance and bias, and to open up discussion on a touchy subject.

I experience ignorance [related to my own religion] and I don't want to be one of those people.

I wanted to learn objectivity and have less of a bias in what is a sensitive topic. People take things personally. Religion is a very touchy subject.

3. "MAKING IT REAL": TAKING LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

For most students, World Religions offered the first opportunity in their degree to learn outside the University.

There's been no other experience like this - nothing like this in science courses

I've never been offered this experience in other courses at UQ - this was only one

Students described the importance of the learning outside the classroom and the practical value it added to their learning experience.

It was helpful to see things in practice, compared to classes of theory. You were not just answering a textbook question

In other courses you are sometimes struggling to see applicability in real world

Students described the importance of learning through both the course materials (lectures and readings) and the “hands on” of site visits, the “combination of the two”: “We were experiencing and observing and putting it together”. Site visits required the framework of concepts and ideas presented in the lectures and readings, a combination necessary to “open your mind”. Through the analogy of world travel, Sophie said: “you can still have prejudices, especially here in Australia; ideas help to deepen this understanding, to understand how deep religion goes.”

It was important to have the knowledge base first from the lecturers then go out and experience it.

I thought it was enriching, the value of the content was not arbitrary knowledge in the classroom that you will never use again. You see its real-life significance and it gives you a broader perspective.

[the course] inspires you to keep looking into it rather than reading from a textbook where learning stops there

You can read about what they do but when you experience it is completely different— you actually had to write about the material that you were observing and think about how it related.

The course is about making the classroom more practical

Students described how bringing experience together with lecture and reading content enhanced their ability to learn and enabled creativity and empathy:

I found it easier to make connections with this course [with content] than with other courses

I noticed that I did better in the courses, like this one, that made it relevant to the real world than those courses that did not

I did enjoy going out - I learned much more than sitting with a book!

Students also described how site visits enhanced their learning because it engaged their wider sensory experience, feelings, and relational experiences. Students felt “awkwardness”, heard “sounds”, were confronted with material objects and people, and were put “into spaces” they “weren’t normally in”. One student used the metaphor of “seeing works of art rather than reading about it in books” to describe the learning experience. It made students more “attuned” to their surroundings and to be more “attentive”. It also fostered “curiosity”.

There was awkwardness, experience, sound - that which is so hard to capture in a lecture.

Compared to other courses, the course gave was ‘hands on’ - actually getting to see their community, to be a part of their community—it was enlightening.

From a non-humanities background (economics) it was important not just to learn how to see that they are people in your brain and heart and to personalize the [course material].





FINDINGS (II)

WHAT DID STUDENTS LEARN?

1. UNSETTLING KNOWLEDGE: “IT BLEW THE LID OFF OUR PRESUPPOSITIONS!”

Some students described the feelings associated with learning that disrupted their “preconceived notions”. Learning, especially when it involves confronting one’s personal identity or one’s relationship with others, can be unsettling and such experiences enable growth and learning.

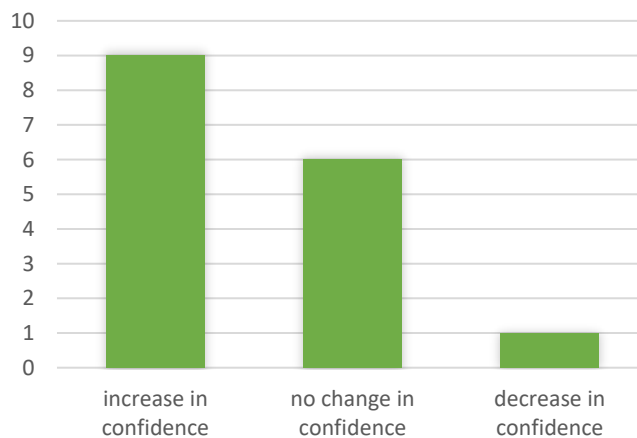
It unpacked neatly boxed things for me

I found myself being angry, looking for something to be 100% true. I was looking for right or wrong, but I learned instead to live in tension, and there is a freedom there, to express the challenges and understand that it is a reflection of myself and my own framework.

People - family and friends - hold a lot of assumptions about religion and hold assumptions about different faiths - but it’s their emotions and there’s nothing to back up these assumptions. I’m very glad I’m not ignorant but I understand relatives’ perspectives

As students learned more about religion and experienced it they recognized how little they knew and how much more there was to learn. Table 4 reflects this change in confidence as some students felt confident in what they knew at the beginning of course and then found that there was much more to learn: “It brought up more questions.”

CHANGE IN CONFIDENCE IN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RELIGION BEFORE AND AFTER THE COURSE (TABLE 4)



I knew far less than I thought. I was very narrow in thinking rather than super broad as I thought I was.

2. COMMON HUMANITY: “THE STICKINESS OF RELIGION ATTACHED TO HUMAN EXISTENCE”

Students learned how fundamental worldviews and rituals are to human life and society and the depth and breadth in religious, spiritual and secular outlooks.

I learned a deeper understanding of words and their signification: what does it mean to be religious? What does it mean to be spiritual?

The course involved helping people to understand the stickiness of religion attached to human existence

It cemented my learning about people, religion and culture.

Learned to see the importance of ritual, like in learning a new sport
It made me understand ritual and the underlying reasons for doing that were notions that were similar to what I hold close: connection to self, people and nature

It makes you stop for a second and knock down “block thinking” about people and see people with a heartbeat.

The course challenged students to consider the varieties of worldviews and forms and expressions of values and spiritual life: “I had never considered surfing as a spiritual experience!”

I realized that everyone is
navigating the world the best way
they can and we are all in it
together

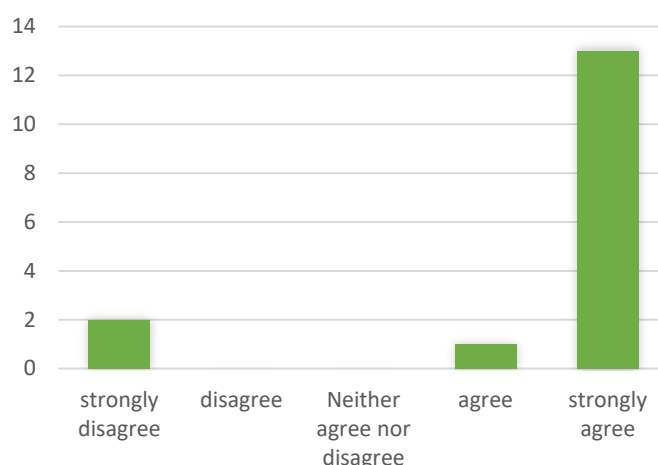
3. VIEWING OTHERS DIFFERENTLY: 'DIFFERENCE IS GOOD AND...PART OF CO-EXISTENCE'

Participants described learning to see difference and to “appreciate a different perspective” and a “different way of looking.” An important part of this learning was offering students new opportunities for interactions: “It deepened learning and understanding of diverse religions external to what I’ve been exposed to in my life.” The majority of participants strongly agreed that learning about others is an important part of their education (Table 5).

Students learned to see difference and they were “Ok” with difference: “it was still ok to believe what you believe” and “we don’t need to agree but I can still accept you.” Recognizing and appreciating difference is fundamental to society and makes for a better society.

The course allowed me to realize how different religions have different truth claims and these are felt differently and it is important to allow them to feel that and that tension and difference is good and is an important part of co-existence. We should be allowed to be ok to be uncomfortable with difference.

LEARNING ABOUT OTHERS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF MY EDUCATION (TABLE 5)



It's not just about being able to tolerate:
it's celebrating difference, and that
difference makes society better

4. VIEWING THE SELF DIFFERENTLY: 'THRUST INTO A CONVERSATION ABOUT IDENTITY'

Students described learning about themselves as persons and learners. Students gained confidence as learners and reflected on their identities and preconceptions:

I am more confident, less awkward and uncomfortable but I still have more learning to do!

I learned that I need to get “in there”, I was reserved, I learned about myself. It allowed you to see yourself in a reflection—see things from their perspective and ask how can I improve myself? How can I view myself differently?

You see yourself differently, as knowledgeable...I have something to say, the degree [in Studies in Religion] has made me more of a well-rounded person, a learner

The experience contributed to my own understanding of culture and identity. This process of seeing oneself differently brought with it challenges of confronting identities and difference that so often serve as boundary lines and areas of contention.

The course thrust me into a conversation about identity—I had never wanted to go there. The course enabled me to ‘confront my own identity’ and to take the time to consider my identity, and that of other people.

I was surprised how homogenous [the location] was though it was clearly influenced by spirituality. People ‘pick and choose’ and made assumptions about me [and my ethnic background]. It wasn’t racism, but it made it clear to me that I would not live there.

This self-understanding contributed to “unlearning...prejudices” and developed empathy (“It opened me up to be more empathetic”), to be “attentive rather than talking about what I know” and to “understand how little I understand”.

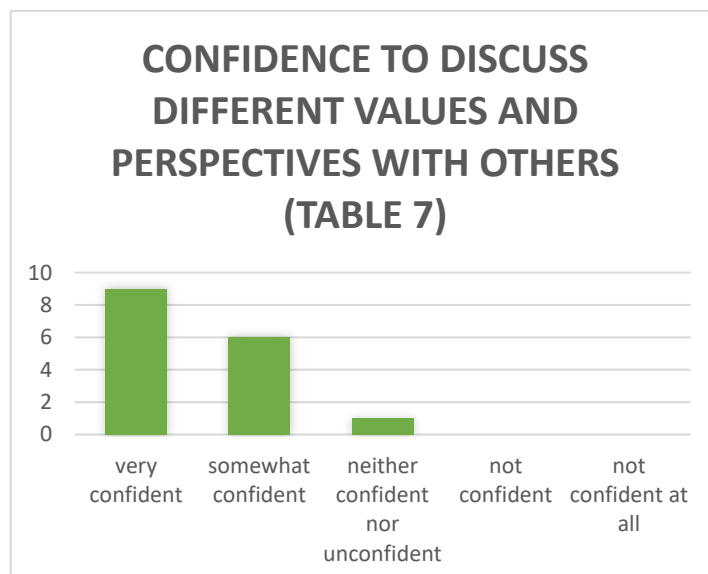
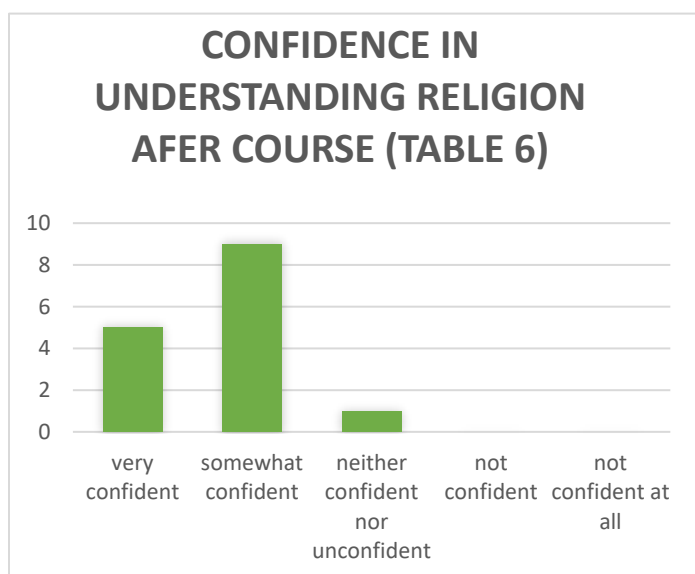
What I thought I knew turned out to be very shallow

I realized what my bias’ were from my standpoint and that definitely changed me. Encouraged me to learn more and not just stop at this course.

The course made me stop and think about the assumptions I have and I am grateful for that

5. WHERE TO NEXT? “IT HAS HELPED MY JOURNEY TOWARDS MY CAREER”

Reflecting on how the course fit in with their broader personal and career trajectories, students expressed a wider confidence in talking about the issues raised in the course and felt more comfortable in interactions and in different places: “Places are less scary!” While Table 6 shows that the majority of students were “somewhat confident” in understanding religion generally after they course, Table 7 shows that the majority of students were “very confident” to discuss different values and perspectives with others.



I have conversations about the issues brought up in the course more often: I was talking to a friend a few hours ago.

I feel comfortable going a bit deeper in conversations; I have more confidence to interact with different religions

I felt more equipped to breach the subject that is so touchy, to attempt to understand.

Moreover, the course mapped onto many students' career objectives, whether these be specific or more general people, communication, and learning skills:

I teach meditation and it changed how I teach

It gave me the skills to understand people and how people work

I chose the course because I knew that my degree in medicine and career would mean that I would be exposed to a vast diversity of people. So I thought: my as well know something about my future! It has helped my journey towards my career.

It gave me the skills to keep going, to keep learning

After the course, students found the course to have enriched their experience at UQ and to build a community on campus.

Now I see people around the campus and I am like, hey, I know you!

Not only was the course important for the local University and Brisbane context, it was important in Australia more widely.

The University is a melting pot:
The course gives you the ability to empathize and to understand of other people around me

This type of learning is important in Australia as so much about religion seems based elsewhere - very far away - so being able to bring it home is important. The course brought it back home [through local site visits]

CHARITIES SUPPORTED BY THIS RESEARCH

Students shared a desire to make a difference in society and volunteered their time for this research to the benefit of the following charities:

Orangesky Laundry: We have a simple formula; we provide a platform for everyday Australians to connect through a regular laundry and shower service. The focus is on creating a safe, positive and supportive environment for people who are too often ignored or who feel disconnected from the community. Our volunteers are not social workers or experts on homelessness - they are empathetic listeners and great conversationalists.

ERaced: The best Australia is a diverse and inclusive Australia, free from racism. E-RACED was created to tackle this issue of racism head on by sharing stories and building connection between people of diverse multi-cultural backgrounds. We do not have a political agenda; however, it is quite evident that the majority of schools in Australia do not have programs such as ours. We focus on issues of refugees and migrants living in Australia and bringing change to the education system across Australia. We train young migrants and refugees to not only share stories and experiences but also share our cultures, music, games, dance, fashion, and ambitions with our fellow young Australians. We believe that better understanding is good for anyone and everyone, and the best way to achieve it is through the sharing of stories. That's why our motto is 'Erasing racism, one story at a time'.

DVconnect: DVConnect is a not-for-profit organisation that has provided state-wide specialist domestic, family and sexual violence crisis counselling, intervention, information and pathways to safety (emergency housing and refuge) for 17 years.

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MAKING IT REAL: TAKING LEARNING OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY IN STUDIES IN RELIGION

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