



Students from the SEAiC program in 2012 during their visit to an Islamic boarding school in Jepara, a province in central Java, Indonesia. Photo by author.

ISLAM ENCOUNTERED

Confronting Stereotypes and Fostering Knowledge

By Julius Bautista

In this article, I discuss how field trips offer unique opportunities to craft a more nuanced and grounded understanding of religion in Southeast Asia, particularly Islam. I argue that rather than exert a lot of energy on “mythbusting” religious stereotypes through direct counterfactuals, encouraging students to channel these stereotypes towards a reflexive introspection has proven to be pedagogically beneficial. I then discuss field trips as a potentially fruitful opportunity to embody religious knowledge, which in turn enables a productive dismantling of the expert-learner model of knowledge acquisition.

These teaching approaches respond to a very real problem of knowledge deficits about religion in many advanced industrial societies, even those that promote religious freedom. In 2010, for example, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) published a report that warned of a widespread “lack of understanding about. . . the basic tenets of the world’s religious traditions and other religious expressions not categorized by tradition,” as well as an underestimation of religion’s internal diversity and the crucial role it plays in shaping public and private life.¹ While the AAR was reporting on the situation in the United States, there is evidence to suggest that these findings are relevant in other places, such as Australia, which is experiencing similar problems of widespread ignorance about Asia and religion.²

As a way to address this issue, the AAR recommended that, among other teaching strategies, the “pedagogical power of experiential encounters has to be taken seriously.”³ Activities like field trips to places of worship are deemed to have a potentially positive impact in

addressing not only religious illiteracy but also knowledge about the world in general. To be sure, there are problems that arise from field trips that would not be an issue in the otherwise regulated and protected space of the conventional classroom. Logistical problems of organization, fatigue, health risks, and culture shock are only some factors that could actually diminish the learning process. Nevertheless, field trips do offer considerable learning opportunities, provided that educators invest time and effort in the deliberate planning and execution of specific pedagogical techniques—in order to mitigate the pitfalls that arise from distance and dislocation.

This is the principle that underpins the Southeast Asia in Context (SEAiC) program, which is an annual five-week summer course, that brings together university undergraduates from Europe, Australia, and the US to the National University of Singapore. A feature of SEAiC is a nine to twelve day intensive field session to Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia, including places of worship, ancient monuments, museums, and agricultural communities, with the aim of “diminish[ing] the gap between the acquisition of classroom-based knowledge and its use in actual situations.”⁴

The experiential learning model that the program adopts is to complement the field trips with a carefully designed set of preparatory and debriefing assignments. For example, in the weeks before leaving for the field, students are sent film, literature, and food review assignments about the destination country. I’ve included examples of the assignments at the conclusion of this essay. The assignments should



EaIC students listen on during a lecture in the grounds of the tomb of Sunan Muria, one of the most revered pilgrimage sites in Indonesia. Photo by author.

prove useful for any instructor or student with an interest in learning more about Islam and its Southeast Asian cultural context. Upon returning, students are asked to conduct photo or video presentations based on the experiences they found most shocking, uncomfortable, or inspiring. These activities are designed to help students place themselves “in-context” by acting as “human instruments” sensitive to their visceral reactions to Southeast Asian life.

My intention here is to share some reflections about the impact of certain pedagogical strategies implemented in SEAiC. But rather than relate this to a discussion of pedagogical theories, I consider what students themselves have said in their written field journals submitted after the program.⁵ I acknowledge that there is a widespread apprehension about the capacity of students to act as primary assessors of the

effectiveness of academic programs. However, I do believe that students’ qualitative reactions give us valuable insight into the resonance of our teaching strategies, which ultimately contributes to our efforts to further enhance and refine them.

In this vein, I focus on the SEAiC Indonesian field trips wherein mostly European and American university undergraduates are taken on a guided field immersion trip to mosques, pilgrimage sites, tombs, and Islamic boarding schools in central and east Java. I highlight two pedagogical strategies implemented during the 2012 trip that may have some relevance for those offering similar field trip programs.

Confronting and Channeling Stereotypes

Knowledge about Islam is often conditioned by the problematic nature in which information about the faith is acquired outside of the

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In the prefield trip session, I had students conduct a word association exercise in which they would list, as a group, the most common ideas that came to their minds at the mention of the word “Muslim.”

classroom. What most undergraduates in the SEAiC program knew about Islam tended to be inflected with portrayals from a media culture that, in focusing on what was “newsworthy,” rarely depicted Muslims as bound in the diverse complexities of the historical and socio-political milieu in which they are found. It was not so much that the students had no knowledge about Islam, but I did find that the faith was often misrepresented as internally uniform and static as opposed to diverse and evolving. But rather than being a deterrent to participation, such misrepresentations actually provide the ideal preparatory content that could contribute significantly toward the meaningfulness of experiential learning.

In the prefield trip session, I had students conduct a word association exercise in which they would list, as a group, the most common ideas that came to their minds at the mention of the word “Muslim.” Words such as “fundamentalism,” “terrorism,” “veil,” or “jihad” were suggested, with words such as “misunderstood” and “misrepresented” put forth with somewhat less frequency. Students were then asked to interrogate why these words are strongly associated with Islam. What kinds of political agendas are involved in classifying Islam in a particular way? What historical events and interpretations have contributed to the association of Islam with militancy or religious fanaticism? What

sort of media culture propagates these ideas? Could they reconcile such impressions with their personal experience with people of the Islamic faith?

The predeparture discussion of stereotypes may not have resolved all these questions from the outset. But it did go a long way toward providing students with the impetus to reorient their observational gaze during the field trip, as one American student expressed:

I had never considered the historical and religious questions that our class has approached. Posing these questions changed what I looked for in my surroundings. I no longer limited myself to the mere aesthetics of my experiences in Java. During the field trip, I tried to appraise the experiences I was having and reconcile them with my impressions as an American and as someone who has spent time in Jakarta.

The effect of being asked to confront one’s preconceived impressions of Indonesia had resulted in an inquisitiveness of a particular kind, one that was not primarily concerned with the “mere” aesthetics of a foreign country. What was equally significant here was that the student turned the analytical gaze back upon her own “self-in-context”—as “an American and as someone who has spent time in Jakarta,”—as opposed to a complete outsider or foreigner. This self-introspection,



SEAiC students interact with young students enrolled at an Islamic boarding school in central Java, Indonesia. Photo by author.

encouraged by direct encounters with actual Muslims, would go far towards a more humanized perception of “Islam”, rather than conceiving of the faith in terms of a set of categories conditioned by a prevalent media culture of suspicion and anxiety. Another American student responded in this way upon encountering fellow students at an *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school):

As in our other encounters with Islam, I detected some familiarity in elements of boarding school life. High schools that teach both religious and secular subjects cannot differ so greatly, whether they teach Islam in Indonesia or Judaism in Connecticut. . . I could sense a similarity to my own religion.

The student had effectively utilized her intuitive knowledge of Hebrew high schools as a template toward a more nuanced understanding of Islamic institutions. Her knowledge of “home” conditioned her experience of what was thought of as “dangerous.” It would be fair to say that this insight would not have been as acute had the student not been encouraged to see her own initial stereotypes as a platform for acquiring knowledge, rather than a barrier to engagement.

A Visceral Experience of the Veil: Embodied Knowledge as a Challenge to the Expert-Learner Model

Confronting stereotypes presents opportunities for students to take charge of the learning process through an embodiment of class content. This embodiment, in turn, offers the ideal conditions for breaking down conventional methodologies of knowledge dissemination, wherein the teacher/expert (as well as the accompanying textbooks and source materials) is the primary source of instruction and information. Embodied knowledge encourages an attentiveness to the sensorial aspects of the learning process, which, as is often the case, leaves a much stronger impression on the student learner.

In SEAiC, this methodology was applied in relation to the topic of veiling, which in pre-field trip exercises has been associated with “subjugation,” “oppression,” and “restriction.” During visits to pilgrimage sites and tombs of Islamic saints, female students were requested to don the Islamic headscarf, the *hijab*, as a mark of respect for local sensibilities. The male students, on the other hand, were encouraged to be observant about the same key stereotypes, particularly when speaking to Indonesian female students during the visit to the Islamic boarding schools. These locations often placed students in a position of physical discomfort, which was to prove crucial in understanding veiling as an experience, rather than an academic topic. One female English student described the experience of being unveiled as such:

I felt a little on edge at times, partially due to all the attention and staring which I received, especially in more rural, local areas. I began to feel awfully uncomfortable as we began to become victim to menacing stares and general rude aggression from the general public.

These scenarios of awkwardness and discomfort were discussed in class during the preparation as a supplement to readings on Islamic feminism, gender, and emancipation. Donning the hijab proved to be a much more effective lesson in reiterating these topics, achieving a visceral apprehension that could not easily be imparted by teachers or religious leaders. Another American student commented upon this as such:

I felt the initial discomfort of heat entrapment and the discomfiting sense of isolation from losing a part of my peripheral vision when I first donned the scarf. As my time in the scarf grew, however, the isolation and perceived restriction transcended into an increased connection between mind and body.

From an educator’s point of view, visceral and embodied lessons cannot be taught. They can, however, be facilitated through a measured relinquishing of control over the learning environment. In SEAiC’s

Indonesia trip, emphasis was directed away from the instructor and channeled toward unstructured conversation sessions between small groups of SEAiC students and their Indonesian student counterparts, often with productive (though at times unexpected) benefits. Student feedback overwhelmingly indicated these conversations as the highlight of the trips. ■

NOTES

1. Diane Moore, “Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States,” *American Academy of Religion*, accessed November 2, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/pur4ubd>.
2. For discussion about declining figures of learners of Asian languages and cultures in Australia, see Tim Lindsay, “Australia’s Asia Literacy Wipe-Out,” *The Interpreter*, November 4, 2012. Print.
3. Moore, 24.
4. Cynthia Chou and Martin Platt, “Southeast Asian Studies in Context,” *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy* 2, no. 1 (2012): 56–64.
5. Student responses were part of student assessment requirements and were not solicited for the specific purpose of this article.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING RESOURCES

READINGS

Dayley, Robert, and Clark D Neher. *Southeast Asia in the New International Era*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2013. 99-132

Pringle, Robert. *Understanding Islam in Indonesia: Politics and Diversity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010.

Kartini, Raden Adjang. *Letters from Kartini: An Indonesian Feminist, 1900-1904*. Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, Hyland House, 1992.

I.W. Mabbett, “The ‘Indianization’ of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (1977): 143-61.

FILMS

Berbagi Suami (Love for Share). DVD. Directed by Nia Dinata. Shira Film, 2006.

Tanda Tanya (Question Mark). DVD. Directed by Hanung Bramantyo. Dapur Film, 2011.

FOOD

Students are asked to go on “food safaris” to recommended hawker centers around Singapore as a prelude to the kinds of cuisine they will be having in Java. The exercise encourages a visceral and embodied engagement with Indonesia and possibly evokes familiar comparisons. Students are encouraged to sample the following dishes in particular:

Tempeh: A traditional Javanese soy product similar to a very firm vegetarian burger patty, which is a staple in Java and many parts of Indonesia.

Gado-gado: An Indonesian salad of boiled vegetables served with peanut sauce.

Sate: Grilled and skewered meat—typically chicken, goat, mutton, or beef—dipped in a spicy peanut sauce and served with cucumber relish.

JULIUS BAUTISTA is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, the National University of Singapore where he teaches courses in anthropology, history and religious studies. He is the Academic Convenor of the Multidisciplinary Minor in Religious Studies at NUS, and concurrently, the coordinator of the Southeast Asia in Context Summer Program. He is author of *Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu* (Ateneo, 2010), editor of *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia* (Cornell SEP, 2012) and co-editor of *Christianity in the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict* (Routledge, 2009).