

# Helping Students Develop Global Understanding through Situated Learning: A Religion Course Example

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## Research Design

### 1. Course Design

The instructor and instructional designer conducted an analysis of **The Human Religious Experience** (RELI 100) course, including student demographics, issues students have had in the past with the course, and a narrative written by the instructor describing what students needed to be able to do when they finish the course. As this course fulfills the **general education requirement in global understanding**, they also reviewed the associated learning outcomes and the existing learning outcomes for the course. The course learning outcomes were re-written to align with the instructor's narrative that described higher-level cognitive thinking. In addition, both because of the diversity of the students and their religious backgrounds; and because of the best practice of having interaction between students (in addition to instructor-student and student-content interaction), learning activities where students could exchange experiences with each other to construct knowledge were included in the design. The formative assessments included blog postings with comments and small group discussions and projects. The summative assessments included sanctuary reports of visits to places of worship and a final essay where they synthesized what they learned in the course.

### 2. Research Question

What is the impact of the course design on the student learning outcomes that focus on developing global understanding?

### 3. Situated Learning Theory

**The Human Religious Experience** (RELI 100) applies a situated learning approach where students "co-construct knowledge" through a "social process" (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, 1991) to meet the general education global understanding requirement. Situated learning recognizes the importance of creating "communities of practice" (Mark Smith, 2003) for effective learning thus the course implements community-building strategies like contextualized learning (how can you apply this to your experience?), regular required responses to classmates' discussion board and blog posts, and group projects. These strategies are particularly effective in teaching world religious traditions since world religions themselves are communities of practice. Further, situated learning works towards the "growth and transformation of identity" (Yu-Feng Yang, 2005) so the course takes advantage of the broad diversity of George Mason University students who are from places like Ghana, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Ohio, and New Jersey (as reported in their student introductions) for the project of transforming identity. The final assignment asks the students to articulate their own worldview after having worked together to understand the worldviews of the world's religious traditions.

### 4. Technology Support

The technology the students used in this course included the Blackboard Learning Management System (e.g. tools including blog, discussion board, quiz, survey, assignments, Kaltura, and the Blackboard groups feature), Vimeo presentations supported by GMU-TV, the library's streaming media collection and e-books, and YouTube.

## Data and Methods

### Data Collection

This fully online course, the first in the department, was initially offered in Spring 2015.

- Sample size: 25 Students enrolled in the online version of RELI 100 during Spring 2015.
- Data collected Monday, January 20 – May 12, 2015

The data was collected from

- **Student Grades for their Assignments**
- **University Student Evaluations** (quantitative—based on a five-point Likert Scale—from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) related to assignments
- **End-of-Semester Survey** (qualitative—from open-ended questions)

### Response Rate

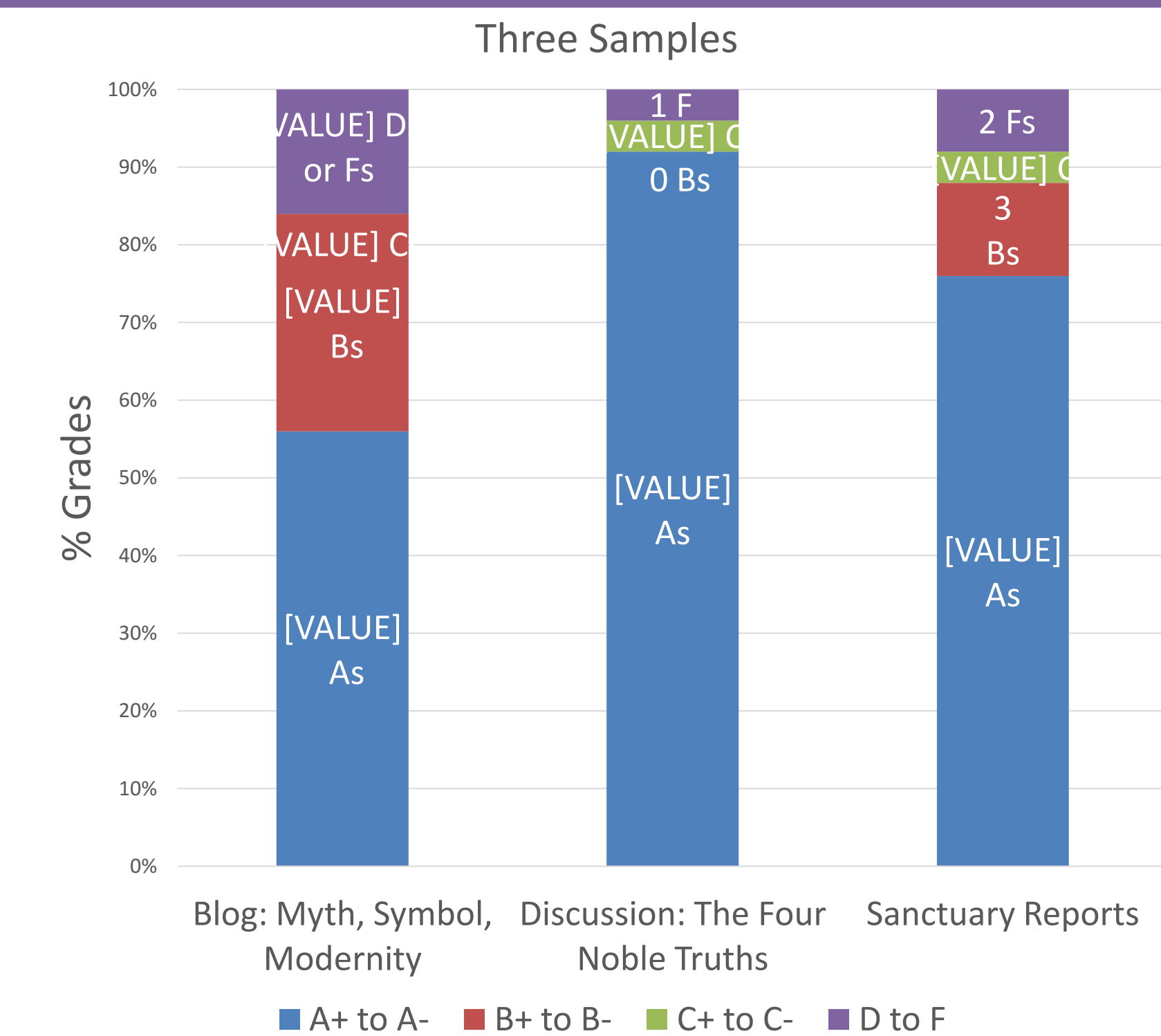
- **University Student Evaluations** (18 student responses out of a possible 25)
- **End-of Semester Survey** (24 student responses out of a possible 25)

### Demographics

- **Geographic Origin:** Ghana (1); Pakistan (1); Iran (1); Bangladesh (1); India (1); Kurdistan (1); Vietnam (2); China (1); Peru (2); El Salvador (1); Washington, D.C. (1); Ohio (1); Virginia (7); Maryland (1); Pennsylvania (1); California (1); and New Jersey (1).
- **Religious Affiliation:** Muslim (7); Christian (14); Hindu (1); unaffiliated (3)
- **Age:** 20 to 45
- **Gender:** women (13); men (12)
- **Major:** Finance (2); Social Work (2); Anthropology (1); Accounting (2); Psychology (4); Applied Information Technology (5); Math (2); Spanish (1); Computer Science (1); Information Technology (1); Business (1); Conflict Analysis and Resolution (1); Physics (1); Undeclared (1)
- **Level:** 1 freshman; 1 sophomore; 6 juniors; 17 seniors

## Results and Conclusion

### Results



❖ **University Evaluation.** The feedback scores range from 4.50 to 4.87

❖ **End-of-Course Evaluation.** Student feedback on the open-ended questions reveal the effectiveness of the course design

#### Quotes about the course:

- "I absolutely had a lovely experience taking this course. I learned a lot in a very organized, interesting, and engaging manner. The instructor provided fun videos, interesting lectures, and collaborative assignments that made it seem as though I was taking the course in person."
- "Myth, Symbol, and Modernity was the most helpful blog for me during this course. . . . Everything could be linked to these three terms, which helped me understand the information better. These terms played a big part in helping me understand some of the major differences in religions."
- "The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path was also a good one because I was able to compare this to my own life and find where these same principles are present in my life. I think that this is important when attempting to understand religion in my own and other contexts."
- "The Sanctuary Reports really did help me learn about religious traditions because it allowed me to be in a different environment surrounded by symbols that represented a completely different religion."

### Conclusion and Future Implications

This research has shown the course design had a positive impact on the student learning outcomes. Students demonstrated a high level of global understanding through the situated learning design. Future research is needed, specifically a content analysis of students' blog posts, discussions, and sanctuary reports. Also, interviews regarding student perceptions will provide a deeper understanding of how the course design affected their worldview.