

Keeping the History of Christianity Contemporary

Canvas Pages and Yellowdig in Introduction to Christianity

Context

“Introduction to Christianity” (Religion 240) is designed as a historical overview of the evolution of Christianity. We cover more than 2,000 years in nine weeks. One of my objectives was that students be able to connect history with contemporary iterations of some of the long debates in Christian thinking. I also wanted them to experience and think about Christianity as something that is still in flux. Because this was a lecture-based class without discussion sections, I was looking for a way for students to communicate with one another.

Project

The first part of the project was integrating Yellowdig into the curriculum. Each week, students had to both post an article of interest to them and comment on another post at least once.

The second and more substantial part of the project was the Worship Observation Pages. Students were asked to observe a Christian church in Evanston in pre-assigned groups of three or four. The teaching assistant and I gave brief introductions on how to conduct these observations and a Canvas teaching consultant gave an introduction on using Canvas Pages.

With that information, students attended a religious service at an assigned congregation. They then created a Page in Canvas documenting their experience. Pages included introductions to the Christian denomination, two to three images of the space from the visit, a short soundscape from the service, and a 500-word description of the worship service. Near the end of the quarter, each group gave a presentation of their webpage to their classmates. The presentations were both an ethnographic overview of their observations and an introduction to the myriad denominations in American Christianity. Students shared their Pages and described their experiences. After the conclusion of the group projects, students completed short individual reflections on their experiences.

Objectives & Outcomes

My project had two goals. First, students had to put their knowledge of Christianity in conversation with Christianity as it looks in the world. Second, students had to compare and contrast Christian communities through learning from their classmates.

On a brief post-course survey, students rated the worship observations as the assignment that most contributed to their knowledge about Christianity. In particular, the assignment allowed them to move between the classroom and the daily practices of religion. One student said they most appreciated "drawing connections between the history of the denomination and what we actually saw in the observation." Another student commented on the value of the Pages and the presentations, saying that "listening to everyone's presentations and getting firsthand accounts of people's experiences at various worship services" most helped them learn about Christianity.

Yellowdig helped me overcome the impersonal nature of a lecture course. This class did not have discussion sections, so one of my TA's tasks was to grade the Yellowdig participation. She commented regularly and tracked trends in what kinds of stories students shared. For example, she realized by the third week of class that there seemed to be a strong contingent of evangelical Christian students in the class. Multiple posts on Christianity and the election season also allowed me to make connections between 17th-century debates and the 21st century. Yellowdig helped students "learn...about modern perspectives and events regarding Christianity that I would not have otherwise noticed," according to one student.

Results

Students were courageous in their worship observations and in posting articles on Yellowdig. I found that Yellowdig also gave students a voice in my lectures. I was able to incorporate some of their articles in lecture—topics like why Donald Trump presents himself as Christian and Pope Francis's response to the Zika virus. I am not sure I would have included these topics!

Students were able to see and interact with Christianity as an active force in contemporary life in the U.S. My primary assessment is that students found creative and personal ways to engage with both of these tasks. Students' own expectations about Christianity were challenged and reshaped through both of these projects. A Catholic student was taken aback when a member of a Protestant congregation she visited asked if she was sure she was really Christian. Another student worked very hard to be clear about the Episcopal Church's history as he detailed its complexity for his peers before commenting on his experience at Mass.

Lessons Learned

I would have had students complete their Pages in a way that would have allowed them to be shared with the entire class after presentations. Student feedback made it clear that they learned from one another and would have welcomed this. I also could have done more in drawing student posts from Yellowdig into class. When my TA and I were active on Yellowdig, students participated even more. One thing I did not anticipate is the amount of logistical work that resulted from adding Yellowdig into the course requirements. The most important thing I learned from this project was that students benefited from seeing the ways what they learned in class related to daily life. One takeaway for me is that creating projects that rely on students' imaginations improves the environment of the classroom and keeps everyone more engaged.