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Studies in Religion: Judaism

Instructor

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Institution

Dept. of Philosophy and Religion, U. of Northern Iowa

Course Level and Type

elective in the Study of Religion major

Hours of Instruction

3 hours a week, 2 days a week

Enrolment and Last Year Taught

20 students; taught alternate years

Course Philosophy

This course places critical thinking skills at the center. In doing so, the professor is committed to the pedagogical values listed below.

- Critical thinking is a learnable skill. A professor and her or his students collaborate as resources for each other in learning this skill. We are all learners.
- Problems, questions, and issues serve as the source of motivation for learners in this class.
- The course is assignment centered rather than text or lecture oriented.
- The goals, methods, and evaluative components of this course emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it.
- Learning is strengthened when students formulate and justify their ideas in writing.
- Learning is strengthened when students exercise sophisticated skills in observing the environment around them. In this class, a primary environment will be Jewish communities on the World Wide Web.
- Learning in this course de-emphasizes individual mastery of the resources. It focuses instead on teaching the process of information discovery and evaluation.

Course Objectives

This course has several objectives:

1. To develop intellectual skills of observing, classifying, applying, analyzing, and evaluating data associated with the practice of contemporary Judaism. Problem-solving and effective communication are central values in this course.
2. To introduce students to a variety of learning processes—inductive and deductive-- and to assist students in developing facility in using these processes. Students will be expected to enhance their understanding of how researchers acquire knowledge and to begin to work as researchers themselves.
3. To acquaint students with the beliefs and practices of Judaism and to prepare students to share with others descriptive and reflective analyses of these beliefs and practices.

Required Books

Fishbane, Michael. *Judaism: Revelation and Traditions* Harper & Row, 1987.

Emerson, Robert. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. .

Levin, Michael. *The Guide to the Jewish Internet*. San Francisco: No Starch Press, 1996.

Recommended Books

Students who have not used the World Wide Web may like to purchase this book for their personal library. It will probably prove of value in several classes. Rod Library has a copy also. However, it is in the reference section of the library so you will not be able to take it outside the library to use. I suggest that you skim a copy at the bookstore and purchase it if you determine that the book will prove helpful to you in multiple settings.

Rodrigues, Dawn. *The Research Paper and the World Wide Web*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. Paper.

Library Reserve Books

Because of the research focus of this class, I have compiled a bibliography of strong resources that may be of use to multiple students. When you begin to work on a research project and are looking for answers to questions, I encourage you to browse the reserve bibliography. Bibliographies in the back of each book will also prove helpful.

Berkowitz, Morris I. *Social Scientific Studies of Religion: A Bibliography*. (Drawback: 1967 publication; but should be considered for a topic search).

Blau, Joseph. *Modern Varieties of Judaism*.

Breslauer, Daniel S. *Contemporary Jewish Ethics: A Bibliographic Survey*.

Cantor, Aviva ed. *The Jewish Woman, 1900-1985: A Bibliography*. (Bibliographic sources are diverse; annotation is exclusively feminist. Citations may be described as problematic only because the editor perceives them as anti-feminist. Students who seek a diverse perspective on Judaism may wish to exercise broader interests than has the editor.)

Gager, John G. *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*.

Glazer, Nathan. *American Judaism*.

Greenberg, Irving. *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*.

Neusner, Jacob. *Understanding American Judaism. Volume 1: Sectors of American Judaism - Reform, Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reconstructionism.*

Neusner, Jacob. *Understanding American Judaism. Volume 2: The Rabbi and the Synagogue.*

Rubenstein, Richard L. and John K. Roth. *Approaches to Auschwitz.*

Seltzer, Robert M. *Jewish people, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History.* (This is considered one of the best textbooks on Judaism. Were our class to be organized on a traditional format, we would spend the semester working through this 800-page book. You should find answers to many of your questions about Judaism in this book).

Course Description

In fulfillment of the course objectives, a variety of activities are planned for this class. *The course will begin with Fishbane.* Working with this text, students will 1) acquire a basic vocabulary for studying Judaism; 2) review or encounter for the first time the basic tenets of Judaism, learning something of its history and diverse practices; 3) observe one scholar's organizational schema for understanding the religion; 4) acquire a bank of questions, issues, and ideas for further exploration. Two videos will enable students to expand on this bank of questions and ideas.

The heart of the course will focus on the World Wide Web (WWW). Why study Judaism on the Web? Why not learn of Judaism through texts? Why not research Judaism only in the library? There are a variety of reasons why the WWW is a compelling environment for studying Judaism.

1. The WWW encourages inductive thinking. Rather than inviting us to focus on scholars' considered views ("THIS is Judaism"), the WWW introduces us to Judaism "live and unabridged." We will need to be active learners proficient in skills of observation and analysis in order to determine the nature of Judaism.
2. At the same time, the WWW encourages a healthy intellectual humility. We may determine at the conclusion of our study of Judaism that we have acquired only snapshots of Judaism. Were we to have emphasized traditional texts, we may have been more optimistic that we had "covered" Judaism.
3. The WWW is an ideal resource for students who live at some distance from Jewish communities. Were our university in an urban area, we could encounter numerous synagogues, diverse ethnic communities, and thousands of Jews with whom we could converse. The WWW brings the richness and complex variety of Judaism into our classroom by means of virtual fieldtrips and virtual conversations. Moreover, because Judaism is a non-proselytizing religion, the WWW sites we will visit are designed for Jews by Jews. They are likely to give us an "insider's" perspective on Judaism.
4. The WWW is timely: contemporary Judaism is at its most contemporary on the WWW.
5. The WWW encourages students to develop sophisticated skills in the observation of religion. In considering what practitioners of Judaism have to say about themselves and their religion, rather than only what others' (authors of texts) say, students working on the WWW will have opportunities to develop new skills in critical reflection. Issues of ethnocentrism can be confronted directly.

While we are working on the WWW, we will be developing skills in ethnographic *research*. Ethnography is a research tool that, when used systematically, enables us to expand the boundaries of our own experiences and to apprehend the world from the viewpoints of others. One goal of ethnography is to describe a culture or community from the perspective of the persons who make up that culture or community. Ethnography enables us to examine fundamental aspects of human experience. In using ethnography to study Judaism, for example, we will learn 1) what Jews do, 2) what they know, and 3) what they make and use in their religious practices (rituals). In sum, the cultural behavior, cultural knowledge, and cultural artifacts of Judaism will become available to us.

Ethnography proceeds by inductive thinking. Some scholars believe that all liberally educated students should develop skills in ethnography. These skills hone our abilities to observe our environment, to listen to others, and to report on what we have seen and heard. While we are working with the text, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, we will gain an ever greater appreciation for the value of ethnography in enabling us to better understand Judaism.

The final component in the course will consist of *research on individual research projects and communication about these projects with fellow students in the class*. Throughout the semester, students will have found particular themes or questions of special interest to them. Each student will choose one of these areas on which to focus in an in-depth fashion. Students will use the varied research tools available in Rod Library for exploring the topic. Each student will be responsible for sharing with the class a document acquired during their research (e.g., a book chapter, journal article) and for facilitating class discussion of the document and their larger project. The emphasis throughout will be on process (conducting the research) rather than the outcome of the research (a final, written synthesis). An additional goal of this unit of the course will be to consider how ethnographic research is integrated with text-focused research in order to arrive at a nuanced view of contemporary Judaism.

Course Evaluation

Because this course is assignment centered rather than text or lecture oriented and because the goals of this course emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it, the evaluative components of this course will be process-focused rather than product-focused. A test on Fishbane will probably be the only traditionally evaluated component of the class. Points will be offered for virtually all assignments in the course in proportion to the amount of time each assignment takes and the degree of difficulty associated with the research tools required on the assignment. Students will do well in this class if they attend every class session, complete every assignment, and maintain a developmental curve of increasing facility with using the research tools they are acquiring over the course of the semester. Because this is a new course, more specific details about evaluation are not immediately available. However, students can generally count on the following 1) if it takes a substantial amount of time and energy to complete an assignment, that assignment will carry more points than one that is less time consuming and does not require infusions of caffeine and/or extra-strength Tylenol; 2) the cumulative weight of classroom and homework experience adds up. If you want to do well in the class, you will be on task, all the time.

Course Outline

August 26 Introduction Sept. 25 Emerson, Ch. 2 & 3

August 28 Fishbane, 11-49 Sept. 30 WWW application

Sept. 2 Video - Chosen People Oct. 2 Emerson, Ch. 5

Sept. 4 Fishbane, 49-82 Oct. 7 WWW application

Sept. 9 Video - Half the Kingdom Oct. 9 Emerson, Ch. 5 cont.

Sept. 11 Fishbane, Ch. III Oct. 14 WWW application

Sept. 16 Complete Fishbane. Review Oct. 16 Emerson, Ch. 6

Sept. 18 Test on Fishbane. Oct. 21 WWW application

Sept. 23 Emerson, Ch. 1 Oct. 23 Emerson, Ch. 6 cont.

Oct. 28 WWW application

Oct. 30 Intro. to library research with Barb Weeg

November and December assignments will be distributed in a syllabus supplement.

Syllabus Supplement

October 28

meet in Room 286 of the library with Barb Weeg.

October 30

WWW application in the lab.

November 4 -

In Class: Discuss Emerson, Ch. 7, 169-194. Location: Wright.

Outside Class: After finishing Emerson assignment, immediately start Library Research Assignment #1.

Library Research Assignment #1: Searching UNISTAR and connecting to other libraries through UNISTAR

1. Prepare a preliminary bibliography for a research project and print out relevant UNISTAR sources. Submit 5 pages of these sources.
2. Get into the University of Iowa or Iowa State University library catalog and search your topic. Submit up to 5 pages of a printout. If you have time, search another library catalog available through UNISTAR.
3. Lab Notebook: During the library research unit, you will be creating a record of particularly useful sources and strategies for each research mode. For this week, include a 1/2- 1 page note about the strengths and weaknesses of the UNISTAR search system. Assess strengths of other library catalogs for your research project. Keep a record of helpful and unhelpful phrases, lists, terms, and sources for future reference. What worked and what didn't work for your research topic? Note: in the weeks ahead, your notebook will also include a log of additional library research (beyond the assignment) if you are electing a library-focus for your final project. If you are electing an ethnographic focus, you will keep a log of additional ethnographic work.

November 6

In class: Complete discussion of Emerson, Ch. 7, 194-210. Location: Wright.

Outside class: Begin to wind up work on Library Assignment #1.

Week of November 11 and 13.

In Class: No Class this week.

Outside class: See next page for assignment -

Individual Student Conferences on Research Project/Ethnography.

Library Research Assignment #1 (above) due in my mailbox in Baker 135 on November 11 by 5:00 p.m.

Library Research Assignment #2: Manual Indexes.

1. Locate appropriate manual indexes in your subject area. Compile a list to turn in. Use the indexes to identify five journal articles from this list relevant to your research topic. Submit a photo-copy of the cover page of each article or the completed ILL form.
2. Lab notebook: Please discuss your efforts to draw on manual indexes for your research topic. What worked and why and what didn't work?
3. Assignment #2 is due in my mailbox in Baker 135 on November 13 by 5:00 p.m.

November 18

In Class: teaching practicum by - Angela Brommel and Forrest Roberts. Location: Lab.

Library Research Assignment #3 due in class on November 18.

Outside Class:

Library Research Assignment #3 -

1. Submit an annotated list of all electronic indexes at UNI that are relevant to your research project.
2. Search UnCover, IAC, and electronic indexes for relevant sources and submit a sample printout from at least four sources, if your topic is represented well in the sources. If it is not represented well, submit successes and failures for a total of 4 sources.
3. Lab notebook. Please discuss your efforts to draw on electronic indexes for your research topic. What worked and why and what didn't work?

November 20

In Class: teaching practicum by - Laura Baker and Brenda Pueggel. Location: Wright.

Outside Class:

1. Depending on research emphasis, continue additional library research or field notes.
2. Lab notebook: Discuss/submit ongoing efforts (library synopsis or field notes sitework).

November 25

In Class: teaching practicum by: Michelle Westholm and Brian Wittcock. Location: Lab.

Library Research Assignment #4 below due in class on November 25.

Outside class:

Library Research Assignment #4: Published bibliographies, library reference materials, library reserve material, and WWW academic sources.

1. Prepare a list of sources from bibliographies or reference materials to turn in.

2. Prepare a summary of sources on reserve relevant to your project with specific chapters and page numbers noted.
3. Prepare an annotated summary of WWW academic sources (second-level reflection on religion using the tools of sociology, history, anthropology, etc.) that are relevant to your topic along with their addresses.
4. Lab notebook: This week, discuss your efforts to locate bibliographies, reference sources, library reserve materials for your research topic, and academic resources on the web. Out of a-c above, at least two of these strategies should work for your research project.

December 2:

In Class: teaching practicum by Fay Bowers and Justin Mease. Location: Lab.

Outside Class:

1. Depending on research emphasis, continue additional library research or field notes.
2. Lab notebook: Discuss/submit ongoing efforts (library synopsis or field notes sitework).

December 4:

In Class: teaching practicum by: Zach Nielson and Justin Taylor. Location: Lab.

Outside Class:

1. Depending on research emphasis, continue additional library research or field notes.
2. Lab notebook: Discuss/submit ongoing efforts (library synopsis or field notes sitework).

December 9

In Class: teaching practicum by: Eric Schumacher and Pete Masteller. Location: Lab.

Outside Class:

1. Depending on research emphasis, continue additional library research or field notes.
2. Lab notebook: Discuss/submit ongoing efforts (library synopsis or field notes sitework).

December 11

In Class: teaching practicum by: Travis Thompson Location:

Class discussion of research project status.

Outside Class:

1. Depending on research emphasis, continue additional library research or field notes.
2. Lab notebook: Discuss/submit ongoing efforts (library synopsis or field notes sitework).

December 16

In Class from 3:00-4:50 p.m. - teaching practicum by: Andrew Kress and Paul Kulbitski. Location:

Outside of class: complete final project.

Final project due in my mailbox by 5:00 p.m. in Baker 135.

Teaching Practicum Guidelines: To follow at a later date.

Final Project Guidelines: To follow at a later date.

Pedagogical Reflections

See course objectives below. This is a highly experimental course using the WWW as an instrument for "electronic ethnography." In its first run, the course worked quite well. The assignments from *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* were adaptable to the WWW format. I am not sure how well electronic ethnography would work in religions that have proselytizing traditions. When sites are visited that are written for "insiders," ethnography works quite well. For example, one student did his project on bar mitzvah web pages that young men create as bar mitzvah projects. He was able to obtain excellent ethnographic data on this phenomenon. So also was a student who visited chat rooms associated with Hillel able to gather data sufficient to complete his project on faith issues for Jewish college students. By contrast, a student who visited the Anti-Defamation League encountered a site focused on the distributing information and conveying ideas in a persuasive mode to "outsiders." Were he to want to obtain good ethnographic data on the League, he would probably have to spend time in an actual office, since their website does not readily convey a sense of the people and inner workings of the organization.

Select a location 

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/studies_in_religion-reineke.html

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