

Black history month

Decolonising Religious Studies and Promoting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion EDI

Suzanne Newcombe:

We are here to talk about Decolonizing Religious Studies and Promoting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, which is a scholarship project, which is OU speak for studying about how we're teaching and improving our teaching that we did as a team. The team members are myself, Hugh Beattie, John Maiden, Maria Anita, and Paul-Francois Tremlett. We're all part of the religious studies department here at The Open University.

And the project was really focusing on our second year module, which is called Exploring Religion or with the course number A227. And this was a new module that started in 17J, which means in September 2017. And what we were doing in this module was promoting what we call a lived religion approach.

And this was in implicit opposition to the world religions paradigm, which was the model of the previous predecessor module was built upon which was called Introducing Religions. And OU modules as you may know or may not know are designed for quite a long time, for about 10 years.

So, on the one hand, we can put a lot of thought into best practices, in design, in pedagogy, in ensuring we do things really well and it's not slapdash or haphazard, but on the other hand, things move on in 10 years. And sometimes we need to make small tweaks and we can make small tweaks to improve student experience and to make sure that the modules stay relevant and current with what's happening.

So, the pedagogical model we used for this course is very episodic. We used frames of people, places, texts, and experiences. And lots of case study examples, many from global majority contexts, looking particularly at Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a variety of places with a variety of demographic audiences, both participants in the religion, as well as those host societies interacting with different questions to do with the religion.

So for example, the picture on this screen is a church in London, and we talk a lot about the repurposing of religious buildings in London, where the church of England might be selling off buildings to nurseries and housing.

Whereas at the same time a lot of African Christian groups are reclaiming other buildings, old industrial areas, old theatres, all sorts of different non-religious locations that were not built for

religious purpose, and they're creating sacred spaces and they're holding their church services in these locations.

So that's one way we are exploring the practice-- the really rich practice and diversity and meaning and conflicts that religion can have in contemporary society. So, what we are noticing in the first few years of A227 was more students were not reaching... We would like more students to reach the end of the module than were reaching the end of the module.

So we wanted to improve retention. And we wanted to look at what we might do better to help more students meet their study goals and finish the course they signed up for.

So our main research questions, and I'd like to thank FASSTEST and the processes of approval both in FASSTEST and the ethical approval at the university in helping us really refine our questions.

Our main research questions were, what challenges do students and staff may have been created in attempting to make a paradigm shift from understanding religion as a concept? That is to say for moving away from world religions assumptions and towards exploring what religion means as a concept. And how religion is lived. How it is practiced. How is it understood by non elites?

And how can these challenges be better addressed? So what challenges were created in what we are doing in the creation of this module? And how can we address these challenges to get better student outcomes?

And then a second but very much related question was, how can equality, diversity, and inclusion be more effectively promoted in the curriculum? So what challenges does trying to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion pose to staff and students? And how can these challenges be better addressed?

And from this research framework on EDI, we were looking at all sorts of factors and both ethnicity. But it became much more apparent that disability was really the key factor influencing retention.

So, the structure of the research this was had several different prongs. ALs teaching on the module were our first port of call and we asked their impressions of the curriculum, their impressions of the difficulties faced by their students. And what they thought about the idea of decolonizing religious studies.

It's really important to consider the ALs views because they didn't write the course material, but they're responsible for promoting it. And we had a lot of ALs who had taught on the predecessor module who were very comfortable with and conversant with the world religion approach. They were excellent in providing student support, but they hadn't necessarily been consulted with this approach and this emphasis on lived religions.

So, a second aspect of our research was to go back to the students and we were able to do a survey reaching out to all the students who took the module between September 17 start date, and the September 2020 start date. So we took the survey in June and July 2021, and we had four years of cohorts of students.

We asked them what their impressions of the module were? What we did well? What we might be able to do better?

And then the final phase of the research which is more forward thinking for us and how to make best practice curriculum reforms and write new curriculum was to get a better sense of the state of the field of religious studies.

What is best practice for pedagogy in terms of deconstructing or decolonizing religious studies as a concept? What are other colleagues doing? What do they consider best practice? And what are the biggest challenges facing religious studies as a discipline? What are other colleagues' struggles and difficulties in their educational contexts?

So we aim to interview 10 scholars on religious studies, and we approached head of departments asking for the best contacts and we then anonymised. It's usually someone who is in charge of EDI or was interested in the subject in the department. And they tried to give an overview of the subject as far as their institution was concerned.

We anonymised each of these, so that any individuals or institutions could not be recognised. But we got a range of Russell Group, Oxbridge, and post-1992 university establishments.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: I guess one of the issues we had, we've already talked quickly about the changing demographic of our students, from older leisure learners, to younger learners enrolled on degrees often with quite complex needs. They may be working. They may have caring responsibilities. They may have disabilities of different kinds.

Similarly, our ALs broadly reflected the previous incarnation if you like of the kind of student that we had, in terms of their familiarity with our technologies and our platforms and best practice around using those platforms.

So, the preference for face-to-face. I wonder what this sounds like talking to people who predominantly work in face-to-face institutions. But there was a strong preference for face-to-face among many of our ALs. And that meant some issues around being able to translate their pedagogy or best practice onto online platforms. I wonder if Hugh wants to jump in.

HUGH BEATTIE: Good morning, everyone.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: There he is.

HUGH BEATTIE: That sounds about right what you're saying, Paul. Yeah, I mean, perhaps there's point about the preference for-- yeah, suppose ALs have become very familiar with a world religions approach, basically. So there was some cultural shift needed, I guess, as the first point on the slide points out. But yeah, sorry. Go on, Paul.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: I'll just move on to the interventions and then I think we need to keep moving.

HUGH BEATTIE: Yeah.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah, I mean, so really important was the training around using some of our new platforms and how to make the best of them.

One of the things that we Hugh and I organised was basically some seminars that brought our religious studies ALs with our-- what we call ourselves central academics participating together to discuss concepts and theories in religious studies, best practice in religious studies pedagogy, and to try and initiate a better culture of working and teaching together.

And talking about the kind of issues that we're facing around retention and progression of students through A227, but not just to A227, around in a more general level as well.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: In the summer of 2021 we conducted a survey of all past and present A227 students. So that was from 17J to 20J, those who started in September 2017. The pandemic affected cohorts of those who started in September 2019 and September 2020. And we had a response rate of about 16%, about 64 people responded to the survey out of a potential 381 students surveyed.

The student surveyed go through a selection process. So it depends on what permissions they gave the university to respond to surveys, so it's not every student who took the module. But as those who agreed to be contacted for surveys and then there's further checks as to not over surveying students. So that's the 381 is the number that we were allowed to survey.

And then as part of the survey which had both quantitative, some of those are to the right here, as well as qualitative kind of more expansive fill in your own opinion type questions. There was also a possibility for students to participate in follow-up groups, focus group interviews with members of the team, and different team members took part and led for focus groups, in which nine people participated.

And these were held in June, July 2021. So, and online. The main points were that there was a generally positive feeling, although there may have been a selection bias in terms of those people who decided to respond to questions about A227, although not universally positive.

There was a lot of uncertainty in moving from level one to level two about essay writing skills, the somewhat prepared to the essay writing. So that was something for us as a module team to consider in what extent were we helping them with the assignments rather than subject knowledge. And again, with the exam.

And the exam, of course, was a bit of a special circumstances as we were moving from in-person to online. And the expectations of university education and exams, and how exams are conducted, and long essays and research projects is, of course, very much in flux right now.

So, there are issues to do with assessment structure that were really important for student experience, as well as issues to do with content. So generally important points from this process. Students were generally positive on content, although they would like some of the concepts better explained, which was important feedback that we could take on board.

Most of the criticism was about tutors, and potential lack of personal interactions, different tutorial structure, things moving online, and technological problems with the platforms used.

And a lot of these are outside of course design issues, but they're really important and valuable feedback for us as people involved in the module production to feed on to other aspects of the university and try to get them sorted.

So, if you are a student listening, please do keep feeding back and keep answering because we do take your frustrations into account as much as we possibly can.

A really important aspect that came from the focus groups and some of the qualitative writing comments was-- there was no other work we do quite good about ethnic diversity. There is no disabled student visibility in terms of discussions about how religions deal with disability, ability, as well as say in photographs or in the visual representations.

So, a very high minority of our students are actively identifying as disabled and they're not seeing themselves reflected in the course material. So this is something we certainly can look to do better at.

Not everyone's specific interests were covered. This was kind of always going to be the case. There's no way we can make everyone happy all of the time. But it's important to know what people thought were missing and would really like to see more of because there's lots of ways of teaching and lots of examples we could use. So it's really nice to hear what people are most interested in.

But as I mentioned before, the most important aspect that really came out of digging a bit further into the analytics and the student demographics of who was taking Exploring Religion was this disability profile. So, in 20J, 38% of students were declared disability with a student support team. And the overall percentage in the faculty of arts and social science at the Open University is 28%, which is much higher than the traditional university.

So, already the model of teaching at the Open University is different than a traditional university, and that we attract a lot more of students who may have different challenges in their lives and find traditional brick and mortar universities less accessible than the kind of hybrid model that we're providing here at the Open University.

And even within the Open University, the students registering for our module are much more likely to identify as disabled than in other modules in the faculty.

MARIA ANITA: So, some of the measures we took following this study in the area of assessment was to clarify guidance notes and embed some reflective activities for students. We offered additional exam preparation. And at the same time, we have been in discussions with our school to remove the exam, given that some students find this a form of assessment a bit stressful.

In terms of student skill development, we started offering an essay writing lecture, which is complemented by a worksheet, titled 'How to write religious studies essays', which students seem to like because it's quite specific to the subject area.

And we're also planning to write some dummy essays for students so that they can engage with a sort of peer assessment activity and they can get a better idea of how their work is marked by tutors. In terms of conceptual interventions, we attempted to help students by offering some help with the more challenging, you know, concepts and theories.

And we wanted to bridge that gap between students who found the module-- the content super exciting and interesting and engaging and students who needed additional help. So we wrote, why not world religions introduction clearly explaining why we did not employ this traditional paradigm for looking at religion. As well as some additional explainers for concepts like liquid religion and vernacular religion.

Finally, these student-led interventions included promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion. So we proactively started discussing and mentioning disability and mental health. And also signposted the help that's available to students in this area.

So, overall, we improved our student engagement approaches. We started thinking about ways in which we can ensure that students had increased accessibility to materials. And that these materials are offered in alternative formats, like having scripts for video materials, or having additional formats for the existing materials that were on the virtual learning environment.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: So the final phase of our research was about best practice interviews with colleagues who are not at the Open University. And we were able to talk to nine people out of a target of 10 at different universities, and we had a broad range of different kinds of theology and religious studies faculties within the UK.

So, some just kind of highlights of the thematic analysis of those interviews was that universally, all the religious studies colleagues we talked to, felt that religious studies as a subject was really intimately bound up with issues about decolonizing, and equality, diversity, and inclusion.

So, explaining and justifying religious studies as a subject is universally important to our colleagues, and explaining how it is a critical and non-confessional approach to understanding religion. But also trying to deconstruct and understand religion's continued importance. And the surprising ways it continues even in overtly non-religious contexts.

So, there was also a really universal concern with pedagogy. All of the colleagues who were self-selecting in that, they were happy to talk about the subject, they were often leads within their universities on these subjects, were concerned with assessment and awarding gaps between various minority groups, both ethnic and gender groups, but also disability awareness. And there was a commitment to exploring non-traditional pedagogies and things like project work, experiential learning opportunities, field visits, these kind of other ways of trying to both have experiential learning and assess experiential learning.

And in terms of other colleagues' experience and understanding of students, they found there was a universal period of adjustment, where people's understandings of the subjects had to be built up and then challenged.

And in a lot of institutions, people signed up for a specifically theology and religious studies degree, where there was a three-year programme of curricula where understandings of the colonial histories were first built up in the first year and then more thematic introductions were undertaken in further years.

And the religious studies department here at the OU is unique in that we have a more open curriculum and we get students from other disciplines who may have had the religious studies component in their first year module, but they may have joined at a later stage. And we can't assume prior knowledge in the same way that some of our colleagues who are only teaching within degree programmes can.

And that's both an advantage and a disadvantage for us at the OU, but it's something, we, at least, need to think about in our course design and our pedagogical framings, how we teach things.

So, we also found that deconstructing was really the dominant approach, and then lived religion and themes would follow on in the second and third years. So the first approach was kind of a narrative one of explaining the colonial history of the study of religion, of the categorisation of religion, and a more historical framing, and then more contemporary sociology, and diversity internal too.

Different main traditions came after that period of deconstruction. And in many cases, there's still very much in a structural subtext of the world religion paradigm which continues to exist because of reasons of appointment, because of reasons of colleagues' speciality. And even if people were very articulate in explaining why the world religions paradigm was problematic.

They sometimes had structural challenges into undoing its implicit ways of structuring how religion is taught and presented at university level. And so, there was a just in a final point was there was a real spectrum of understanding.

Just as we found within the Open University's associate lecturers, and within the student body, between quite conservative understandings of wanting certainty of beliefs-- official beliefs and practices. And how to memorise and explain the official position of Christians believe this.

But more generally, the colleagues wanted to emphasise the internal diversity at the very minimum within each religious tradition. So very much colleagues who wanted to draw on more indigenous terms, for so things like understanding Sikhi, instead of Sikhism.

And Sikhi being the preferred term for Sikhs to self-identify, and Sikhism being understood as a colonial imposition, for example. Or other kind of terms from non-Christian traditions. So understanding that Indic traditions with ideas of dharma and karma and that these are not necessarily directly-- they don't directly map on to Western European Christian understandings. And it's really important to explore the lived metaphysical and ethical systems of different cultures in their own terms. And that we need to bring more of these terms into our teaching.

And also, some colleagues were much more radical in trying to honour their students' lived experiences and allow them to co-create the curriculum to a much greater extent than is easy to do at the OU when we have to build courses for several hundred students to take for 10 years at a time.

So we need quite a lot of structure. But it was really interesting to hear colleagues' attempts at engaging students interest. And I think that here at the OU, we've got a lot to learn and we're building more research-oriented projects to help students be able to follow their own passions within the frameworks we're trying to teach to a greater extent.

So, our interventions are making a difference. There has been a positive. We started a positive trend here. So we started looking at improving retention in the summer of 2020. And last year, we were able to increase it by a good 6%, which is absolutely wonderful.

We still need to improve or the ability for people to complete their study and meet their study goals, particularly amongst those with disabilities. And we'll continue to work in this field.