

A “Reading Sequence” in a Religion Class: Using Class Design to Encourage Self-Directed Learning

Ingie Hovland

Limited-Term Assistant Professor Department of Religion and Lecturer at
the Institute for Women's Studies, University of Georgia., USA

Abstract

The study of religion and society happens in archives, in the field, in libraries, and in many other places of research. Here, I want to focus on one place that is not discussed as frequently: the study of religion also happens in the classroom. How do we design our classes when we teach religion? How do students read the texts we assign and how do they learn from these texts? In this article, I describe one element of class design that I used in a class on “Women in World Religions.” This class design revolved around two-week “reading sequences,” that is, planned sequences of readings and related activities aimed to strengthen students’ understanding of the texts they studied about women and religion. I outline my class design and reflect on how it fits with some of the dimensions of self-directed learning that can help to build lifelong learning tools for students.

Keywords: Religion and Society, teaching religion, Women in World Religions, Reading Sequence, Self-Directed Learning.

Introduction

I do not separate the field from the classroom in my work: I see both as inherent dimensions of the role of an anthropologist [of religion]”¹ I begin with this quote by Simon Coleman, a cultural anthropologist who studies religion in society. Research and teaching, he argues, are closely linked in the study of religion. He continues: “communicating about the discipline [in the classroom] is of equal value to research in the field: indeed, both are important forms of knowledge production”²

In this article, I wish to pick up his suggestion that the classroom is

¹ Simon.Coleman, 2017. “Looking At and Beyond Religion.” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* No. 13: 22–29.

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a valuable site of knowledge production for students of religion. This suggestion could be explored in a multitude of ways; here I will concentrate on one aspect, namely reading. I am interested in how students of religion read, and, by extension, how instructors who teach religion assign reading. When we ask our students to study religion by reading texts in a class, which other tasks do we ask them to carry out alongside that reading? What type of learning do we hope that the reading will facilitate? What kind of lifelong learning skills does this foster?

I will address these questions by reflecting on my own use of “reading sequences” in a university-level religion class, “Women in World Religions,” at the University of Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic. By “reading sequences,” I mean a planned sequence of readings and related activities that aims to strengthen students’ understanding. While I have long been interested in undergraduate reading, my curiosity about reading sequences in particular was sparked when I was forced to shift my classes to a hybrid format – partly in person and partly online – during the pandemic. When preparing for this hybrid class, I decided to implement two-week “reading sequences” that would allow students to work with readings in a step-by-step manner over time. The reading sequences that I implemented were within the time-span of two-week modules, so the basic sequence repeated itself every two weeks. During the semester that I taught the class, I received positive feedback from students on the clarity of the sequence and I was encouraged by the degree to which the sequence seemed to facilitate students’ ability to self-direct their learning.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature often distinguishes between research studies that examine students’ learning and reflective essays that describe instructor’s teaching. This article is an example of the latter, namely a reflective essay in which I

describe some of the teaching choices I made regarding a reading sequence in one class, how this sequence fits with the goals of self-directed learning, and similar examples in the literature (I have elsewhere examined my students' learning from, and perception of, reading; Hovland 2019, 2021). In the first section below, I begin by outlining the two-week reading sequence that I used in my class "Women in World Religions" during the COVID-19 pandemic. I then reflect on some dimensions of self-directed learning incorporated in this reading sequence. Finally, I compare my two-week reading sequence with two other sequences described by scholars in related disciplines: a one-week reading sequence in a history class (Calder 2006), and a one-semester reading sequence in a literature class (Linkon 2005). Both of these related sequences could also be adapted for a religion class.

A two-week reading sequence in a class on "Women in World Religions"

Let me begin by outlining the class "Women in World Religions" that I taught during the pandemic. The class was housed in both the Institute for Women's Studies and the Religion Department at the University of Georgia, and was offered to upper-level undergraduate students. This is the class description that I sent out to students to advertise the class:

What do religions say about women? What do women say about religions? We'll read descriptions and watch films about women in indigenous religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and modern feminist spirituality (e.g. Goddess worship) from ancient times until today. There are no prerequisites for this class, and everyone is welcome. Sign up for RELI 4550 or WMST 4550!

The class ran for one semester, which at the University of Georgia is

sixteen weeks. I divided the semester into eight two-week modules. For most of these modules we focused on the experiences and roles of women in one religious tradition or in a set of related religions. Toward the end of the semester, I incorporated some longer writing assignments, and I also included a different module that I called a "book project." During the book project I gave the students a list of books to choose from and they each chose one book to read based on their own interests. This gave me a chance to allow for some variety in the class. For example, if a student was particularly interested in women in Judaism, he could choose to read a book about that topic for the book project, which would advance a chance to dive into that particular topic in some greater depth the end of the semester. For most of the modules, however, we were all dealing with the same topic as a class. When I was designing the hybrid class format, I drew on one of my previous SoTL studies, in which I had observed that many of my students tended to work their way through a series of overlapping tasks as they engaged with readings that I assigned: They read the text; they sought to understand what it was saying and they tried to make a mental overview of the text as a whole; they further developed their own understanding of the text in discussion with their peers; and they formed their own response to the reading and integrated it into their own knowledge of the subject matter, themselves, and the world³. Building on this understanding of how undergraduate students may need to engage with the readings step-by-step, I designed a basic two-week template for a "reading sequence" in "Women in World Religions." I made some minor changes in each module depending on the subject matter and the assignments, but most of the modules followed some versions of this basic four-step template: Overview, encounters, analysis, and reflection. Let me describe each of these

steps in turn.

Step 1: Overview and map #1

At the beginning of each module, I knew that students might not be familiar with the religious tradition(s) we were covering in that module, and I did not want students to feel “lost” or to feel that they were thrown into a new topic without some points of orientation. Therefore, we started each module with an overview. Students would either read a short text or watch a short video that provided an introduction to the religion(s) of that module (for example, Hinduism), so that they had some basic knowledge about the history of the religion, the main teachings and practices, and the questions and concerns of that tradition. This also helped them to connect each religion that they learned about to the other religions. As part of the overview, students also read a brief text on contemporary themes that are particularly important for women in that religion today.

I then asked each student to make a 1-page “map” of what they had learned from the overview. The format of the map was up to them. For example, they could draw a classic concept map, a flow chart, a diagram, or something else. The purpose was to place the main points and concepts from the overview on one piece of paper and relate them to each other. I asked them to scan or take a picture of their map and to submit it on our learning management system. This was a way for me to ensure that each student was in a good position to start the work of the module, and that none of them felt overwhelmingly “lost.” This concern was especially important, given our hybrid format, since I could not count on seeing all students in person but still wanted them all to keep pace with the class.

Step 2: Encounters and class conversations

The next tasks in the first week encompassed what I thought of as “encounters” or “experiences.” In reality, these tasks were not direct encounters of the type that students might have in a fieldwork course. However, the tasks were ways of moving the students a little closer to hearing from, and seeing women in, the religion(s) they were learning about in that module. The first “encounter” was to read one or more short texts written by women affiliated with that religious tradition. Sometimes, these were autobiographical stories, and sometimes they were essays that reflected on particular current topics. The second “encounter” was to watch a film about women in the religion. I sought to select films that either included interviews with women or that followed women in their everyday lives and in their religious practice, giving these religious women themselves a chance to explain what they were doing and why they were doing it.

I wanted my students to have a chance to discuss these “encounters” with other students in the class so that they could ask questions, share their observations, and hear other people’s thoughts. Before the pandemic, I usually facilitated class discussions synchronously, meaning that all the students came together in the classroom for the class period and discussed the reading. However, during the pandemic, part of my class was asynchronous, which meant that this discussion could not happen among all the students in the same place at the same time, but instead needed to take place online over a number of days. To facilitate this, I asked students to do two things: First, I asked them to comment on the text. I used the online reading platform Perusall for this activity. I posted the class readings on Perusall, and students read the text and typed in comments in the margins next to particular

sentences or paragraphs. Each student could see the comments of all the other students, and could respond to these. Second, I asked them to write and contribute one question about the text. For this activity, I used the online discussion platform Packback, which requires students to formulate an open-ended question and then explain the question in a paragraph. Everyone in the class could see all the questions as they were posted, and I asked each student to write a paragraph-length response to two other students' questions.

These two connected discussion forums – first, direct comments on the text, and second, asking and answering open-ended questions about it – gave students a chance to process what they thought about the “encounters” they had with women in particular religious traditions. It helped to move them from their initial reactions toward a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of what might be going on with women's roles, practices, or concerns in the religion under study.

Step 3: Scholarly analysis and own analysis

In the second week of the module, students were ready to move on to analysis. At this point, I provided an academic article for them to read about women in the religion(s) of that module, and I sometimes gave them a choice between two or three articles. I tried to select articles that presented a clear, and perhaps thought-provoking, argument about women in that religion, meaning that the author was putting forward an analysis of underlying dynamics, or of vital themes, or of causes and effects, or similar. In other words, the author was not only describing what was happening at a surface level, but was also putting forward their own analysis of what was happening beneath the surface. The purpose of this was to model for students different ways of thinking

more deeply, and to encourage them to begin to form their own argument in response. To facilitate this process, I organized another asynchronous class discussion in the second week that followed the same format as the discussion in the first week: first, students commented directly on the text and responded to other students' comments, and second, they asked an open-ended question and answered two other students' questions.

The culmination of the work in the module was for students to articulate their own analysis. They saw a model of how this might be done in the academic article they read at the start of the second week, and I asked them to try to engage with the module's theme in this way – but in a shorter version. I wanted this assignment to be an individual assignment so that I could gauge how students were managing the work, especially since some of them were working remotely. Toward this end, I provided a list of key concepts that had come up in the texts or films in that module. For example, when we studied women in Goddess traditions, a few of the key concepts were “body,” “the earth,” “female spirits,” “rituals,” “mother,” “authority.” I asked students to choose five concepts from the list and to write their own brief analysis of those five concepts. I explained that the goal was not to provide a surface-level definition of the concepts, but rather to analyze what was going on beneath the surface and to articulate their own argument in this regard.

Step 4: Map #2, conversation outside class, and reflection

Finally, at the end of the second week of the module students completed three tasks to sum up their learning and prompt metacognitive reflection: a second map, a conversation outside class,

and a brief image-and-sentences reflection.

The first of these reflective tasks was to make a second map. Like the first map at the start of the module, the second map at the end of the module was a chance for them to put together the main points they had learned on one piece of paper. I also asked them to compare the first map they had made with the second map, so that they could see how their understanding had changed over the past two weeks, having worked through the encounters and the academic analysis. My hope was that this second map would make visible to them their own learning: at the end of the module they hopefully knew more than they did before, had more thoughts about the topic, and could formulate more nuanced and analytical arguments about it.

The second reflective task was to conduct a conversation outside class. One of my goals for the class was to provide opportunities for students to practice talking with someone else about the topics that we were learning in class. My hope was that if the topic of women and religion came up among their friends or at their workplace or in another context, they would be able to speak about it more thoughtfully and knowledgeably than before, having had some practice in our class. Since they practiced doing this with their peers in class, I hoped that they would then be able to transfer that skill to their life beyond the classroom, after our class ended. I, therefore, asked students to speak with someone outside of class and reflect briefly on the conversation. They could choose their own conversation partner – it could be, for example, a friend, a family member, or a co-worker. I asked students to explain to their conversation partner what they had learned during that module in our class, to ask their conversation partner what they thought, and then to have a conversation about it. In this way, I sought

to give students a little practice in speaking about women and religion with someone else, and since the conversation was conducted in the context of a class assignment, they could focus on trying to speak knowledgeably and thoughtfully. I asked them to submit a few sentences about the conversation (with the friend’s permission) in a discussion space in our online learning management system, so that all the students in the class had the chance to see the different reflections their peers had about these conversations.

Finally, students shared with the class a very short reflection on what they had learned in that module and how they had learned it. I asked them to find a picture that summed up the most-important thing they had learned from the module, to share the picture with the whole class in the online learning management system, and to write a sentence or two explaining what the picture represented. In addition, they shared one or two sentences about their process of working during that module, and whether they felt it had gone well or if there was something they wanted to improve on in the next module. Some students shared, for example, that they had found a better way to manage their time during that module and they wanted to try the same work schedule in the next module. Other students might comment that they had found it difficult to focus on the reading during that module, and that they wanted to improve on this by doing the reading at a different time of day or in a different place, and so on.

In sum, this was the basic template that I used for the “reading sequence” of most of the two-week modules in my hybrid class, moving from overview through encounters in the first week, and then to analysis and, finally, reflection in the second week. Since the basic template of this sequence was repeated each module, my hope was that

students would also be able to build a mental map of the class design, further supporting their understanding of what they were asked to do and why they were asked to do it. Now I would like to step back and consider how this type of reading sequence fits into the broader conversation on student learning. What stood out to me, from a teacher's perspective, was how this repeated reading sequence seemed to facilitate students' self-directed learning.

Reflection on the reading sequence through the lens of self-directed learning

What is self-directed learning? In short, self-directed learning happens when a student begins to take responsibility for managing their own process of learning⁴. The perceived opposite might be called teacher-directed learning, in which a teacher is seen as responsible for making sure that learning happens – the teacher is the one who has to do the work. As quickly becomes apparent, even in teacher-directed learning, the student still has to do something, and similarly when students take on self-directed learning, the teacher still plays a part. In other words, students' self-directed learning does not discount the importance of the teacher. But when we ask students to take on self-directed learning, the emphasis shifts toward students having to take more responsibility for tasks such as: planning how they will get through the process of learning, engaging actively in the process, monitoring what they are doing, and then reflecting on how they did. I am drawn to two informal definitions of self-directed learning provided by two anonymous students in a study by Douglass and Morris (2014, 7). The first student comments: "You have to take some ownership here for what you are

³ Ingie Hovland., 2021. "The Importance of Making-While-Reading for Undergraduate Readers: An Example of Inductive SoTL," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 9 (1): 27–44.

⁴ Boyer, Stefanie L., Diane R. Edmondson, Andrew B. Artis and David Fleming. 2014. "Self-directed Learning: A Tool for Lifelong Learning." *Journal of Marketing Education* 36 (1): 20–32.

trying to learn.” And the second phrases it as follows: “It’s really on the student to take the most away from their college experience because the professors aren’t going to be able to do that for you.”

There are many possible dimensions of self-directed learning, and the reading sequence that I used in my class “Women in World Religions” did not draw on all of these dimensions. For example, in my modules, I as teacher was still the one who planned which texts we would read and which assignments the students would complete. I was also the one who evaluated their work. In other words, in this class, the students did not participate in the initial class design or in the final evaluation. However, the reading sequence I used drew on some dimensions of self-directed learning, and it seems to me the most important of these were: construction, co-construction, metacognition, a focus on skills, a focus on authentic tasks, reflection, and self-regulation. Let me briefly comment on each of these in turn.

The first dimension of self-directed learning that is evident in the two-week reading sequence is construction. Construction began happening at the start of the sequence, when students made the first map of the overview readings. To make a map of the readings, they had to construct or make their own mental overview of the texts – in other words, they had to engage in a more active way with the reading, as opposed to a passive mode of simply looking at the words. The next and related dimension of self-directed learning is co-construction, which came into play during the class discussions. Here, students were seeking to respond to, and make sense of, the readings and the films that formed the “encounters” of the module. This time, they were trying to build some personal understanding of these experiences, and they were doing so together with the other students, as they contributed to,

and learned from, the discussions. Their developing understanding was, therefore, to some extent co-constructed at this point in the sequence. The first week of the reading sequence thus oriented students toward construction and co-construction.

Third, metacognition. When students read the academic article at the start of the second week in the module, it provided one model of academic analysis, and if students were actively thinking about this while reading, they could learn something from that model. The phrase “if they were actively thinking about this” points toward metacognition. I tried to facilitate this metacognitive orientation toward what they were doing by giving students a simple framework to differentiate “description” from “analysis”: as mentioned above, I explained to students that reactions or straightforward descriptions orient us toward asking what is going on at the surface level, whereas deeper-level analysis orients us toward asking what is going on beneath the surface. The repeated reading sequence reminded them to keep this distinction in mind, since in most modules they read an example of academic analysis and then moved on to formulate their own analytical arguments. This connects to the fourth dimension of self-directed learning that I want to comment on, namely a focus on skills. Students who are engaged in self-directed learning will not just learn content but will also be engaged in learning skills. In my class, a key skill was learning to think more deeply about the readings, and when the students wrote out their own deeper analysis of selected key concepts toward the end of each module, they kept returning to this skill practice. The analytical steps thus oriented students toward metacognition and a focus on skills.

Finally, at the end of the module, students had an opportunity to take

what they were learning beyond the classroom in a conversation with a friend outside the class. These kinds of assignments are sometimes called "authentic" tasks because they give students practice in handling situations they will encounter in life beyond the classroom. This authentic task was carried out alongside reflection and self-regulation. Students had a chance to reflect on how they completed the readings (for example, with regard to their focus, or their time management, or their reading techniques), and then they had a chance to initiate a process of self-regulation by asking: Will I do it the same way next time? What is one thing that I want to keep doing, or one thing that I want to change in the next module? The final reflective steps of the two-week reading sequence thus combined an authentic task, reflection, and self-regulation.

A metareview of research on self-directed learning found that there was a positive relationship between having the experience of self-directed learning and five capabilities: an internal locus of control (that is, feeling that you are more in control of what you are doing), motivation, performance, self-efficacy (that is, thinking that you will be able to do something), and support (that is, being able to find and use support when you need it)⁵. These five capabilities are all characteristics of effective workplace behavior. The authors of the metareview argue, therefore, that by giving our students opportunities for self-directed learning, those students will be more able to function effectively when they step into the workplace. The experience of self-directed learning in a university class can give them tools for lifelong learning (*ibid.*).

Two related examples of reading sequences

⁵ Boyer, Stefanie L., Diane R. Edmondson, Andrew B. Artis and David Fleming. 2014. "Self-directed Learning: A Tool for Lifelong Learning." *Journal of Marketing Education* 36 (1): 20-32.

After I had taught the class “Women in World Religions,” I reflected on the two-week reading sequence and became curious about whether other scholars of teaching and learning had described different types of reading sequences. I turned to the literature on undergraduate student reading and found two relevant examples of other reading sequences. They are both from related humanities disciplines – history and literature – and could thus be adapted for religion classes. They are of interest to me here because they cover different time spans: one week and one semester.

A one-week reading sequence in a history class

The first example is of a one-week reading sequence in a history class. The sequence is described in an article by Lendol Calder (2006) in which he discusses how he teaches his survey class on United States history. His class meets three times per week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Each week he covers one topic (for example, the civil rights movement in the 1960s), and to teach the topic for the week he always uses the same sequence:

Monday:	Visual inquiry
Wednesday:	Critical inquiry
Friday:	Moral inquiry

On Mondays, for visual inquiry, he shows the students a film. This is usually a historical documentary, but sometimes, he also shows a historical fictional drama. The purpose of starting the week in this way is, most importantly, to make students curious about the topic and time period they will learn about that week. Calder says that he chooses films that present interesting problems, with the aim that they will

intensify the students' "desire to inquire"⁶ A bonus is that the films also allow students to absorb some basic information about the week's topic and period.

On Wednesdays, he turns to critical inquiry. He tells the students that the Wednesday class period is a "history workshop" and he asks them – before coming to class that day – to read some primary sources that he provides, to formulate a question about those sources, and to write a brief essay about their question. When they come to class, they begin by sharing their essays with the students sitting next to them. This gives them an opportunity to share their own question and interpretation of the primary sources they read and to hear others' interpretations. After this small-group discussion, they move to a whole-class discussion in which they consider the different interpretations that can be made, based on the primary sources at hand.

On Fridays, the class turns to moral inquiry. In preparation, the students read two different scholarly accounts of the time period they are learning about. The two accounts usually conflict with each other. This time when they come to class, Calder begins by asking them some questions about the accounts, which they answer. They then discuss which of the conflicting accounts they agree or disagree with, and what the moral implications are for how they understand themselves and the world today.

Calder emphasises that his goal is for students to practice six key skills as they repeat this one-week sequence: questioning, connecting, sourcing, making inferences, considering alternate perspectives, and recognizing limits to one's knowledge. The skills fit well with the

⁶ Lendol Calder, 2006. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey." *The Journal of American History* 92 (4):1364.

disciplinary habits of a historian. They also fit well with several of the dimensions of self-directed learning mentioned above, especially construction, co-construction, a focus on skills, and a focus on the authentic task of connecting historical understanding to current moral inquiry.

A one-semester reading sequence in a literature class

The second related example I found of a reading sequence comes from a literature class described in an article by Sherry Linkon (2005). Her class was about American novels that address the theme of immigration and, as part of the class, she organized a semester-long “inquiry project.” For the inquiry project, each student chose one novel to read by themselves. They read this novel in addition to the novels that the whole class read together. During the early part of the semester, students selected their novel, read through it once, and kept a journal of their thoughts as they read. They were then asked to identify tensions in their novel, such as tensions between characters or in the plot line, or tensions between the text and the reader. They constructed a concept map of the novel’s main themes, and they formulated questions they were interested in pursuing. They also practiced formulating literary questions about novels in class and received feedback from the teacher. During the middle of the semester, they moved on to some research activities. They searched for scholarly work on their novel (or on similar novels), and they also looked for popular responses to their novel on the internet, or popular responses to some of the immigration issues the novel addressed. From all the sources they found, they selected some they considered particularly important or interesting, and wrote a report on these. They were also

given time in class to share what they were learning about their novel with some of the other students.

During the last part of the semester, students looked back at the various tasks they had carried out in relation to their novel and they wrote a synthesis essay in which they drew together the different conclusions they had reached about the text. They were asked to compare their conclusions at the end of the semester to the initial thoughts they had recorded in their journal at the start of the semester. They also added a reflection on what they had learned.

The skill that Linkon emphasized was for students to learn to conduct close reading in the same way literary scholars do. As the students read, re-read, and worked with their novel in a variety of ways, their task was to practice extended and thoughtful inquiry into one literary text. This thoughtful inquiry included returning to parts of the text many times and reading them closely, as well as re-thinking how to interpret the effect of different parts of the text. The students were guided through this semester-long process on their own while simultaneously reading other novels together as a class. The one-semester sequence thus seems to fit well with many dimensions of self-directed learning, such as construction, a metacognitive focus on how their thoughts changed, a focus on literary reading skills, and a final reflection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to the observation at the beginning of this article: the classroom can be a valuable site of knowledge production

for students of religion – whether those students are undergraduates or whether they are experienced scholars. One way that knowledge about religion can be built is through “reading sequences,” that is, a sequence of selected texts that are read and worked with through a series of tasks.

While I have included examples of different ways of designing a reading sequence over different periods of time (two weeks, one week, and one semester), I wish to emphasize in conclusion, that every teacher will necessarily need to adapt the timing and content of any sequence they use to their own circumstances. Anyone who is using a reading sequence as part of their class design will be asking themselves questions such as:

- What are the skills students can learn in my discipline or sub-discipline?
- What are the skills they can use outside this class, or after this class?
- In particular, what are the skills associated with reading and working with texts?
- How do I practice those skills?
- Which steps will help students practice those skills?
- How can these steps fit together into a sequence?

⁷ Joan Middendorf and Leah Shopkow. 2018. *Overcoming Student Learning Bottlenecks: Decode the Critical Thinking of Your Discipline*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

These questions can form part of a process of "decoding" one's own disciplinary skills and making them available to students⁷. In this way, the skills that students have practiced through the reading sequences can remain with them long after the class is over.

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