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INTERFAITH INQUIRY: LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH, PLURALISM, AND STUDENT-FACULTY COLLABORATION

John C. Waldmeir, John C. Eby, Samantha E. Eckrich & Rebecca A. Edwards

On Catholic college campuses, community outreach and inter-faith cooperation occurs most often under the direction of Student Life Offices, often with strong leadership provided by Campus Ministry. Within this more traditional approach, students learn a great deal about the value of both enterprises, though often their learning remains largely undocumented, unassessed and, without the benefit of earned credit hours, unrewarded.

A team of faculty and students at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa are in the process of following a different approach. After five years of coordinating interfaith conversations and scripture study with centers of worship throughout the Dubuque area, including Christian churches, Jewish Temple, and the local mosque, faculty and student interns created a survey designed to gauge attitudes toward religion throughout the city. By working not only with places of worship but also with local government and businesses, faculty and students are collecting responses that can provide data on each site as well as information on more general, community-wide trends. At this early stage in the process, the group has completed surveys of five institutions, and although that number is too small to reveal conclusive evidence about religious attitudes in this Midwestern town of 60,000, it has been sufficient to disclose the type of learning students are experiencing throughout the project.

In an effort to follow the best practices associated with community-based learning, that pedagogical approach designed to correlate academic inquiry with forms of civic engagement for the common good (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2008), Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa began a campus-community interfaith partnership in 2012. Today that collaboration includes lay and pastoral leadership from many churches, the small local synagogue, the Islamic Center, six colleges and seminaries, as well as several religious orders and unaffiliated community members throughout the city. Its varied and creative activities, which have included topical conversations with members of different faiths, the comparative study of sacred texts, service projects, and events targeted at raising awareness of violence, have consistently drawn significant numbers of participants. All of the events have benefitted from student help.

Given this success, it was somewhat surprising that, during a Fall 2014 visit to campus, the writer and founder of Interfaith Youth Core, Eboo Patel, challenged faculty to commit to an even “deeper” understanding of religious attitudes throughout the city. Only through careful community research, Patel argued, would the college discover ways to build upon the goodwill it had established through its community outreach. Moreover, if the College indeed was committed to the claims it made in statements describing its Catholic identity, namely, its commitment to “foster dialogue that will promote understanding, cooperation, and respect” in the ongoing and “impartial search for truth,” then the growing pluralism of its surrounding city population provided an excellent starting point (Loras, 2007). Loras could be proud of what it had accomplished through its local interfaith outreach, but Patel wanted to see more.

Faculty involved in meeting with Patel came to realize that, to promote greater understanding through its interfaith programming and to connect the emerging efforts at community-based learning more directly with specific disciplines, the College needed to identify the religious issues and attitudes that were important to people throughout the city. In his writings and speeches, Patel calls the range of such responses—whether they come from believers or non-believers, practitioners or non-practitioners—“orientations around” religion. He points out that the lives of most people respond in some way to the presence of religious faith, whether or not they follow a specific tradition. In fact, Patel reminds us, non-believers may shape attitudes toward religion in places like the public square in ways that are even more pronounced than those who embrace a particular faith. In his meeting with faculty and administrators, Patel urged them to find ways to discern the thoughts and attitudes of the widest possible spectrum of residents and to do so not only in places of worship but also in the secular offices of government and businesses.

With strong support from a number of areas within the college, faculty members John Eby (History) and John Waldmeir (Religious Studies/Theology) assembled a team of students, including interns Samantha Eckrich and Rebecca Edwards, and began to outline an approach toward gathering information about city-wide religious attitudes. Each stage of the approach was designed to address two broad goals. The first goal was to collect data that would be useful to multiple audiences, from students of Midwest American religion to city planners to those specific organizations that agreed to participate in the project. Early in the process it became clear that virtually no formal data about religious identity existed for the city. Recent census information provided little help, and local government offices could supply only a general breakdown of religious preference

that contained merely six categories: Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Orthodox, Other and None. The city population was becoming more diverse (in two years the local Islamic Center, for example, had more than tripled in size with the introduction of new tech industries into the city), yet no one was collecting information that would be useful to those businesses, schools, care-providers, or places of worship that needed to support a changing population. Moreover, no local information existed that could assist any groups who might wish to address the larger, national trends the country was experiencing.

The second broad goal that motivated the project's design and implementation was educational: this should be an opportunity to expand Lora's growing commitment to community-based learning, both on campus and throughout the city. On campus, students would meet with faculty from a variety of areas, including sociology, mathematics, and business analytics, to discuss ways of acquiring data. Off campus, they would follow Patel's advice and speak not only with local religious institutions but also with human resource directors in businesses and personnel from interested city offices.

After numerous reports from meetings and subsequent discussions of broader goals, the student-faculty team decided to create, administer, analyze, and share the results of a survey dedicated to gauging religious attitudes within the city. The group realized that, although the types of questions that might highlight such attitudes were of deep interest to many organizations, most were prevented from inquiring due to external or internal restrictions regarding queries about faith and practice. Information on personal worldviews might be essential for understanding how people orient around the presence of religion, and that same information might shape a wide range of programming plans in locations as diverse as a church or an office workshop, but to date the necessary questions simply had not been asked. In posing the questions and studying responses, students would practice and learn a number of essential skills involving technology, critical thinking, verbal communication, and writing for different audiences. They also would learn, it turns out, a number of unexpected qualities associated with their strengths and weaknesses.

A FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

As of this writing, the survey has been administered six times throughout the city: once to a test group within the city offices, three times to Christian churches, once to the local Islamic Center, and once to a local business. Although analyzing the results of the survey constitutes the long-term goal of the project, the primary focus in this article is to discuss the learning outcomes that have become clearer through faculty, student, and community collaboration. After more than a year of working together, the team finds itself in a position both to reflect on what they have learned and to describe that learning in language intended to guide others interested in organizing

similar community-based projects. Using a set of objectives published by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) in a document titled simply "Creating Interfaith Learning Outcomes" (Interfaith Youth Core, 2015), the team has drafted objectives that relate directly to three phases of the survey project: 1) the development of the instrument; 2) its dissemination; 3) its analysis. As José Miguez Bonino notes, community-based undertakings such as this one help to create a "shared context" for students and research participants alike, one that invites both creative and critical thinking (Cohn-Sherbok, 2001, 42). The result of "encountering diversity" as part of an academic exercise where students can apply foundational knowledge as well as skills from different disciplines to life outside the classroom not only broadens experience but, as Derek Bok says in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, "helps students improve their power of critical thinking by challenging them to respond to different values and perspectives" (Bok, 2006, 195). To date, all phases of this project have supported such claims.

DEVELOPING THE SURVEY: LEARNING FROM EMPATHY

Early in the project, two students accepted the task of developing a preliminary outline for the religious climate survey. Using data available from the PEW Research Center and an IFYC campus climate survey as guides, the students identified basic categories of inquiry and began to organize questions into six sections: Demographics, Personal Worldview, Diversity Awareness, City Climate, Intolerance Based on Worldviews, and Engagement with Other Religions/Worldviews. They drafted sample questions, met with members of the college faculty who had experience creating similar instruments, placed the document into an electronic format, and began a series of tests that would help clarify questions and make the instrument easier to navigate and complete. At 109 questions, the final version proved to be lengthy but comprehensive.

The need for clear and concise writing throughout this process was obvious, but when the students reflected on what they learned from this complicated undertaking they emphasized something else entirely. Students reported that, as they spoke with faculty and drafted their questions, they came to appreciate that what they sought to measure were not formal religious identities but perspectives, attitudes, philosophies, even worldviews. For that reason, they found that they needed to craft questions that would encourage people to reflect on their experiences and self-understandings while, in turn, inviting them to share their thoughts with others. "Membership" in a religious denomination or group indicated the size and perhaps influence of the group within the city; whether a person thought that their particular group provided "support" in difficult times offered very different insights and information. In a similar manner, whether or not a respondent "knew" someone from another faith tradition revealed information about the "quantity" of interfaith interaction taking place in the city; but whether they felt "challenged" or

had “grown” through that encounter offered a glimpse into the quality of interaction taking place.

In “Creating Interfaith Learning Outcomes,” the IFYC addresses what they call the “multifaceted nature of interfaith cooperation” and identifies six categories of student learning. Based on the work of L. Dee Fink, the IFYC categories expand traditional notions of student learning to include affective dimensions of educational experiences; they attempt to account for the way interfaith activities change student perceptions of themselves and others (Fink, 2013, 186-88). One of those categories, what the IFYC calls “caring” because it emphasizes the way students develop connections to interfaith issues, is appropriate to the type of learning students experienced as they created this survey. Although the process of drafting and re-drafting survey questions certainly engaged student writing skills, their gradual realization that, what they were trying to compose were questions that could lead respondents to consider how religion mattered in their lives, introduced a level of empathy into the process that seems to have left a deep impression. For that reason, were the team to craft a specific learning outcome now in advance of this exercise, it would emphasize this “caring” dimension of the learning experience and read as follows:

Learning Outcome: Students will learn to pose questions that demonstrate care for or empathy with listeners/readers.

- By reflecting on their own attitudes toward religion (their own faith tradition or lack of tradition as well as their attitudes toward other traditions), students will identify those questions that reveal what is most important to them.
- Students will learn to craft questions that demonstrate they are sensitive to the beliefs of others and interested in their responses to mutual concerns.

Assessment: short, reflective papers about their own beliefs in, concerns about, and attitudes toward religion; participation in conversations based on the exchange of these statements designed to elicit written questions about religious beliefs and attitudes.

In all phases of the survey undertaking, the Loras team of faculty and students found themselves referring directly or indirectly to the ways Catholic identity at the College related to the project. In developing material for the instrument, students recognized connections between what they learned in drafting questions and what transpires in ongoing campus conversations about the dignity of all humans. When written well, such questions, they learned, betray a level of respect for respondents whose beliefs and experiences may not fit conveniently into any fixed categories. Of course all questions on the survey are prefaced with the assurance of privacy, which itself is another form of respect. But the queries students

actually wrote for the measure involved more than a promise of confidentiality: they also conveyed to survey-takers that our deepest attitudes toward ultimate meaning truly matters. Such writing required students to demonstrate in matters of voice and tone a genuine care for the other.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE SURVEY: BEING PRESENT TO LEARN

Distributing the survey required that students meet first with leaders of those places of worship or businesses that agreed to participate and then with larger groups of potential respondents. In many respects, these encounters comprised “applications” of student knowledge, a second category noted in the IFYC taxonomy of learning objectives for interfaith activities. In a very straight-forward manner, these students applied what they had learned in courses such as Interpersonal Communication and Public Speaking. Having learned to account for the features of a particular audience, students realized that organizational leaders (for example, pastors or business managers) as well as members of the organization itself had certain interests that needed to be addressed in order to secure a strong return on the survey.

But again it was the unexpected learning that captured the attention of students and faculty. In speaking with potential survey participants, these students were learning to apply a certain kind of knowledge about the way people view the world. Moreover, it became clear that the intentional effort to engage community members in interfaith contact had an impact on interfaith learning; in other words, simply being present for the purpose of interfaith activities became a means of applying what students were learning about the value of dialogue (and about the protocol of holding interfaith conversations).

One of the strongest examples of this dynamic came from the very first meeting the group arranged with a local church. When a team member on the project—a young, female Muslim student—attended the initial planning meeting with the pastor of the local Catholic Cathedral and then addressed the Cathedral’s congregation at the close of Sunday Mass, she learned just how extensive her impact had been. As the pastor pointed out, the student was the first Muslim ever to have entered the headquarters for the Dubuque Archdiocese and, as several parishioners noted after she offered the invitation in a formal announcement during Mass at the Cathedral, this also was (to their knowledge) the first time anyone had attended services in a hijab. Before she was even asked to share information about the survey, the student had “applied” some element of the interfaith objectives that motivated the entire project. The experience was momentous for the parishioners, but also for the Muslim student and for the entire research team, who realized from the event the power of personal encounter and its pathway to community leadership. Zach Ritter’s research at UCLA reveals the importance of just such encounters for breaking down stereotypes (Keenan 2015, 162).

His insights accord with the findings of the Pew Research Center study that shows familiarity with people of other traditions promotes positive attitudes (Patel 2012, 77). For these reasons, faculty involved in the project would emphasize that “applied” learning for projects like this should include a heightened sense of self-awareness on the part of students. They need to spend time reflecting on how acts of “applying” knowledge also can mean “representing” that knowledge personally—even physically—in ways other than speaking or writing. For these reasons, the team has concluded that an intentional learning outcome should read something like this:

Learning Outcome: students will learn to apply their knowledge of different forms of communication during interfaith conversation.

- Students will demonstrate that they are aware of multiple forms of communication when they address others about the importance of interfaith initiatives.
- They will reflect on their perceptions of what motivates others in conversations about interfaith.
- They will demonstrate that they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in promoting interfaith conversations.

Assessment: Students will outline their approach to all formal meetings with others about interfaith initiatives and, when the meetings are concluded, they will supplement the outlines with comments about where their conversations showed strengths and weaknesses.

As an expression of its Catholic identity, Loras refers frequently to “dialogue,” which includes a willingness not only to address and listen to the other but to be “present” to others in a variety of settings. Exercises such as those required to distribute this survey (and to promote other interfaith activities as well) become opportunities to demonstrate the long-held Catholic maxim that the contexts for our ideas include the physical world. In other words, it can matter deeply when and how we decide to be physically present to others; in fact, one could argue that such presence is the basis for all Catholic notions of sacramentality. In this case, the experience of dialogue opened students and research subjects alike to the possibility that belief—and the spaces in which we practice it—could include a wider range of people who represent traditions “other” than our own.

ANALYZING COMPONENTS FROM THE SURVEY: LEARNING ABOUT ASSUMPTIONS

As the team continues to collect data from the surveys designed to provide a substantive body of information about religious attitudes, it has focused most of its attention to date on the written comments provided by respondents. Typically each survey has 6-9 questions that invite written answers, and each one could receive anywhere from 15 to 60 submissions, depending upon the total number of people taking the survey.

These questions that require participants to write are open-ended and include 1) some queries that are consistent among all iterations of the survey as well as 2) questions written specifically for a participating institution. Some examples are:

- What are significant issues that the religious population of Dubuque faces?
- How can religious organizations in Dubuque work together to improve our city?
- Compared to three years ago, do you think Dubuque has become a more welcoming environment for people from diverse religious faiths and philosophical perspectives?
- What about the religious climate in Dubuque needs to change or develop?
- Ten years from now, do you think Dubuque will likely be more or less welcoming to diverse faith traditions?
- From time to time, [our business] likes to promote collegiality through social events. Have there been any activities or contexts that have made you uncomfortable? If you are willing, please explain.
- Do you feel that the Islamic Center (TSIC) is sufficiently supportive of your learning?
- How can we grow as faith communities?

Because the team has needed to find ways to summarize responses to questions like these, it has paid particular attention to those modes of learning that IFYC labels “integrative.” In this type of learning, students try to recognize connections between otherwise discreet bits of information (in this case the individual comments) and to synthesize their findings for a particular audience (for example, a final report to the participating organization).

The process that the team has sought to develop involves searching for patterns among the comments, frequently at the level of individual words. Inherent to this exercise is the need to evaluate the relative importance of these patterns to determine if some can be located as subsets of larger or broader statements or ideas. For example, a question about “education” put to the local mosque revealed that many members of the mosque placed great value upon learning, but within that broad category several made a distinction between what should be taught about the public role of Islam in the local school system versus what should be taught about the Muslim faith within the mosque itself. The summary produced by the team needed to account for this distinction within an otherwise overarching concept.

Using terminology borrowed from the Interfaith Youth Core document, the team has chosen to pay particular attention to the way student learning in this phase of the survey integrates knowledge. Upon reflection, the team would recommend a more formal learning outcome for such analytical activities that reads as follows:

Learning Outcome: Students will integrate information to think critically. By reading survey comments carefully, students will learn to identify words and terms that appear frequently. As students analyze the meanings of these words and terms, they will learn to:

- relate them to one another and recognize patterns among them;
- evaluate their relative importance among the total number of comments and integrate them according to the ideas or actions they imply;
- synthesize their relationships to informed readers.

Assessment: quality of participation in group meetings with faculty and other interns; quality of summaries produced for organizations that have ordered the surveys.

Just as the team was surprised at the type of learning students experienced as they wrote and distributed the survey, so they were unprepared for the kind of learning that became important in trying to reach consensus on how to integrate and synthesize survey comments with some consistency. Within the IFYC taxonomy, this unexpected learning belongs to what the classification system calls “the human dimension,” which means that it is learning that makes learners aware of their own assumptions and presuppositions.

Of course, there have been many instances of this type of learning as students involved in the project repeatedly have spoken or written about the way encounters with others about interfaith matters have challenged the outcomes they anticipated. As one student wrote, “a very big learning experience for me was overcoming my misconceptions and preconceived notions that came in the form of fear: ‘what if no one agrees to do this research?’” But identifying and clarifying preconceptions for the sake of a specific activity like analyzing written survey comments required a more systematic approach to uncovering these preconceptions.

Through a process of identifying and then arranging groups of words that recurred throughout the survey comments, it became clear that most of the students had certain preconceived notions of what constituted certain terminologies. For example, the term “religious identity” seemed to carry strong assumptions, for although most survey respondents associated their religious identity with membership in a particular faith tradition, students on the team saw identity as almost exclusively a personal matter. In fact, religious identity for most of the students was so personal that they admitted to a belief that one could forgo certain elements of a tradition if those elements were deemed contrary to personal codes of behavior.

Such potential disparities between survey participants and interpreters have provided the team with a chance to raise substantive issues about the study of religion and its

relationship to negotiated ideas of human nature. In itself, this “finding” is hardly a surprise, and it fits well with descriptions of contemporary American religious life (Alper, 2013). But what the finding reminded the team was that, as members undertake analyses of an instrument like the religious attitudes survey within an educational setting, everyone needs to call attention to the presuppositions that shape acts of interpretation. This is perhaps especially important because the topic is “religion,” an issue that, for many, is simply self-evident.

As the team moves forward, it will continue to create a more specific learning outcomes for the educational experience associated with this part of the survey analysis. At present, the group is considering a learning outcome that looks something like this:

Learning Outcome: Students will consider the human elements at work in their analyses and interpretations.

- As students participate in group discussions of how to interpret survey comments, they will come to see themselves as analysts or interpreters who assume certain beliefs, ideas, and practices.

Assessment: brief, written reflections by students as they undertake the analysis of survey comments; these reflections should describe the experience of creating the summaries (what was easy, difficult, frustrating, etc.) and must explain what aspects of the student’s background accounts for the experience (academic background and preparation, personal outlook or bias, etc.).

The Loras College statement on its Catholic identity points out that the “Catholic tradition has stressed both the dignity of the individual and communal participation in the formation of personal conscience.” By paying particular attention to the assumptions we make about the relationship between personal and communal identities, we can be better prepared to understand that others within religious traditions may make different assumptions that require us to pose careful initial questions and to follow-up with queries that clarify the responses we receive. One of the unique characteristics of Catholic colleges like Loras is that they provide a platform for an authentic engagement with diverse identities grounded in the Church’s teachings on the universality of human dignity and truth as it is encountered in the world. As George Dennis O’Brien argues in his 2002 study, *The Idea of a Catholic University*, “the Catholic university distinguishes itself from its grand secular counterparts insofar as it opens its life and study to the realm of ‘the real,’ the participatory immersion within which love, commitment, and decision have lodging” (O’Brien, 2002, 213).

CONCLUSION

The development of a unique research instrument for exploring attitudes regarding religious diversity has had unexpected benefits for student learning while, at the same time, holding considerable promise for impact in the Dubuque community. While the initiators of the project believed that its intentionally collaborative nature would help to provide students with practical skills in data collection, data analysis, and research writing, they did not anticipate the extent or complexity of student learning that unfolded. The guidelines constructed by Interfaith Youth Core, "Creating Interfaith Learning Outcomes," were an important feature in helping to identify characteristics of student learning.

"If we believe in a nation where people from different faith backgrounds live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty," Eboo Patel writes, "we will have to make the teaching and practice of interfaith cooperation a priority on our nation's campuses" (Patel 2013, 102). According to James Keenan, building a culture of ethics on campuses comes from increasing and modeling collaboration within the institution (Keenan 2015, 172). Catholic Social Teaching, informed by seminal documents like *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*, provides a foundation for extending that ethical culture beyond the confines of the institution into functioning partnerships with the surrounding community. Its intentional engagement with the world gives Catholic education its distinctive flavor, and community-based research provides students and faculty alike with an experience of that encounter that has pedagogic benefits as well as moral significance.

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