

Rethinking the Course Content and Pedagogies used in Learning about ‘Asian Religions’

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Abstract

This essay examines the concerns expressed by students when studying a second-year module on Asian religions and how they thought the facilitation of their learning could be most effective. Following research done with three cohorts of second-year students studying Asian religions from 2015 to 2017, this essay argues that both changes in pedagogy and course content are needed to create spaces where learning about these religions can address the concerns raised by students. Students were particularly concerned about how studying Asian religions would prepare them for the world of work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The research for this essay is located in a social constructivist pedagogy that forefronts social justice and is grounded in an engaged learning practice. The essay examines why in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, studying Asian religions is important and valuable to students studying for a degree in preparation for entry into the workplace. The essay shows that engagement with different technologies in teaching and learning enables a pedagogy of co-knowledge production and co-sharing of knowledge where students learn technological skills, critical thinking skills, and a deepening awareness of their worldviews and those of other people. In so doing, this module addressed student concerns about their studies and the skills they considered valuable in preparing them for future careers.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Eastern religion, Asian religion, technology, teaching

Introduction

As we move into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the study of 'Eastern/Asian religions' can play a critical role in any Bachelor of Arts degree. It can do so by preparing students in a unique way for the emerging world of work in which the worldviews and cultures of different religions/philosophies/meaning-making systems practiced in various Asian countries will dominate the economic and political landscape of the future. In her book, *Anthro-Vision*, the Financial Times writer, Gillian Tett (2021:1-10) argues that as much as we need Artificial Intelligence in business, we also need a better understanding of how people make meaning of the world. She cites the phenomenon of KitKat sales in Japan (Tett n.d.). Kitkat sales grew rapidly over the past five years, and none of the data could explain why. When an anthropological study was done, it was discovered that Japanese students were using KitKat in prayer rituals before exams as offerings to Shinto gods, asking for their blessing on favorable exam outcomes. This one example illustrates the point that in the 4IR, an understanding of societies and people making meaning of their world is as important as understanding new technological innovations.

This essay is based on research funded by a larger Department of Higher Education (DHET) research project into technology and learning in higher education. The findings focus on research done with three cohorts of students studying Eastern/Asian religions in 2015, 2016, and 2017 at a South African university, during the #FEESMUSTFALL movement. The central research question was, 'What do students want to learn when taking a module in Asian religions, and how can this be facilitated using technology?' This question was motivated by three issues: The first being the decline in students choosing to take religion Studies as a course within their B.A. degree and, therefore, the decline in students studying Eastern/Asian religions; the second was one of the fundamental demands of the #FEESMUSTFALL movement in which students wanted to be consulted when determining what they were studying and the skills they were learning; the third was how a module exploring Eastern/Asian religions could equip students with technological and critical skills and knowledge that would be useful in the future world of work. To address these issues, 'practical and epistemological ruptures', as the decolonial scholar, Aina (2010:21) puts it, are needed, and examined in this essay.

Before discussing the research findings, I begin with an overview of the methodology used and then discuss the tricky terms of 'Asian' or 'Eastern' and 'religion'. Having clarified how these terms are used in the essay, I outline the key concerns raised by students and show how these were addressed by reimagining the pedagogies and course content used in the teaching of 'Eastern/Asian religions'. Finally, I reflect on the lessons learned from the pedagogical shifts and changes in module content that I implemented from 2015 to 2017.

Methodology Used

The research for this essay was done from 2015 to 2017 during the #FEESMUSTFALL movement, when I taught a course, officially called 'Eastern religions' to three cohorts of second-year students. My research question was, 'What do students want to learn when taking a module on Asian religions, and how can this be facilitated through an innovative use of technology?' The inclusion of technology was of particular interest for me, and it also was a requirement of the DHET funding, which examined innovative technology uses in teaching and learning. A move to rethinking praxis and pedagogy in teaching theology in South Africa is highlighted in work done by Denny and Wepener (2021). It shows that in the intercultural context of South Africa, the teaching of religions/theology needs to be as interactive, socially just, and as inclusive as possible.

The theoretical framework of this research was grounded in the intersection of three pedagogical approaches: Social constructivism, engaged learning, and social justice. First, the social constructivist pedagogy is discussed in which learners are understood as co-producers of knowledge. The report of Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) offers a good overview of the philosophy of social constructivism and the research that demonstrates its effectiveness. It is an approach that values and hears student questions and ideas. Primary sources and materials are engaged to experience and explore concepts. The classroom is a space of dialogue and engagement where students and educator create knowledge together – knowledge that is understood as socially constructed and therefore, ever-changing. This learning approach reflects my research: Grounded in social constructivism, it argues that we construct our religious practices, understandings, and beliefs through social

engagement and meaning-making. In this philosophy, students have a say in what is taught, while assessment is primarily formative and continuous, including and valuing student views, ideas, and observations. Social constructivism suggests that we create learning environments that have three particular elements: First, a dialogical space in which knowledge is co-constructed through an engagement with others; second, specific activities that help the development and construction of knowledge used; and third, knowledge artifacts, such as podcasts or short videos. Closely linked to social constructivism is an experiential and engaged learning pedagogy (Kolb 1984) in which students are actively involved in the learning process and not passive recipients of knowledge. The approach focuses on meeting students where they are at, and building on the knowledge they already have, and bring them into the learning experience (Krause 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea 2007; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie 2009:471). Finally, I believe that social constructivism must be linked to a social justice pedagogy (cf. Freire 1970) that foregrounds students' situatedness, ensuring that everyone has equal access to learning. In the South Africa context, this must also foreground the different levels of under-preparedness with which students enter South African universities (Lederman 2006).

The DHET grant was for a five million Rand project to be run over five years and included researchers from five different South African universities. The funding for my portion of the research project meant that in 2015 and 2016, at the beginning of the year, every student in my second-year Religion Studies class¹ received a tablet with a stand and detachable keyboard that they did not need to return. I had never taught a class where every student had a device on which they could type their assignments, use the internet, make videos, e-mail, and connect easily to the university learning management system. It was exciting for the students and for me, and enabled me to radically rethink how learning about the worldviews of communities in Asian countries could be engaged. In 2017, the students were not given tablets. However, they all had smartphones or laptops, which meant that minor changes to how technology was used, needed to be implemented, ensuring that the module could be taught similarly in 2017.

¹ In 2015, there were 48 students in this cohort, and in the 2016 cohort, there were 53 students. In 2017, there were 56 students in the cohort.

At the beginning of each year, I asked students what they expected from the module by requesting them to anonymously complete a questionnaire, asking questions such as:

- In what ways do you like learning?
- What learning activities have been most successful for you?
- What do you think you should be learning at university to prepare you for the world of work?
- What interests you in your study of Eastern religions?
- What do you want to learn about in this module?
- What support do you need in order to succeed in your learning?
- What technological skills do you think you should learn during your B.A. degree?

From the written feedback in the form of open-ended questions, five key issues emerged each year. The issues were not consistently ranked in the same order of importance each year, but these issues were raised by more than half of the class each year. First was a concern about the value of what they were learning in the Eastern religions course and its relevance to the world of work. Second, students said they found it interesting to study religions but wanted to know more about the contemporary lived realities of these religions and not about the historical background of religions. Third, students questioned the relevance of learning to write an essay, as a student in the 2016 cohort asked, 'What value is an essay? You aren't ever going to write an essay at work'. The fourth issue raised by students was a desire for educators to consult with them about what they wanted to learn rather than being given a prescribed curriculum by a professor. The fifth issue was that students were anxious about the technological skills which they were learning in doing a B.A. degree. They felt that they were not getting exposure to technological skills, which would disadvantage them when looking for a job. Almost all students said that they needed to have their own devices such as laptops to fully engage in the learning process.

I refined the activities and style of teaching I had planned for each year in response to the feedback from the students. At the end of each module, I asked students to evaluate the module, again remaining anonymous and reflecting on how the module addressed the key issues which they had

raised at the beginning of the module. I used thematic analysis to analyze their written responses to determine themes, trends, topics, and important issues. Over the three years, I redesigned the course material for this module and the pedagogies that I used to facilitate the students' learning experience. Below I describe the new teaching and learning practices with which I engaged and the revised course content which I covered with the classes. Before I explain the reimagined module, I need to clarify how I understand and use the terms 'religion', 'Eastern', 'Asian', and 'Asian religions'.

Terms and Definitions

The first challenge we encountered is the very idea of 'religion'. Most scholars agree that the term is problematic. Rudolf Otto (1923) argues that religions are an experience of the 'holy'. Building on Otto, Mircea Eliade (1963) discusses the division between the sacred and the profane, arguing that religions are an experience of the sacred grounded in myths. Ninian Smart (1960) argues that Otto's definition is too limited, as Buddhism did not engage with the idea of the holy/sacred and so argued that religions could be either an experience of the numinous or the mystical. Religions have also been understood as philosophical or ethical systems. These approaches are problematic because they try to find a universal harmony across multiple knowledge systems from a Western Judaea-Christian perspective. What these systems have in common is that they are all in some way trying to address questions of how we view the world (Alberts 2010). In this essay, religions are understood as systems that people use to make meaning of the world and live in accordance with a coherent worldview (*Weltanschauung*), often expressed in social practices, rituals, and moral codes. Religions are meaning-making systems that differ in focus and tenure, but generally help people to make sense of the human condition, including evil and suffering. Some of the systems engage with the holy and divine, while others are philosophical systems that guide personal and societal behavior. These systems are not static but are continually shaped and reshaped by time, place, community, and history. As such, they are socially constructed and not 'objective', as they often appear to adherents. These systems construct the worldview of the adherents, who in turn influence the form, practice, and knowledge system of a religion.

The terms 'Eastern' or 'Asian', with reference to religion, are equally problematic as they try to proffer a coherent system in which there is a degree of harmony or sameness. In recent times, trying to create unity among societies that have geographical proximity, has proven to be essentially meaningless, as many cultures, for example, on the Asian subcontinent, have little or nothing in common, except a geographical closeness to one another and a geographical distance from Europe and North America. A similar phenomenon is true in Africa. The work of decolonial scholars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America addresses this and other questions of taxonomies and classification (Mignolo 2007; Grosfoguel 2013; Mkhize 2017; Tayob 2018). I refer in this essay to 'Asian religions', aware of the fact that the term is problematic and that it denotes a variety of meaning-making social systems practiced in the geographical region of the Asian subcontinent and the Asian diaspora. The term 'Asian' is preferable to 'Eastern' as it denotes a geographical space rather than being the opposite of 'Western' with all the implied colonial and global north bias of this term's use in 'othering is "foreign"'.

This brings us to the question of who is doing the studying and who is being studied. Teaching Asian religions in South Africa has often been challenging because there are relatively few practitioners, followers, or adherents to various forms of Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, and the multitude of religious systems, being referred to collectively as Hinduism. These different meaning-making systems have generally been studied as the 'other' and from an academic perspective with little engagement with practitioners, followers, believers, or adherents. I have deliberately not used the terms 'faith' and 'believer', as these 'foreground disembodied beliefs and creeds too much' (Fort 2006:157). Like Fort, I prefer the terms 'practitioner' or 'adherent' to 'believer' and 'follower', as it 'puts the emphasis more appropriately on actions in a cultural and historical context, though of course belief and practice are related' (Fort 2006:157). Overall, I speak of 'academics' and 'adherents', not to create binary opposites but to denote locations from which people engage with different religions, fully aware that there are times where the lines between the two positions are blurred. With 'academic', I mean 'a sympathetic but historical-critical academic study, not an adherent's attempt to describe truth' (Fort 2006:159).

How Asian Religions were Taught

In order to locate the students' comments about what they wanted to learn, it is useful to review how Eastern religions, as they are called, were taught in South African universities. During the early 1980s, most universities, due to the apartheid system, had largely homogenous lecture halls where students spoke the same language, came from the same racial group, and often had a similar cultural and religious background. In this context, religions were taught from a confessional approach in which students were educated in 'their' religion and learned about 'other religions'. In the late 1980s, this began to change as many universities became heterogeneous, including students from various racial backgrounds. The study of religion moved to a non-confessional approach, where students learned about different religions. The focus was not to educate students in one religion². In South Africa, John de Gruchy as well as Martin Prozesky (2019:114-141), among others, were influential in shaping Religious Studies as a discipline within South African universities. Two books by De Gruchy and Prozesky (De Gruchy & Prozesky 1991; Prozesky & De Gruchy 1995) on religions of South(ern) Africa were instrumental in moving the study of world religions away from a confessional to a non-confessional approach in South Africa. As South Africa moved into a new democracy, the curriculum of religious studies in schools also changed (Chidester 2003), as Christianity no longer dominated the curriculum.

In the study of Asian religions, Buddhism was studied from an academic perspective focusing mainly on Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology, using sacred texts. Rob Nairn (2001) did some critical academic work on Buddhism, writing as a Buddhist insider, focusing primarily on Buddhism as a system of meditation. Within Hinduism studies in South Africa, as in India itself, there was a lamentable absence of scholarship (cf. Fort 2006; Sen 2021). As in other parts of the world (cf. Fuller 2010:42), the teaching of Hinduism in South Africa focused primarily on an ancient past Hinduism and gave far less attention to modern Hinduism and Hinduism in the diaspora.

In the 1990s, particularly in the English and more liberal universities, the study of world religions in South Africa focused on the study of different religions such as African Traditional Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and

² For more detail on the difference between education into religion, education about religion, and religion, see Schreiner (2005:3 quoted in Alberts 2010).

Judaism, among others, from a largely philosophical and phenomenological approach, grounded in a historical overview of the different religions and their sacred texts. In the mid-2000s, after several Departments of Religion/Religious Studies were closed down, different universities began to focus more on the sociology of religion. At the University of Cape Town, David Chidester was central to foregrounding religion as a sociological phenomenon, emphasizing the relationship between religion and culture. At the beginning of the 2020s, the study of religion was more focused on critical theories, terms, and sociological questions to compare religions and explore questions as diverse as rituals, secularism, and ethics. Attention was given to issues such as politics, gender, and development concerning religion, but there was still a limited engagement with the voice of contemporary adherents, and on the whole, little anthropological work was done.

Rethinking the Pedagogy, Module Content, and Skills Learned

From the questionnaires, which I asked students to complete at the beginning of their module on Eastern religions – as it was called at the university where I taught the subject – five particular concerns emerged each year. The first was that students wanted to learn key technological competencies in engaging with social media and its information and using various technologies as a medium to share ideas. Second, students want lectures to be more engaging, and they did not just want to be passive consumers of knowledge. Linked to this, was the third concern that students raised: They wanted a say in what they were learning. The fourth concern was that they wanted to learn about the actual lived practice of religions according to those who followed a particular meaning-making system. Finally, students wanted their studies to help them to think about and understand the world, assisting them in developing a sense of self. This section explains how I addressed these issues by redesigning the module content, and the technologies used in the learning process.

A key concern of the students was to learn how to use contemporary technologies better. Nevertheless, the learning of technology needed to be grounded in a social justice pedagogy (Adams 2007; Mayhew & Fernández 2007; McArthur 2010) to ensure that all students had equal access to

learning. In 2015 and 2016, when all students were given devices because of the DHET funded research of which I was a part, access to actual devices was equal. What students needed was training in how to use technology and to develop a healthy emotional relation to technology. This included confidence in using technology, not feeling alienated because of technology, or feeling overwhelmed by technology (cf. Galanek, Gierdowski, & Brooks 2018). With this in mind, a part of the redesigned module required students to attend tutorial classes where they would learn how to use their devices effectively. These tutorials used a scaffolding approach to skills and knowledge, moving from an elementary first tutorial – a ‘beginners guide to using your device’ – to the last tutorial, focusing on editing the two-minute videos that students had been requested to make. Students joined the tutorials that addressed the knowledge or skills gap(s) which they had self-identified. Some of the tutorials were led by staff from our technology transfer division, while others were led by students from the class who had a thorough understanding of technology, thus including students in the sharing of skills and knowledge acquisition. These tutorials were over and above the tutorials that focused on the course content of the module.

Students wanted their learning about religions or worldviews to be a dynamic engagement with real-life experiences and practices of adherents. They wanted to engage with what they called ‘the real religion and what people do’. A pedagogy of social constructivism in which the learners and the coordinator of learning both co-construct knowledge, enabled this to occur, as Roux unpacks it in her 2007 article (Roux 2007). The module moved away from a historical overview of religions practiced in Asian countries and their sacred texts, to facilitate this. The module therefore problematized the notion of Asian religions and the neat classifications of ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Confucianism’, and ‘Taoism’, and how various meaning-making systems in Asia and its diaspora are practiced. This was done by asking students to go online, find, and follow a religious leader or spiritual group who was active on a social media platform that practiced a religion that could be broadly classified as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. In this way, primary sources, a key element in the social constructivist pedagogy, enabled students to become producers, not just consumers of knowledge. Over a period of five weeks in tutorial groups, the students discussed what they were learning about these groups. In preparation for these tutorial discussions, students had to write a 300-word reflection on the online activities, programs,

discussion, comments, posting, videos, or memes (also known as knowledge artifacts in the social constructivist literature) that were shared on the social media site which they were following. In the small tutorial groups, students shared their observations. These discussions were guided by critical theories or terms used in comparative religion studies (cf. e.g., Chidester 2018b; Taylor 1998). Terms such as 'belief', 'body', 'materiality', 'time', and 'performance' were discussed. The paradigm shift in using these theories was to help students to see religions as embodied and not just ideas and practices (Strijdom 2018:163). Simultaneously, the challenge was to help students to become critical of the value of Western-centric theories such as pollution, resistance, and hegemony, which were developed by scholars such as Douglas, Foucault, Gramsci, and Lefebvre, in the study of Asian religions. This dialogical space created an environment of co-production of knowledge and knowledge sharing as we all learned new insights into the contemporary practices of different religious groups. This exercise also engaged with key ideas in anthropology, exploring how to listen to what people said and did not say about their religious practice.

An essential skill that students learned in this process was how to engage with social media and the big data available on these various platforms and research these spaces as sources of information. Critically engaging with information on social media, is an essential skill in the contemporary world, but has been largely neglected in undergraduate teaching. More than 80 percent of the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts reported that they have found this social media exercise relevant. Students admitted that their go-to place when researching a topic was often social media, and they felt they had learned skills to critically assess social media information. One of my 2017 students said, 'My sister works for an ad company, and she is always looking at social media to see what are trends, etc. She was so jealous about my course and social media learning, and she wished she had learned this while she was studying'. This approach addressed the desires that students raised to learn skills which are relevant to the world of work, the use of technology, and how religions are being practiced in the world today.

At the end of the term, students were asked to take their five reflections on the religious group or leader whom they were following, which had been assessed as formative exercises, and in an essay, critically assess what they had learned about a particular world religion and how it is discussed in academic literature. This essay brought the work done in the

tutorials together. It helped students to critically engage with the data which they found on social media and academic literature on the study of religions.

Depending on the religion that students were following, they were also put into groups of four and asked to make a two-minute video, explaining key concepts within Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. These videos were played during a lecture and then discussed with the class. In doing so, the students' concern that they wanted a say in what they learned, was addressed. Students had been given training on making these videos, and because they had devices, they were all able to make these videos in groups. For the 2017 cohort, it was a bit more complicated, but on a smartphone, videos could still be made and edited. The students loved these exercises and reported that they had learned a valuable skill at the end of the module and had fun making the videos. One 2016 student wrote in the feedback: 'I learned the most about a religion when I made the videos'. The student engagement in the class discussions following these videos was the best I have ever encountered in lectures. Students asked their colleagues to explain why particular images or music was used. What new insights did they get from making this video? Why did they make it as they did? The videos were uploaded onto the student learning management system, allowing students to refer back to the videos when preparing for exams. In this process, the students' desire to determine their learning process and what they learned was enabled. The two-minute videos offered another opportunity to learn technological skills that they would use in the world of work and focus on expressing critical thinking skills in a medium other than an essay. This picks up on critical research done by Cekiso (2011), showing how students in South Africa are learning in different ways and how modes of learning and assessment need to cater to these multiple learning styles.

Addressing the Students' Concern about the Value of Learning about Worldviews Adhered to in Asian Countries

The overriding concern of students studying Eastern religion was about the value of the course. Below I will outline the value that the students and I have developed during the three years of this project. The first is that we live in an ever-shrinking global network of connections. What happens in China, affects the lives of citizens in South Africa. The study of different religions

from an anthropological, political, development studies, economic, marketing, and sociological perspective is key to helping global citizens in understanding the contemporary context in which they live and the interconnectedness of systems of thought, economies, and political regimes (Kong 2015). In 2010, Merrill, Taylor, and Poole argued that an understanding of India and China, their cultures, and worldviews, is essential for people entering the world of work, as the future economic-political landscape will be dominated by these countries (Merrill, Taylor, & Poole 2010:1-4). In the 4IR, this is proving to be even more important (Bhalla 2021).

When we study religions without privileging one over another, and with an empathetic approach that aims to represent each religion accurately, then, as Fort (2006:157) puts it, we create a space that values reason and inquiry into 'claims of authority, intrinsic power and ahistorical truth'. This was the second value we identified. The study of religions is valuable because, as Chidester (2018a:42) argues, an important part of being human, much like music, politics, and economics, is engaging with religious practices, ideas, and worldviews. In the study of religions, we become aware of how much religions and the 'objective truths' they claim to hold, are a product of time, place, culture, social interactions, and a few grand narratives of universal truth. The study of religions exposes us to how much of the things we might take as 'a given' are created. Religions or worldviews are so complex, heterogeneous, and varied that they offer us 'new possibilities for understanding a diverse array of powerful discourses, practices and social formations' (Chidester 2018a:42). Decolonization highlights the need to explore, examine, and explain the world and societies from multiple diverse theories, positions, and knowledge systems. The study of Asian religions offers a powerful lens through which to do just this. This is, of course, valuable if we see the study of religion as helping us to live more empathetically and informed in a multi-cultural globalizing world (Everington, quoted in Alberts 2010:278). When hearing the voices of people who practice and study these religions, we can engage to some degree in the decolonial project, when we do not solely study Asian religions through the production of the body of knowledge about Asian/Eastern religions, developed by Western scholars (Van Klinken 2019).

The third is that the study of different worldviews enables us to critically reflect on the situatedness of our own historical, cultural, and knowledge system, on how we see the world and make sense of it. Religions,

for most adherents, offer unique technologies of shaping the self, as Foucault (1972) argued. By studying the various worldviews, and social and cultural practices of religions, we can examine the Foucauldian questions of the creations of the self. Undergraduate students are on the whole studying, at a time in their lives when they are trying to establish their sense of self. By studying the technologies of shaping the self, offered by various religions, students are given a unique space to think critically about their selfhood, thus enabling the university space to be a place of *Ausbildung* and technical training. *Ausbildung* is understood here as training and personal development, central to the Humboldtian university system of the last two centuries.

This reflexive practice is not easy, and I attempted to enable students to become reflexive through the 300-word reports which they wrote each week, and which were then shared in the tutorial classes. These reports were based on or shaped around a variety of questions. At the beginning of the term, I began with ‘simpler’ questions such as, ‘As you engaged in this week’s online session, what did you learn from the leader or group that you can use in your life?’ This particular question set the tone for not othering the religion being engaged with, but rather seeing yourself in and through the religion. Over the term, the questions guiding the reports were scaffolded to more complex questions such as, ‘Explain how the leader or group you are studying, engages with materiality in their religious practice’. The reports that students wrote were then discussed each week in the tutorials, making the tutorial spaces a place of dialogue and inclusivity in which we discussed the various forms and shapes of religion that we were experiencing.

Having outlined what I did and the module’s perceived value, I now reflect on how successful this was.

Reflecting on Achieving the Learning Outcomes

In this section, I reflect on the five key learning outcomes which were determined by the students when they shared what and how they wanted to learn, in the questionnaires I gave them at the beginning of the module. The first was to create a space in which students could learn key technological competencies, including engaging with social media and how to use technology to share and co-produce information. Short videos were chosen as the technological medium to communicate knowledge because short videos will

replace PowerPoint in the future world of work (Morgan 2011). The second learning outcome enabled students to become co-producers of knowledge and not passive consumers of knowledge. Linked to this was the third outcome, which aimed to enable students to share information, moving the dissemination of knowledge out of the hands of the one lecturer and into the hands of the cohort of students. In this way, the students also had a say in what they were learning and sharing with their colleagues. The students guided the learning space with the lecturer as a coordinator, rather than a director or dictator of the learning process, addressing an important concern of the students. The fourth learning outcome was that students have demonstrated that they had developed an understanding of different worldviews and meaning-making systems. The final learning outcome was that students could reflect on their personal meaning-making systems and worldviews. In this last section, I reflect on the learning outcomes and lessons that we have obtained in the process.

Technical Skills

The scaffolded approach (Vygotsky 1978) applied in teaching the technical skills of using a device to the level required for this course, proved helpful as some students had quite advanced skills while others had minimal skills. By allowing students to join only the tutorials they needed, they were not frustrated, feeling that they were wasting time. The facilitator of the tutorials was able to give students individualized attention, going at the students' pace. Feedback of the students in 2015 and 2016 – the two cohorts that received tablet devices – highlighted how important it was for students to have a personal device which they could use all the time and 'play' with at home. They felt that if they only had a device while on campus, they would not have developed the competencies needed to excel in this module. The students in the 2017 cohort who did not get devices as there was no further DHET funding, could do all the exercises on their smartphones and the university computers, but stated that they would have found the work more manageable if they had had their own devices. In the evaluations at the end of the year, 87.4 percent of the students reported that learning new technical skills was one of the most valuable things they obtained in this class. In the 2015 student cohort, 83 percent of students did not have their own tablet or laptop, and in the 2016 cohort, 81 percent of the students did not have their own tablet or laptop. In 2017, all the students had a smartphone, but only 73

percent had access to laptops, tablets, or computers at home. Social justice within teaching and using technology for learning remains an ongoing area of concern within South African higher education, particularly in light of the ever increasing digital divide.

Co-Production of Knowledge

As students learned the skills to engage with social media and used it as a source of data collection, they became co-producers of knowledge, sharing what they learned with their colleagues in tutorials. Students generally found that they could easily follow a religious group or leader online, although they did not always find it easy to find a guru or group communicating in English. In their questionnaire feedback on their experience, 78 percent of the students reported finding this exercise exciting and engaging because they felt that they were experiencing how a religion was practiced. They also reported finding it interesting to hear from their colleagues about their experiences of the other religious groups, but that it was a lot of work to report back every week on what they have observed in the postings of their group about a religious leader. For many students, the idea that they were actively researching and producing knowledge was empowering and exciting. While the students were acquiring knowledge about different religions, it was not always easy to remind them that ‘scholarly interventions at once re-present and conceal religions as experienced and lived’ (Kong 2015:101). Many students reported that they enjoyed the tutorials because they felt they had something to contribute. Other students criticized the module because the workload was (too) intense, and if they missed two weeks, it was challenging to catch up as there were no notes for the tutorials, and tutorials did not just summarize the lectures. Yet, several students commented that they enjoyed these tutorials because it was not just a summary of the lectures. Conversely, some students did not appreciate the fact that the tutorials covered different material to what was discussed in lectures because they said it made the module intense and complex, especially if they missed a session.

Participating in Knowledge Sharing

Co-sharing of knowledge was central to the pedagogy that was used, while the technological skills that students learned in making two-minute videos to share with their colleagues, created an informative, engaging, and creative format through which students shared their knowledge. As Foucault (1972)

has shown, knowledge production and consumption are laced with multiple power forms. A social constructivist pedagogy, together with social justice pedagogies, actively aim to recognize and minimize negative power dynamics that silence and oppress students and encourage positive engagements that empower all learners. Students found this exercise challenging, both on a technical and an academic level. They had to research an aspect of one of the religions which was practiced in Asia or the Asian diaspora and then present it as a two-minute video to their colleagues. While it was challenging for the students, the videos were also very popular, and class attendance was on average about 86 percent each week. Not only were students attending class, they were also actively engaged in lessons. Brüssow and Wilkinson (2010: 375) argue that engaged learning supports 'the underprepared student and even makes a more significant contribution to these students'. While this is an engaging way for students to learn, it does require the lecturer to ensure that the information which students are sharing is factually correct, and at times some corrections had to be made to the content. This needed to be dealt with sensitively and constructively, not shaming or diminishing students in front of their colleagues. Criticism from some students was that they needed to attend class to fully understand the readings assigned, and the videos made by their colleagues. This reflects how the module demanded a different engagement from students compared to other modules in their degree. While the workload was intense, the module did conform to the notional hours set for a second-year module.

Understanding of Different Worldviews/Meaning-Making Systems and the Value of Studying It

In 2015, I first tried to address the value of studying Asian religions, but my answers were not well formulated. In the feedback at the end of the module, students reported being unsure of the module's value. In subsequent years, I discussed the module's academic and personal value with students and whether different learning activities and content were valuable. With the input of students, we came up with the module's value as outlined earlier. This exercise showed the importance of working with the students to determine the module's value that addressed both the lecturer's ideas and the students' perspective. The agreed-upon value propositions of the module guided the content that was taught.

At the end of 2017, the students commented on how they felt the module had developed them as people and gave them an awareness of and insight into a completely different way in which people make meaning of the world. In the feedback from the students, the overwhelming majority reported that they appreciated being able to follow a group or religious leader who was actively practicing a religion. ‘The group I followed made Hinduism come alive to me’, said a student in the 2015 cohort. Another student commented that they had never thought there was a link between studying Eastern religion and world politics but, having followed a Buddhist (English speaking) group in Hong Kong, the student reported that he had learned about life in Hong Kong and Buddhism at the same time. The drawback of this approach is that the South African students could only follow religious groups or leaders who posted in English. As a consequence, it was challenging to find Confucian groups.

A Reflection on Students’ Own Personal Meaning-Making Systems and Worldviews

Coupled with social constructivism, I worked with experiential and engaged learning as established by Kolb (1984). This approach empowers learners, meets them where they are, and involves them in the learning process (Krause 2005; Kuh et al. 2007; Wolf-Wendel et al. 2009:417; Lederman 2006:1). An important aspect of this process was using the tutorial sessions to help students reflect on their learning and how it impacted them. One student reported in 2017, ‘I am starting to think differently about myself and what motivates me because of this course’. Some students even invited friends to audit the module because they were finding it so interesting. One student who was identified as auditing the course in the 2016 questionnaire said, ‘This course is not recognized in my degree, but my friend invited me to come, and I learned more about myself in this module than in the others stuff I do’. Ho (1995) argues that in studying philosophical systems such as Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism, people can engage with meaning-making systems other than Western psychology to develop their self-understanding.

Conclusion

In the mid-2010s, three key dynamics have shocked higher education in South Africa: The #FEESMUSTFALL movement, the decolonization of academia, and the emergence of the 4IR. These three dynamics called for a radical and far-reaching change in the pedagogies, epistemologies, and technologies in the teaching of world religions. In this essay I argue that, by developing a pedagogical approach drawn from the intersections of social constructivist, experiential and engaged learning, and social justice pedagogies, a new way of teaching and learning can emerge in which students become co-producers of knowledge and are actively engaged in the selection and sharing of knowledge in a module. This can be done effectively when various technologies are used, so that students can learn critical thinking skills and the technological skills that are fundamental to life in the 4IR. By taking this approach, an epistemology of decolonial thinking can be employed in which the religions that originated in Asia are not studied solely through the lens of Western academics. It enables the students, the voices of the practitioners are heard, and scholars in the global south, such as the students studying these religions at a university in South Africa, become producers of knowledge about these religions and their contemporary practitioners.

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Learning about 'Asian Religions'

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