21. Patricia Harrington, "Mother of Death, Mother of Rebirth: The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (Spring 1988): p. 27.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
23. Judith Becker, *Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam, and Aesthetics in Central Java* (Tempe: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 17.
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THE LEARNING COVENANT: PROMOTING FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES CLASSROOM

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Many who teach Religious Studies struggle with appropriate pedagogy for their courses. They are discontent with traditional approaches to instruction that often treat students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by the professor. Such approaches rarely generate discussion or encourage student involvement in the course. This is especially problematic for those whose courses in Religious Studies are mandatory, where students may not necessarily have an interest in the subject matter. To counter these effects, faculty search for new, innovative, and creative ways to present course materials and to motivate student interest in the learning process.

I believe that the struggle these teachers face is not just pragmatic—getting students involved in the class. Underlying their practical concerns are the value commitments they bring to their teaching. Faculty today want to encourage such values as freedom, responsibility, equality, and community among their students. Traditional approaches to instruction are often authoritarian in structure. It is very difficult to promote those values in an authoritarian, hierarchical, model of teaching. Instead, they seek to empower students, using techniques and strategies that promote student freedom, self-respect, and provide ways for students to take responsibility for their learning.

Because the Judeo-Christian tradition of covenant community shapes my worldview, I share many of these value commitments. In its best sense, the covenant tradition recognizes the value of all persons, and seeks to generate a community that enables and requires the participation and contributions of all members. My desire to bring this vision of community into the classroom has led me to experiment with two contemporary learning theories: contract learning and cooperative learning. What I have discovered is that a combination of these learning theories, what I tentatively call the "Learning Covenant," has fulfilled my desire. The Learning Covenant promotes student freedom and creativity, while it also encourages students to work cooperatively and to take responsibility for their learning (individually and corporately).

This essay considers what the learning covenant involves and how I have implemented this pedagogical strategy into my introductory course in Religious Studies. However, before proceeding in that direction, I will describe briefly the two learning theories that provide the basis for it: contract learning and cooperative learning.

Individual Learning Contracts (ILC)

One contemporary theory of pedagogy that many religious studies faculty experiment with in various ways is Independent or Individual Learning Contracts (ILC). The ILC developed out of research related to adult learning. What researchers discovered is that adults learn more deeply and permanently when they have a strong role in the planning and carrying out of their learning efforts. Contract learning engages students in the learning process by building a program of study upon the compelling interests of each student. Instead of asking herself/himself, "How can I teach so that students will be motivated to learn?" the teacher asks students, "What do you want to learn?" This approach empowers the student by giving a large measure of control over what learning takes place to the student, thereby providing ownership of learning.[1]

Contract learning is an approach to adult learning that makes certain assumptions. First, learners have the need to know why it is they are learning what they are learning, how it will benefit them or hinder them if they don't. Second, learners need to be self-directing. This is based on the notion of an adult as one who has a self-concept of being responsible for herself/himself. If a learner perceives herself/himself as being responsible, then s/he needs to be perceived and treated by others as someone who is capable of assuming such responsibility. Third, learners have the need to have their experiences taken into account. There is diversity among adults in terms of life experiences, interests, styles of learning, and the like that adults want taken into account in the development of their learning experiences. Fourth, learning should be geared to the learners' readiness to learn, which occurs when they have a need to learn it. Finally, the learning process should encourage intrinsic motivations to learn, which include self-esteem, responsibility, creativity, and self-fulfillment.[2]

As advocates of contract learning contend, there is no right way to develop contracts. Flexibility is important because contracts should be appropriate to the learners. However, in the context of that flexibility there are certain basic elements involved. The contract usually begins with some assessment of what the student needs to know and what they want to learn (learning objectives). These objectives can be based on the student's own self-assessment, or they can be more institutional or teacher-oriented. On the basis of these objectives, the student then decides on the strategies, activities, and resources he/she will need to meet these objectives (learning resources). The student will also indicate what the outcomes will be, how and by whom those outcomes will be evaluated, and the timetable for their completion (evidence, verification, and target date).[3]

Critics of this pedagogical approach suggest that contract learning deemphasizes content and rigor, undermines student

respect for authority, and encourages students to take a minimalist approach to learning. Advocates counter the legitimacy of these criticisms. Contract learning certainly replaces the traditional content-transmission structure with a process structure for learning. But they do so because it engages students in the learning process to a far greater degree; and the more engaged students are the more they will learn. Contract learning also replaces teacher-imposed discipline with self-discipline in the learning process. As a result, the student-teacher relationship becomes one of colleagues and mutual learners seeking to achieve mutually agreed-on objectives. Moreover, contract learning sharpens students' skills of self-directed learning, providing them a tool that will enable them to learn from any experience and in any environment they encounter in their lives.[4]

Student evaluations of my use of contract learning speak of the freedom they experience in the learning process, affirming the opportunity contracts provide to direct their own learning and gear their courses to their needs and interests. Not only does this freedom enhance their self-respect, it also makes them more responsible people because fulfilling the terms of the contract rests upon their shoulders.

My main concern with learning contracts is that they can promote excessive individualism and lead students to forsake their responsibility for making the class a worthwhile learning experience. Many students focus only on their own goals, activities, and grades and absenteeism can be high. This can hinder the continuity and process a teacher hopes to develop in the class. As a result, I found myself looking for strategies to address these concerns while maintaining the benefits of contract learning. My search led me to experiment with a second contemporary learning theory, cooperative learning (CL).[5]

Cooperative Learning (CL)

Cooperative learning advocates contend that, because humans are social, interdependent beings, we learn best in cooperation with one another. Traditional approaches to learning are based on competitive or individualized models. But these models do not tap the potential of students to contribute to the learning process. This is especially true at the college level, where students bring diverse experience, backgrounds, and skill levels to the classroom. Students are almost never encouraged, much less rewarded, for helping each other learn. However, when teachers encourage students to work together and provide incentives for them to learn from one another, students learn better in the vast majority of cases. Numerous research studies support this claim. Many faculty in Religious Studies experiment with cooperative strategies, whether they are advocates of CL or not. But CL transcends placing students in group contexts to learn. Education theorists break the instructional system (the means by which information and skills are transmitted to students) into two tasks: the instructional task structure (the ways a teacher sets up activities for student learning); and the student incentive structure (ways of motivating students to perform learning tasks).[6] Cooperative learning includes both cooperative tasks (groups working on a common task) and cooperative incentives (rewards distributed on the basis of group efforts).

Crucial to bringing task and incentives together is creating an environment of positive interdependence. Positive interdependence involves creating a situation (and an awareness) where students are linked with one another in ways that one cannot succeed unless the other members of the group succeed. In other words, they sink or swim together. This interdependence occurs when the professor gives students different roles and resources to meet a mutual goal; and distributes rewards on the basis of meeting that goal together. The only way the students can meet their mutually shared goal is if they share resources and fulfill their role responsibilities. For example, students are given the task of making a group presentation on a specific subject for which they will receive a group grade. Each person in the group is given a different assignment and resources. The only way for the group to get a good grade is to work together.[7]

One potential problem for cooperative learning (and any task that carries a cooperative incentive) is the diffusion of responsibility. A student can be rewarded for doing nothing (free rider) or punished for doing their best (lower grade). As group size increases, the potential for the diffusion of responsibility to have negative effects on individual motivation and performance increases.[8] To counter this possibility, CL advocates insist on the importance of individual accountability. Students cannot be allowed to do nothing and benefit from the work of other group members. Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual is assessed and the results relayed to both the group and the individual. This way students can see who needs help in the group; or the group can sanction people who do not pull their weight. Techniques to insure this include giving individual exams as well as group exams or randomly selecting one students work to represent the group.[9]

Placing students in group contexts does not necessarily mean they will function effectively as a group. Since our educational system is so dominated by competitive and individualized models of instruction, many students do not know how to work cooperatively. That is why CL advocates argue that social skills, such as leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict resolution must be taught as purposefully as academic skills. Moreover, teachers must insure that each student gets opportunity to practice each group role.

Engaging students in the responsibility for their learning through cooperative strategies has implications for the role of the teacher in the classroom. To move students from passivity to active learning, the teacher must become a facilitator and resource person instead of an authority figure. This does not mean that the work of the teacher decreases. The opposite is the case. The teacher must make numerous planning decisions to insure the effective functioning of the group process, including the size and make-up of the group, and the set-up of the classroom. Moreover, while the groups are working the teacher moves from group to group to monitor both the content of what is taught and the process by which it is taught, intervening where necessary, but in ways that invite the participation of the students.

Critics of CL argue that this approach invites irresponsibility, sacrifices too much content, and unfairly burdens gifted students. We have already seen how CL deals with irresponsibility by its stress on individual accountability. With regard to the second charge, like contract learning, CL affirms the importance of process as well as content. CL's effort to teach social skills certainly consumes time. However, advocates would argue that education ought to be about teaching people how to live

together as well as how to write, to balance books, or manage a company. Finally, studies suggest that gifted students learn better, in terms of retention and depth of understanding, when they teach what they learn to others.

Here again, student reaction to my use of CL has been mostly favorable. They enjoy working in groups and the opportunity to learn from one another. The students who have the most trouble are those who feel uncomfortable with being held accountable by their peers, or who prefer a passive approach to learning. My only concern with CL is that evaluating students solely on achieving shared goals and restricting students access to all resources may unfairly hinder some students from creatively expressing themselves. But CL makes room for individualized instruction and I am able to minimize this concern by using covenants as well.

The Learning Covenant

The pedagogical style I currently use attempts to build upon the strengths of each of the two learning theories described above. As a covenantal thinker, I believe strongly that relationship and interdependence are central to human experience and that this interdependence evokes an awareness of our responsibility and obligation to one another. Thus, covenant implies a sense of mutual obligation. This sense of obligation goes beyond any contractual sense of mutual advantage; it attempts to create community among the members of the covenant. Recognizing our interdependence and fostering the growth of community means that we are interested not only in our own good but also in the good of others. The good of each is intricately tied up with the good of others. Yet respecting this reality means affirming a plurality of goods. Finally, just because we have obligations to one another does not mean we always fulfill them. Irresponsibility is just as much a part of human experience as responsibility.

This covenantal framework leads me to certain basic pedagogical assumptions. People learn best in cooperation with one another. Individual learning may take place between the ears, but the resources one draws upon to make that learning happen come mostly from a cooperative context. Self-direction in learning is still important. People need intrinsic motivation to learn; their learning should be self-fulfilling. However, because learning is a cooperative venture, learners have the potential and the obligation to contribute to the learning of others. Sometimes learners shirk their responsibilities; they need external motivation to participate in the learning process (especially in a required course). Finally, the teacher is not an authority figure, but a colleague and facilitator of learning. Fostering a classroom environment that both encourages students to recognize and fulfill their responsibilities for one another's learning and respects the rights of each student to have voice in the learning process is the reason I have adopted a teaching style that combines the strengths of ILC and CL.

The Covenanting Process

The learning covenants I use follow contract learning theory by including learning objectives (the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to be acquired by the learner); learning resources and strategies (the activities in which the learner will engage to accomplish the objectives); the evidence of accomplishment (the completed activities to demonstrate completion of the objectives); the criteria and means for validating the evidence (evaluation criteria and persons); and the target date for completion.[10] Because of the importance of grades to my institution and students, the learning covenants also include the weight students give to each completed objective.

I provide students with a list of learning objectives that I (and the institution) hope to achieve in the context of the course. These include some knowledge/understanding objectives, some skills objectives, some values objectives, and some attitudinal objectives. My hope is that they will provide guidance and direction to the learning experience. However, meeting the course objectives only fulfills part of the covenant. To complete the covenant, students must also include objectives that are in keeping with their own personal needs and interests yet stay within the broad parameters of the course. These can be drawn from a list I provide or they can develop their own based on their interests and learning needs.

The learning strategies and resources are those activities that students use to fulfill their objectives. As a starting point, I provide students with a list of learning activities that provide ideas about ways to meet their objectives. Like the course objectives, I require completion of some of those activities. The vast majority, however, are optional. For example, students could enhance their critical thinking skills through a series of focused thought papers or a critical review of a play or film. Students may acquire knowledge about a particular religious group or concept by taking a field trip, observing a ritual, or reviewing appropriate literature. Students are to select those activities they deem appropriate for meeting their objectives. The list I provide is meant to be suggestive not exhaustive. I encourage students to develop their own activities or strategies as well.

Each learning activity has some outcome or product attached to it that will provide evidence that the student has indeed met the objective in question. For example, evidence that the student took a field trip can consist of some written, oral, or video report to the class or to the professor. In addition, each learning activity has some evaluative criteria attached to it to verify that the student has met their objectives and to determine the quality of their work. With the handout on suggested learning activities, I attach "evaluation criteria" to each activity. I make every effort to insure that the criteria are appropriate to the learning objectives involved. My reason for including these criteria is my belief that students have a right to know the basis for evaluation prior to completion of the work. Students may change evaluative criteria attached to those activities to make sure that they are consistent with what they intend to learn. Only those evaluation criteria listed with the learning activity on the covenant may be used by the professor to determine the quality of the work. In this way, there is a mutuality of understanding between the student and the professor.

Students must indicate specific dates by which they will complete their objectives (and the activities associated with them). Students are in the best position to determine when they have time to complete their activities. The only stipulations I make are that they finish some activity during the first half of the semester so that they have some feedback on their learning. Further, I make students aware that, because of time and institutional constraints, the later they complete their activities the less feedback they are likely to get from me.

Finally, students must determine the weight each activity is to have in factoring their overall grade for the course. Students can split the weight each activity carries on their grade as they deem appropriate, even including activities that meet their learning objectives but carry no weight. My purpose in this is to create a classroom environment that places more emphasis on learning than on grades. Students at Le Moyne College tend to be risk-adverse. They are afraid of failure; they are reluctant to enhance their learning or strengthen their weaker skills out of fear that their GPA will fall. (In many ways, we have contributed to this fear of failure institutionally by attaching continued financial support to maintaining certain grade levels.) By allowing students the option of placing no weight on a learning activity, they can enhance their knowledge or skills without the fear of being "punished" by receiving a poor grade.

Except for required objectives and activities, students are free to modify their covenants (objectives, activities, evaluation criteria, due dates, weights) until four weeks before the end of the semester. This provision recognizes that learning is a process and takes place in the context of competing demands and constraints. The opportunity to modify covenants invites students to experiment with different approaches and strategies without getting locked in. The reason for placing a time limit on the modification of the covenant is to encourage students to make better use of their time by getting feedback on their learning (and to enable me to manage my time).

Finally, students may complete most, if not all, of their objectives and activities cooperatively. Whether the activity be artwork, a field trip, or a ritual paper, the students can work in groups to achieve their objectives. The students then produce common evidence of their learning (such as a single report). In addition, students must evaluate themselves and one another on their performance in the group. This is done to counter the free rider problems often associated with group activities in which one or several members of the group do little or no work.

The covenanting process is continuous; however, the bulk of it ends within the first two-three weeks. After consulting with their peers, students turn in an initial covenant which I then approve or negotiate revisions.

The Cooperative Classroom

At the same time the covenanting process is going on, I structure the class on a cooperative learning model. This means that every person in the class has some responsibility for the learning that takes place in class. My goal is to promote cooperative behavior and ultimately cooperative motives, the predisposition to act cooperatively. To insure this, students work collaboratively (cooperative task structures) during every class and a significant portion of their final evaluation is based upon the collective results of their group work (cooperative incentive structure) and their individual participation in those groups (individual incentive structure).

Although I experiment with a variety of formal and informal cooperative task structures, for the sake of space I will discuss only those I use most frequently. The formal cooperative group strategies include home groups, jigsaw, cooperative presentations, and group exams. The most common informal cooperative strategies include focused discussion questions, think-pair-share, and focused closure questions.

Home groups are semester-long, heterogeneous cooperative learning groups of 4-5 students with stable membership whose primary responsibility is to provide each student the support, encouragement, and assistance they need to learn. Home groups personalize the work required and the course learning experiences.[11] These groups provide help with the content of the course, but also report on the process of participating in groups as well.

At first, I selected home groups randomly during the first week of class. However, I am moving toward a more systematic approach. I choose the groups at random initially. I provide a variety of exercises and tasks for the first two weeks to see how students interact in a group context and to measure their level of group skills. In addition, I gather information on each student, including race, gender, interests, major, GPA, etc. I place this information into a database and attempt to come up with the most heterogeneous groups I can. At the end of those two weeks, I arrange students into permanent home groups.

The first task of the home groups is to review each other's covenants to make sure that each student is clear on what her/his objectives and responsibilities are. My primary reason for doing this is to enable students to understand that they are a part of a learning community. The covenants they make are not simply between the student and the teacher but with the entire class. Moreover, home group members serve as consultants and provide each student with feedback on the clarity of their objectives and the appropriateness of the activities chosen to meet them.

Jigsaw is a cooperative strategy designed to promote informational positive interdependence among students.[12] I use the jigsaw method in two ways. First, I give each group one copy of each essay I want students to review. The groups divide the essays among group members to read and analyze. During the next class, students with readings in common meet together to form expert groups. These students go over their essays to insure that each person understands the key elements of their essay and can present it to others. Then they return to their home groups to teach the contents of each essay to every member of the group. Since each student will be held accountable for the ideas in each essay (through exam, presentation, or some other format), students must listen attentively to one another. A different way of doing jigsaw is to have students read the same material (such as a chapter in a book), but assign students different parts of the chapter to concentrate on. They then become the experts on that part of the chapter.

The task of cooperative group presentations is to involve groups of students, home group or other group, in making a class presentation. Sometimes the group decides the topic for presentation, sometimes the professor. Yet the format (presentation/discussion, dramatic display, or simulation game) for the presentation is left up to the group to decide in consultation with the professor. In addition to the presentation itself, group members keep logs of their preparation meetings and evaluate one another's performance. Each group member receives three evaluations that factor into the total grade for the presentation. The first component of evaluation is on how well each person participates in the group. Students provide this evaluation. The second component consists of successful completion of a task sheet on which individuals document the activities they undertake to make the presentation successful. These two compo-

nents are individual evaluations. The final component is the evaluation of the presentation itself, a group evaluation conducted by the professor and classmates according to established criteria.

A group final exam is an essay exam that students write and the professor evaluates cooperatively. The purpose of the exam is to have a thorough, intellectually stimulating, and useful discussion of course materials. The task is to demonstrate mastery and deeper-level understanding of the ideas and concepts presented in the course. To structure the process, I provide a number of integrative essays that relate material from many parts of the course. The groups divide the essays and each member is responsible for becoming an expert on the related course materials. That person prepares a typed essay or outline of an essay and leads a group discussion on the question. In addition, each group member comes prepared to discuss the other questions and to learn from one another. The group generates one set of answers for the group and all members must agree with and be able to explain the answers. Recently, I have had to add an objective/short answer component to the final exam to insure that each student reviews material from the entire course. I provide study sheets that students can work cooperatively to generate answers for. To provide incentive for students to work together, I give bonus points to the final exam if every member of the group scores at a predetermined level.

Using cooperative strategies to teach much of the course content has implications for my role in the classroom. I seek to minimize student perceptions of me as an authority figure and enhance their understanding that I am there to facilitate their learning. Thus, I am primarily a resource person. I attempt to create a context for them to learn together and for them to assume responsibility for their learning. This role has been far more demanding because, while I must insure that learning is taking place, I must do so in ways that invite ideas and perspectives different from my own. Constructing the classroom cooperatively and assuming the role of facilitator means that I do very little lecturing. Yet there are times when I find it necessary to lecture on specific material. When I do, I break the lecture into smaller segments (10-15 minutes) and use informal cooperative strategies to facilitate student comprehension of the material.

Two strategies I frequently use include introductory focussed discussion pairs and closure focussed discussion. Introductory focussed discussion pairs requires students to pair off and answer one or more questions that the lecture segment will attempt to answer. Students will formulate their own answers, share them with their partners, and attempt to create consensus on one answer to each question. The purpose is to have students thinking about what they already know about the subject and to anticipate the lecture segment. Closure focussed discussion is an ending discussion task for pairs of students to summarize what they have learned from the lecture. The intent is to help students integrate what they have learned into previous learning and to enhance retention of the material lectured on.

Conclusion

Has this pedagogical approach had the effects I intended? Have I fostered a learning environment that both encourages students to recognize and fulfill their responsibilities for one another's learning and respects the rights of each student to have voice in the learning process? Do students experience freedom and community? Do students take responsibility for their learning and actively contribute to the learning of others? Formal and informal student evaluations of this combination of learning covenants and cooperative learning have affirmed my decision to choose this approach. Students comment upon the freedom and diversity that the learning covenant provides. One student says of this approach: "[It] gives the student the opportunity to make his/her own decisions on how to participate in class. It gives you the feeling of being more responsible and more interested in your work because you are not just fulfilling the professor's requirements, but your own as well." Students also speak of the way in which this approach helps them to develop a stronger sense of their own contribution to the classroom. "Group work is great for raising class participation." Students feel respected and empowered. "[This approach] treats us as colleagues not merely uneducated students." Many students who initially feared the cooperative classroom because they were uncomfortable trusting their peers, discovered a new appreciation for the ideas and contributions other students made to their learning. "The use of groups worked out very well. If nothing else, it taught me to 'let go' and not be so controlling and obsessive about my grade. One of the toughest lessons to learn has been to trust my group members! My experience in this class has given me alot of insight to carry with me throughout my life...." This does not mean there are no drawbacks or problems. Some students prefer individualized learning. "I don't like having others affect my grade and I'd rather work according to my own schedule and not have to hear anything from others if I decide that I can't do the homework one day. To me it's just demeaning; I'm going to Le Moyne for me!!" For others, there is too much freedom and some students do not take their responsibilities seriously. "Coverage of material was done in groups that didn't always take it seriously. More control in the classroom would make people take it seriously and concentrate." Others speak of the hindrances inactive or irresponsible groups members create for the rest of the group.

I suspect that part of the problems identified by students reflect the unconventional nature of this approach and my own inadequacies in implementing it. But it is a start. More importantly, the approach currently best implements my own covenantal perspective on human community. What I envision is a society that fully values all persons, a society that enables every member to contribute meaningfully to the life of community. The classroom is a microcosm of society. By implementing this covenantal approach to pedagogy, I hope to provide students with a taste of this vision of community.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor John Freie, chair of the Political Science Department at Le Moyne College, for introducing me to contract learning. For his approach, see John Freie, "The Individual Learning Contract," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 25 (June 1992): pp. 230-34.

2. Malcolm S. Knowles, *Using Learning Contracts: Practical Approaches to Individualizing and Structuring Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), pp. 41-42.

3. See Roger Hiemstra and Burton Sisco, *Individualizing Instruction: Making Learning Personal, Empowering, and Successful* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), ch. 8.

4. Knowles, pp. 46-47.

5. Kathy Leogrande of the Education Department of Le Moyne College introduced me to cooperative learning during a pedagogy workshop she

conducted for the entire Religious Studies department in Spring 1993. I am grateful for that introduction and for her continued support of my experimentation with CL.

6. See Robert E. Slavin, *Cooperative Learning* (New York: Longmans, Inc., 1983), ch. 1.

7. The best single resource book on Cooperative Learning in higher education is *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*, by David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Karl Smith (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1991). Much of the following description of cooperative learning comes from the first chapter in their book.

8. Slavin, p. 16.

9. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1:19.

10. Knowles, p. 38.

11. I borrow this strategy from the notion of "base groups" in David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Cooperative Learning Lesson Structures* (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1991), S:62-S:63.

12. See Elliot Aronson, *The Jigsaw Classroom* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978).

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