



Integrating theory and research in the undergraduate Islamic studies classroom

Caleb Elfenbein, *Grinnell College*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

March 16, 2016

Tags: scaffolding learning | critical thinking | Islamophobia | teaching theory | student research

More often than not, it seems, students register for courses on Islam wanting to learn “stuff.” In a moment when the ubiquity of Islam in public consciousness is matched by general illiteracy about its history and diverse forms, these expectations are tempting. Yet if we don’t spend time really developing theoretical frameworks for understanding that stuff, then are we ultimately doing much more than presenting curiosities, intellectual knick-knacks? Without explicit and sustained theorization, we create the mistaken impression that information stands on its own. That said, working with theory in an undergraduate classroom might actually be one of the hardest things about teaching in the humanities and social sciences. How can we go about teaching theory in a way that really engages undergraduates in the Islamic studies classroom? I’ve been experimenting with scaffolded mini research exercises toward this end, which come with the added benefit of providing students with much sought after research opportunities.

Sometimes, we can construct courses around certain theoretical questions because there is a sufficiently developed body of related scholarship to build around. Yet our learning goals for a particular course do not always line up neatly with existing theoretical work treating Islam—or even the study of religion more generally. Even when they do, I have come to have some real questions about how effective simply presenting theory, and perhaps even following how other scholars apply that theory, can be in teaching students how to *work* with theory. This

semester, I am teaching a new course, *Being Muslim in America*, whose learning goals don't really conform to existing theoretical discussions in Islamic studies. I thought I might take this opportunity to come up with a scaffolded mini research assignment that could provide a framework for course inquiry *and* help students work with theory to analyze material of their choosing.

Collaborating with a research librarian at my institution, I devised a small assignment requiring students to apply a theory that on its face has little or nothing to do with the study of religion, but that introduces crucial questions in the work of the course. I wish I could say that I had everything perfectly planned from the start. Execution has definitely required improvisation, but at least I now have a model to refine.

Driven by the contemporary environment of Islamophobia, I want my students in this course to consider the conditions in which Muslim communities have been or sought to be included or excluded from broader American public life. Doing this well means that we have to spend some time figuring out what exactly "public life" means, which requires us to...theorize. There is a rich body of literature analyzing the place of religion in public life, but none (that I know of) that really engages the particulars of American Islam. So to begin this work I have students read articles about the nature of "publics" as vehicles for solidarity—or exclusion. Among them is Michael Warner's "Public and Counterpublics," in which he argues that within any social collectivity there are myriad publics, some expressions of dominant perspectives on a given matter and others self-conscious expressions of opposition. These publics and counterpublics, he suggests, always coalesce around a text, though it is not entirely clear what precisely he means by "text." This was definitely a sticking point that I had not anticipated.

In my syllabus, I jump right from reading and discussing the article to a library session in which students work with a research librarian to identify a text that seeks to include or exclude American Muslims from public life. When I walked into class the day we were to discuss Warner's article, however, I could see that I needed to take a step back. It's a difficult article, and the look of apprehension on the students' faces made it clear I needed to improvise. So, we began class that day with a foundational question: What does it mean to theorize? It was a wonderful collective exercise, and it created a great way to begin breaking down Warner's article. [Student feedback at the time suggested that we could have spent a whole session at the beginning of the unit talking about what it means to theorize!] By the time we got to the end of the session we had come to the conclusion that what Warner means by a "text" is really an expression of an idea—in any medium—that grounds a common experience of some kind for people. This common experience is then what generates a public.

My students did a great job locating varied “texts” that sought to include or exclude American Muslims from public life, and many tracked the circulation of these texts via diverse social media platforms to figure out whether they had, in fact, generated publics or counterpublics. I then had students present on their findings, making it clear how they used Warner’s theory, which at no point mentions Islam or Muslims, to understand how the text they selected contributes to the conditions in which American Muslims participate (or not) in public life in the United States. Some of my students came to the conclusion that Warner’s theory does not really help make sense of the texts they selected, but when it comes to learning about theory this is as important an outcome as any other. In virtually all cases, though, students came away feeling like applying a theory heightened their capacity to learn about and reflect on the conditions of public life for American Muslims.

I found this to be an effective assignment overall because it scaffolded the process of applying theory, it allowed students space for exploration based on their own interests, and it contributed to the cultivation of research skills. Of course, studying Islam in the American context means that primary sources are plentiful and readily available. But now that I think about it, perhaps this is a good reason to begin any kind of survey course about Islam with a “frameworks” section that includes theory-driven mini research exercises exploring how the conditions *in which* we study Islam affects what we see and how we see it, promoting crucial self-reflection in the classroom.

I finished drafting this post a few days ago, and between then and now I have been going back and forth about how transferable this kind of exercise is outside of my own classroom at a small liberal arts college. Can you imagine doing something like this? Do you have other kinds of exercises that in your experience have helped students work with theory in the Islamic studies classroom? Are mini research exercises the best way to do so? More broadly, does the premise of the post—that really digging into and asking students to work with theory is a crucial element of undergraduate education—resonate with your experience?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/03/integrating-theory-and-research-in-the-undergraduate-islamic-studies-classroom/>