GRANT: REDRAWING THE MAP OF (WORLD) RELIGION

PRESENTING QUESTION/FOCUS

This project's presenting question was whether one might use geographic and spatial technologies to foster literate and reflective response to a range of popular misperceptions of religion (both within and beyond the academy). Through developing collaborative curricula that leverage digital tools in ways that counter the impulse to locate religion outside of space and time, its focus was aimed at (1) countering characterization of religion as a divisive and destabilizing force, by involving students in conceptually "redrawing the map" of world religious landscapes, shaped by cross-cultural confluence, intersection and exchange; (2) brokering informed consideration of religion as a generative locus of creative, artistic, ethical and scientific thought, through virtual exploration of the cultural and geo-political contours of historical and contemporary terrain; (3) balancing broad representation of Religion as a single, 'stable' or 'static' repository of 'truth', by engaging malleable models that emphasize – rather than efface – the supple character of religious belief and practice. Beyond this, our grant work was structured in an iterative series of cross-disciplinary configurations.

DESCRIPTION OF GRANT ACTIVITY

In Spring of 2016 we ran three full-day workshops that involved an interdisciplinary cadre of World Religions and Spatial Studies students in re-conceiving, and 're-drawing' traditional maps of historical and contemporary religious landscapes. In every respect, immediate results exceeded expectations. Success might be measured by the twenty to twenty-five students that enthusiastically participated in each day's morning and/or afternoon sessions, or the ways in which preparing and staging the workshops generated innovative, cross-disciplinary engagement. As exciting was the degree to which effective pedagogical design and implementation shaped conversation that moved beyond the classroom, driving animated lunchtime exchange, and wider campus discourse.

The grant's second phase took place during the fall of 2016. Responding to suggestions from students who had participated in the spring sessions, workshops were re-formatted into six evening modules. Like their full day counterparts, each session included a meal, which also served as the discussion forum for a common core of readings. Broader focus remained both technical and conceptual. However, technical components were refined to increase student agency over the tools being deployed. In subsequent assessment, the effectively of this term's 'slow tech' approach afforded much food for thought.

During the Spring of 2017, our final set of workshops followed the six-session format introduced during the Autumn of 2016. However, two otherwise positive developments – a dramatic increase in enrollment, and a shift in personnel (our young GIS/Religious Studies alumna was hired by a geographical software firm) – introduced a hybrid range of challenges that made this third series of workshops much 'bumpier' than anticipated.

Beyond assessment, our plan for the Summers of 2016 and 2017 was to fine-tune curricular development and implementation. Due to a series of unawaited personnel shifts, this proved more challenging than anticipated. In turn, student requests to continue project work into the summer months were unexpectedly easy to orchestrate. During the summer of 2017, a portion of unused grant money – originally budgeted for the summer of 2016 – was re-deployed to support synthetic research on four primary student projects, and presentation of posters at the Esri Annual Users Conference.

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In the days following this unawaited chance for seminal engagement with a spatially savvy, regional, national, and international audience, we took time to substantively reflect on the consuming investments that had occupied the prior eighteen months. In a stroke of good fortune, these reflections afforded opportunity to extend collegial conversations that had begun in the context of our Wabash Departmental Grant workshops. As a result, this period devoted to summative assessment simultaneously spurred ideas for collaboration that retain rich promise for imagining the 'next steps' implicit to 'Redrawing the Map'.

OVERALL LEARNING

In reflecting on what we have learned, the short answer is 'much'! Without exception, it was surprisingly easy to attract enthusiastic, cross-disciplinary student investment that remained genuine, energetic, and sustained. As summarized by Shana Higgins, "they drove the conversation". Although the workshops did not offer conclusive answers, the work of wrestling with questions of taxonomy – and the rich complexity of both historical and contemporary mapped landscapes – proved far more compelling than we had anticipated. We were continually surprised by the textured (and sometimes troubling) surfaces produced by simple strategies aimed at 'redrawing the map'. As subsequent conversation extended beyond the workshop setting, an uptick in new Religious Studies majors resulted in dissemination of ideas across a wider range of disciplinary discourse.

Broader knowledge came as the result of implicit challenges. Although we were given due warning in our earliest Wabash consultations, the 'fault lines' that lay just below the surface of both disciplinary and institutional history continued to surprise. Having worked informally for most of the past decade in each of the arenas that grounded this grant, we felt we had a clear sense of the 'seams' and 'fissures' of the territory being explored. However, we repeatedly discovered more subtle contests by 'tripping over' the cracks in what looked, initially, like a smooth collegial landscape.

As many hurdles were mundane. The learning curve inherent to realistic coordination of logistics, budgeting, planning, publicity, and communication is truly steep! Reconciling vision with institutional policy and politics; balancing workload, with project priorities; and aligning interdisciplinary and departmental investments, each fostered renewed appreciation for the measure of trust that remains essential to any collegial and/or collaborative work. Beyond this, here and elsewhere, claiming space in the academy for Religious Studies, in particular, and the Humanities, in general, rarely proved as tractable as proposed on paper – or articulated in informal verbal agreements.

Perhaps the most important learning remains integral to the emphases that grounded the grant, as a whole. In our initial proposal, navigating the grant's cross-disciplinary landscape in ways that benefit all involved was a primary goal. An iterative process of affirming success, while re-thinking areas of implicit constraint, readily confirmed the importance of these aims. However, gaining a clearer grasp of the complexity inherent to institutional, disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and pedagogical dynamics, increasingly underscored the value implicit to distinguishing between what is conceptually 'possible' and what is actually 'feasible'. As we contemplate 'next steps', it is perhaps this wisdom that will prove most essential to savvy and strategic leveraging of collaborative energies (and resources), in joyful and meaningful ways.