The Questionnaire

What is the most and least successful course you have taught?

Rebecca Alpert

Associate Professor, Department of Religion, Temple University

Teaching "Religion in Philadelphia"

I have taught undergraduate courses at Temple University (a bit of Jewish Studies but mostly Religion and Women's Studies) for many years, but a pedagogy course I took this past summer transformed the way I defined success in my teaching. While I used to place more emphasis on the quality of my lectures and the dynamism of class discussion, I now also measure success by how well I design assignments and what students learn in the process of doing them. During the fall 2010 semester I had an opportunity to test out my new criteria in a course I created for our general education program, "Religion in Philadelphia," which I taught for the first time.

The most successful assignment was a "Mapping Religious Philadelphia" project. Students ventured out in groups of four to observe together what religion looked like on the streets in a Philadelphia neighborhood of their choosing. I created the groups based on how students rated themselves on the skills needed to complete the project—powers of observation, knowledge of the city and its transportation systems, access to digital photography equipment, the ability to create maps and make PowerPoints, and comfort with oral presentation. In preparation I showed them a PowerPoint I had created that highlighted different aspects of religious life, encouraging them to look beyond churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques to other dimensions, from billboards and graffiti to grave stones and historical markers. The projects they presented in class were fabulous examples of what students can do when asked to work together to discover and create. They also let me know how much they enjoyed not only doing the assignment but learning from each other in the evaluations I asked them to write about their experiences.

The least successful assignment was a final portfolio, in which I asked students to collect their work, resubmit the best examples (and something they revised), and write a short essay reflecting on what was most beneficial and what was most difficult for them. Judging from their essays, I didn't craft the assignment well. The prompts I gave did not evoke the level of critical thinking and analysis that I wanted. In the future, I will write better questions, asking for cumulative and synthetic judgments about their work that I hope will elicit more thoughtful responses.

I highly recommend finding ways to challenge students to do work that encourages their active participation and reflection—it makes teaching more productive and more fun!

Mark Baker

Associate Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Director of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University

After a quarter of a century of teaching and watching the blackboard change to a whiteboard and now a digital screen, I've moved many of my classes from the lecture room to off-shore sites. Over the past year I've taught an intensive, two-week course on the aftermath of conflict and genocide in South Africa and Rwanda; a course on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Israel and the Palestinian Territories; and journeyed with student groups through the landscapes of post-Holocaust memory in Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, Krakow, and Vilnius. Students emerge from these immersions in the 'traumascapes, of recent' history engaged and transformed by the encounter. Of course there is the compulsory research essay, readings, and exam, but nothing in the classroom can match a conversation with a Rwandan survivor whose flesh is marked by a machete wound; or a visit to a church near Kigali where the bones of the slaughtered worshippers bear witness to their final prayers; or attendance at a genocide tribunal on a rural hilltop in Rwanda; or being guided through the alleyways of Soweto by a fellow student who grew up there; or a visit to an abandoned wooden synagogue near the forests of Ponary; or taking the train from Berlin to Wannsee and stopping at Platform 17 from where Germany's Jews were deported; or moving from a hotel in West Jerusalem to East Jerusalem; or visiting Abraham's tomb in Hebron twice—once from the Jewish side and then again from the Muslim side; or meeting a student in Deheishe refugee camp, and then listening to a parent speak of his hope despite losing a daughter in a suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem.

My worst course? The one I'll be giving next year where I find myself alone in the lecture room, while the students are all at home listening to me talk to myself through technologies that encourage absence. I might just turn off the button and see if anyone notices.

Michael Feige

Senior Lecturer in Israel Studies, Sociology, and Anthropology, Ben-Gurion University

Coming for a year from Israel to Emory University, Atlanta, I was required to teach two courses on Israel and two general courses in Sociology. For one of those courses, I chose "Introduction to Sociology" (101). Teaching that course often in Israel, and having experience in teaching more advanced sociology courses, I was under the illusion that even if you would wake me up in the middle of the night, I would be able to stand before a class and deliver an inspiring appearance. That turned out not to be the case. I learned how culture-specific an introduction to a seemingly universalistic academic discipline can be. I knew Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, but I did not truly know my students. When teaching the sociology of religion, class, ethnicity, deviance, and gender, I found it difficult to relate to their life experiences. It was a sobering experience for me, as the supposedly easy course turned out to be the most exhausting, time-consuming, and anxiety-generating that I have ever done.

My best classes would be small seminars of highly motivated advanced students, discussing contested topics of Israeli historiography, touching upon their identity as Israelis, their moral convictions, and also, tacitly, the turbulent academic world that they hope to

join. Those miraculous, intense encounters sometimes do happen, and when they do, they may have a profound influence on the students. This year, however, my first-year introductory course on Israeli society, with seventy students, is becoming an unexpected pleasure. It all started by accident. Checking attendance, I realized that the students—for reasons beyond my grasp—added their identity numbers to their names. I told them that, not being from the Mossad, I have no use for those numbers. I asked them to write their majors instead. The following week, they were requested to add their hometown. Growing in confidence, I moved to all kinds of simple opinion polls, presenting the results in the following class. When discussing the dominance of the army in the Israeli cultural sphere, I pointed out that last week, when the question was what Israeli movie they liked best, most students chose movies having the army as their main theme. The question on the favorite Israeli song showed that most students chose songs that were composed and performed before they were born, and about a third picked songs probably older than their parents. And the most popular prime minister, according to students of Israel Studies at Ben-Gurion University, was Yitzhak Rabin, with the namesake of the university coming only second. Learning about Israeli society became a joint experience full of surprises, for me as well as for the students. For Israeli students, studying their own society is both thrilling and unnerving; the polls, limited and "unscientific" as they were, stressed the connection between the material learned and their living experiences, in a totally different and more satisfying way than my "Introduction to Sociology" course mentioned before.

Christine Hayes

Robert F. and Patricia R. Weis Professor of Religious Studies in Classical Judaica, Yale University

My most successful courses are those in which I manage to render unfamiliar that which is familiar. A good example is my "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible." Students who take this course invariably enter the course with some presuppositions about the Bible and/or the deity who figures as one of its central characters, deriving from religious education or simply reflecting general cultural assertions (positive or negative) about the Bible. I love creating the conditions in which these comfortable presuppositions are challenged, dissolved, and ultimately replaced by a more profound understanding of the complex, multifaceted, and multivocal nature of the text. The intellectual and personal excitement this generates in students is palpable.

In general, I think that any course that centers on the study of religious texts will succeed to the degree that the students come to see that they cannot exempt religious texts from the kind of loving scrutiny, wrestling, and pummeling with which we favor every other kind of text in our world. When approaching religious texts, many students put on kid gloves while others, animated by an iconoclastic fervor, treat them dismissively and derisively. I hope that in my Bible course and other text-based courses, students learn to transcend these dichotomies so as to encounter and struggle with the texts in all their rich complexity—their grandeur, their banality, their pathos, their self-contradiction, and, surprisingly enough, their profound humor (a feature students so often miss).

My least successful course was a general survey of the Ancient Near East taught at the very beginning of my career. Although I tried to make the lectures as interesting as possible, it seemed to me that the course fell flat—it lacked the sparkle, intellectual energy, and excitement that are such important elements of good teaching. As I thought about why this might be the case, I realized that it was because I did not have—and therefore did not convey to my students—a good account of why what I was teaching mattered. In preparing a new course now, I think long and hard about why what I am teaching matters. This has an influence not only on what I choose to teach but on the energy and excitement with which I present it.

Robin Judd

Associate Professor of History and Jewish Studies, The Ohio State University

Perspective's query concerning my most and least successful courses summoned a hodgepodge of embarrassing, exhilarating, and meaningful memories. It may seem facile, but my teaching zeniths and nadirs are inexorably linked to my pedagogical goals. In the last decade, I have come to identify five metrics: Do I get to know my audience? Do I challenge my students to take risks in order to achieve knowledge? Do I create a bridge between my classroom and the larger communities in which we live? Do I organize my courses around specific themes and questions? Do I promote discussion about the class material inside and outside of the classroom?

One course stands in stark relief. My first year at Ohio State, I taught a seminar entitled "Gender and Jewish History." Despite the fact that my teaching and research interests directly informed the course, the class was a disaster. Of the two women and twenty men enrolled in the class, few expressed excitement with the reading list or assignments. Almost no one was interested in questions of gender or in the Jewish experience. Students had taken the course because they needed a class on Tuesdays at 1:30. Others expressed their now-dashed hopes that they would meet a Jewish girl (they had, but I was their professor and married).

The class bombed. I did not make the materials relevant. I focused on maintaining high academic standards and teaching the material I wished to address. I bulldozed my way through the class and flopped.

That year, I realized that I needed to set clear pedagogical goals, one of which had to be taking the time to know and appreciate my audience. OSU students represent varying classes, generations, ethnicities, religions, and races. They come from inner-city Cleveland, Appalachia, the farms of Western Ohio, former industrial towns, and war-torn countries. My Jewish history courses enroll football players, Somali refugees, marching band musicians, state-chess champions, retired police officers, future lawyers, and soldiers who get called for active duty midway through the quarter. In the last ten years of teaching, I've found ways to take advantage of their differences, skills, and talents. While I may prefer some courses ("History of the Holocaust") to others ("Western Civilization"), I hope that my classes have become more successful as I have become committed to addressing and meeting specific metrics.

Robert Kawashima

Associate Professor of Religion and Jewish Studies, University of Florida

Not unlike Socrates, I find it necessary to begin by professing my ignorance. I know neither what a successful class is in itself, nor what its outward signs might be. If Plato is to be trusted, Socrates himself was a very great teacher. For this reason, many of us profess to employ his "method" in the classroom. But

can we agree on what this method actually consists in? Are Plato's "Socratic" dialogues, for example—not actual (spoken) dialogues, but their literary (written) representation—properly Socratic? Is the ideal class, then, necessarily a discussion? Is it even legitimate to practice this method in the modern university? Which is to ask: Can and should the modern search for "knowledge" imitate the ancient search for "wisdom"? And since we know how the *polis* rewarded Socrates, we do well to distinguish carefully between the appearance of success and the "real" thing.

The success of a class should, I assume, be measured against its goal. Need I add that students, administrators, and instructors often have different goals in mind? My aim as an instructor is simply this: the transmission of knowledge. My teaching is thus structurally identical to my scholarship, adding only that the latter is in a reciprocal relationship with other scholars. Instruction thus presupposes the ongoing acquisition of knowledge, namely, research, which takes time. This "free" time may appear to be a mere luxury, but it is, in fact, absolutely necessary for acquiring and transmitting knowledge. I say "transmission," however, and not "reception." The receptiveness of one's audience—their inclination to agree, approve, etc.—is extrinsic to knowledge as such. The question is, then, whether one can and should employ instructional techniques that are unrelated to the specific knowledge being transmitted, as one can, for example, employ convincing rhetorical techniques that are unrelated to the particular thesis being argued.

Ken Koltun-Fromm

Associate Professor of Religion, Haverford College

The most successful class I have taught is the one I just completed, "Modern Jewish Thought," in the Spring 2011 term at Haverford College (you can find the syllabus at: http://dvar.haverford.edu/courses/modern-jewish-thought/). I invited eight of my colleagues to suggest readings for our Monday class sessions, and then send me their scholarly work on this class material for students to read for our Wednesday meetings. For example, I asked Noam Pianko to suggest readings on Mordecai Kaplan for Monday, and I provided copies of Noam's work on Kaplan to my students for Wednesday. All of this provided the framework for Noam to actually "visit" the classroom via Skype on the very day that we read his work on Kaplan. I mirrored this framework for each of the eight participants: readings in modern Jewish thought for Monday, my colleague's research for Wednesday, and a Skype hookup so that my students could engage directly with scholars in the field. All eight scholars then arrived on campus at the end of the semester for a symposium in modern Jewish thought and culture. Technology (Skype) and funding (Hurford Humanities Center grant) expanded my classroom beyond Haverford's borders.

My least successful course undermined the very goals of that modern Jewish thought class. Early in my career, I team-taught a course in "Ethics and the Good Life" with one of my mentors at Haverford. Big mistake, for I foolishly attempted to emulate his teaching style and ended up becoming what I was not—certainly not a good life by any standard of assessment. Teaching is a praxis, I soon realized, and one enacted with distinctive style and character. My colleagues in modern Jewish thought projected their own sense of purpose and concern into the classroom; I wish I had done the same in mine.

Tony Michels

George L. Mosse Associate Professor of American Jewish History, University of Wisconsin at Madison

What is the least successful course I have taught? If you asked my former student, Alia, she might say it was my undergraduate survey, "The American Jewish Experience." After taking the course in 1999, Alia regretted that I made the Jews seem "ordinary." I gave lectures on migration patterns, economic niches, intracommunal debates, and other aspects of social, cultural, and political history. I considered these topics interesting and significant, but Alia brought a different perspective to bear. A devout Christian (of an unspecified denomination) and an African-American, she expected a course that would somehow do justice to God's Chosen People. The Jews are special, Alia believed, so she wanted to know why I depicted them prosaically, as if they were like any other people. I do not recall what I said, but I know I failed to give a cogent answer. Alia's question pointed to others I had not adequately considered, probably because they always seemed too daunting. Does Jewish history differ in any profound way from that of other ethnic, religious, or racial groups? Is there anything inherently unique about Jewish history? If not, why do I teach it? Why not subsume Jews under some general rubric? I suppose that if I accepted the theological underpinning of Alia's criticism, I would have reached definitive conclusions by now. But, as it stands, I am still working through the questions, hopefully to the benefit of all my courses. I thank Alia for prompting me.

Don Seeman

Associate Professor of Religion and Jewish Studies, Emory University

I have been teaching long enough to know that "success" in teaching can be a very difficult thing to measure. Sometimes students come to me long after a course that I considered less than fully successful to tell me that, for them, it was a life-changing event. Do I measure success by that one student or by the others who seemed less than fully engaged? How much should I care about the consumerist metric of formal student evaluations, and how much should I care about my own view of the integrity and importance of the material I taught? There are no singular answers to these questions, and a lot also depends on the life-course of the teacher—is she pre-tenure or post? Still, all things considered, the most problematic course I ever taught was a 300-student "Introduction to Anthropology" that I taught in Hebrew before I was fluent. In retrospect, my cultural assumptions were all wrong: it upset me that students read the newspaper, chatted, or even spoke on the telephone while I lectured, though I later watched the same course taught by a successful senior faculty member who just spoke to the front row and ignored everyone else in the room. There was one student who told me that the course helped him decide to go on in the field, but it made me want to run in the other direction.

By contrast, the most successful course I ever taught on all counts has been a recurring graduate seminar in the "Ethnography of Religious Experience," which I give in Emory's Graduate Division of Religion. It allows me to teach methodology and research ethics along with books I truly love, and to induct students into an intellectual tradition that I care about. The best part of all is that students have taken what I taught and run with it in their own directions—two participants organized a whole conference on ethnography and theology last year. Isn't this why we all have gone into teaching?

Nancy Sinkoff

Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and History and Chair of Jewish Studies, Rutgers University

I often tell my students that crafting a convincing historical argument can be compared to an attorney making a summation argument to a jury. She has to tell a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end, and must adduce evidence that convinces the jury that the narrative holds together and is "true," with the understanding that the evidence has been selected in order to make a specific claim.

I like to tell historical narratives and my most successful teaching, therefore, takes place in two broad surveys of Jewish history, where I teach frontally and tell students how I conceptualize the Jewish past. The first, "JSC 2: The Early Modern/Modern Experience," starts at the end of the fifteenth century and culminates in the interwar years in both Europe and the United States, and the second, "Jewish Power, Jewish Politics," begins with the war with Rome and ends with the contestations between the government of the modern State of Israel and its Jewish inhabitants in the territories.

In JSC 2, students are exposed to the political, economic, social, and religious transformations that marked the transition from subjects to citizens, from a community whose status was based on privileges to that of individuals with rights, from societies based on hierarchy to those committed to equality, and from identities based on fate to those based on self-conscious choice. A Western bias, with the centrality of the process of political emancipation at its core, is explicit in this narrative and I foreground it in my introductory lecture. At the end of the course, we test the hypotheses of these transformations by comparing the structure, identities, politics, varieties of religious commitments, and languages of interwar Jewry to those of their early modern predecessors. In general, I feel that I have convinced the jury, that is, of helping them understand how vastly different contemporary Jewish life is from its premodern past.

In "Jewish Power, Jewish Politics," I approach the wide variety of Jewish political behavior in the diaspora by presenting students with a simplified dichotomy between the quiescent politics of the Sages and the adversarial politics of the rebels during the War with Rome. We then move rapidly through Jewish history, examining the Bar Kokhba revolt, the "royal alliance" in medieval Iberia, the "Noble-Jewish" nexus in early modern Poland, and the étatism of the Haskalah, highlighting the fact that for most of Jewish history, *dina dimalkhuta dina* was understood by Jewish leaders to be the best strategy for safeguarding Jewish interests and security. We then look at the birth of modern, radical Jewish politics in Eastern Europe and its migration to the American diaspora, spending time with the modern Jewish labor movement, the attraction of Jews to socialism, communism, liberalism, and to postwar neoconservatism, interrogating the topics in light of the introductory dichotomy. Sections on Jewish political behavior during the Holocaust and among Jewish settlers who do not wish to uphold the *dina* of a Jewish *malkhuta* close the course. While I always pose rhetorical questions, encourage questions, and read primary sources with my students, the course's success has derived, in great part, from my mastery of the material and ability to communicate it in a frontal style to my students.

My least successful courses have been seminars, no matter what the topic ("Modern Jewish Historiography," "Community and Crisis," "What If You Can't Go Home? Cultural Effects of Nazism and Communism on Postwar Lives," "Jewish Historical Fiction") and I attribute this to the fact that my undergraduates, in general, are daunted by the demands of reading sufficient historical material on their own, analyzing its key features, and articulating its meanings in small group discussions. I have come to the conclusion that in order for seminars to be successful, I have to spend far more time in class on the mechanics of being a student of history and far less time on actual historical content and texts. Seminars are thus far less satisfying to me as an educator, and I therefore prefer frontal lecturing, enhanced by relevant films, analysis of images, and structured in-class discussions of primary sources.

Rebecca L. Stein

Associate Professor of Anthropology, Duke University

For the past ten years, at a variety of research institutions, I have taught an introductory course on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Because of the need for brevity within the advertised course schedule, the full title of the course—"Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict"—rarely appeared on the books. Herein a symptomatic irony lies. For while the language of "conflict" is legible to many students across the political spectrum, the very term "Palestine" is understood as incendiary by many, Jewish students numbering heavily among them—a signifier that suggests not merely "bias" on the part of the professor in question, or so some charge, but also her refusal to countenance histories of Jewish oppression and victimhood. For other students, Arabs numbering heavily among them, the potential absence of this term signals acquiescence to the dominant narrative of the conflict—one which has effectively absented Palestinian indigeneity from the historical record. The central project of this class is less to mediate between these largely incommensurate positions than to refuse the notion of a history or political conflict understood in dyadic terms—that is, as Jewish suffering versus Palestinian suffering; a history in which victimhood is mutually exclusive, the claims of one party canceling those of the other.

The power of this class lies less in the assigned material, and in the stories and reflections it elicits from participants. Over the course of ten years, I have heard about the Jewish grandmother who emigrated to Palestine from Germany in the 1930s; the Palestinian relatives who lived as refugees in Lebanon; the family from East Africa who never met any Jews, and mistrusted all accounts of anti-Semitism; the Israeli extended family, originally from Argentina, who only encountered Palestinians during their army tours of duty in the occupied Palestinian territories. The success of this class lies in the power of these personal narratives—ones that, taken together, can complicate the dyadic model in ways that few academic sources can. Yet this is also the source of the class's failure. On the final day of instruction, when students are invited to speak in personal terms about "what they really think" (an idiom I usually discourage), I am always stunned by the number of students who return to the comfort of the dyadic account, using the language of identity politics ("As a Jew, I think. . ." or, "As a Palestinian, I think. . .") to avoid the complications that the class material has introduced. I tend to conclude that academic language, with its tools of analysis and critique, is too dispassionate to dismantle beliefs that are, for many of these students, integral to not merely their public performance of self, but perhaps their private understandings as well.