

Challenges and Approaches to Teaching about Other Cultures: The Case Study of Nation-Building, Identity, and Diversity in South Asia

Teaching and learning about different cultures and societies results in classroom experiences that are both enthusiastic and challenging. Enthusiasm arises from the exposure to new realities and ways of living. On the other hand, challenges occur since the worldview under study may be very different from one's own. Teaching about other cultures implies exploring the values, attitudes, and beliefs of those societies, and for the teacher it means a commitment to imparting an understanding that is coherently connected and as free of bias and stereotyping as possible. For the student, learning about another society presents the difficulty of "identifying and understanding cultural perspectives."¹ However, if done correctly, learning about other cultures eventually leads to new ways of thinking and conceptualizing the world around us.²

As students navigate the world of the "other,"³ through the process of introspection and inquiry, they simultaneously gain knowledge and skills that range from politics, culture, and economics to critical skills in observation and cultural analysis about the new culture and society that equips them to view aspects from the "other's perspective." Such cross-cultural and critical thinking promotes multiculturalism and most certainly paves the way for creating a globalized society open to the possibilities of issues such as social justice. The development of such mindsets is both desired and required as we navigate a world with increasing problems of a global nature and for the acceptance of diversity that is an asset to creating a more inclusive and sustainable world. Awareness of the positive benefits of studying other cultures has encouraged universities to offer appropriate courses that provide an in-depth understanding of these topics. This essay presents the challenges and opportunities that arise when teaching about other cultures and societies with particular reference to the countries of South Asia.

To facilitate an exploration devoid of a lopsided understanding of another society and culture, the teacher must prioritize the following three strategies for enhanced learning: First, bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge gained through reliance on literature versus the practical exploration of the subject matter; second, find meaningful connections by uncovering the implicit; and third, commit to an analysis and exploration of a deeper meaning in order to reach a more holistic understanding. Distance should not be a hindrance to gaining the knowledge and insight about a region necessary for developing such a culturally enriched understanding of its people. Covid-19 and the ongoing, public health crisis has shifted the focus of education to online and distant learning methods and limited the opportunity to travel for study abroad. Consequently, instructors are presented with a much more challenging responsibility to ensure that students develop a good grasp of the society they are studying in the absence of experiential learning. As such, we must reduce the challenges that spatial distance presents while exploiting pedagogical approaches used to generate knowledge about other cultures and societies.

In the first part of this essay, I describe my course offering on South Asia titled “Nation-Building, Identity and Diversity in South Asia,” which explores issues of ethnic identity and nation-building. I also highlight the various lenses used to view the conceptual and theoretical ideas explored in the course to promote critical thinking, analysis, and reflection. The course is taught to undergraduates at a liberal arts institution to offer a comprehensive view and understanding of the volatile socio-political processes that make India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka an important focus of international analysis, discourse, and research. Teaching this course at a small liberal arts institution implies a small class size and a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:13. The classes are capped at twenty which implies there is space for in-depth discussion of issues. Many of the students who take this course are majors in International Studies and at the junior or senior level of their four-year college education. Quite frequently, there are also students from other majors enrolled in the course, many of whom are interested in learning about the region because of family connection to South Asia or other, purely personal interests. Furthermore, the course is an elective with no prerequisites. Hence, most students enrolled have no prior knowledge or understanding of the geographical area studied in the course. In the second part of the essay, I describe specific approaches I use to teach about all countries in the region, approaches that strive for meaningful and relevant, cultural learning from a distance. Understanding these strategies may allow readers to adopt and adapt some of these approaches as they teach about cultures in other historical time periods. In doing so, modifications may be necessary based on the context of the society under study and particular course objectives. Much of the theory is applicable to history and interdisciplinary area-studies courses.

Conceptual and Theoretical Approaches

In teaching about South Asia, I present an area of the world to students that has both specific regional and international implications. The region's social, political, religious, and economic developments have global consequences. These facts are explicitly presented and deliberated upon in the classroom through the syllabi and introductory lectures. While gaining content knowledge about South Asia, students simultaneously become aware of the importance and the need to study the region due to how interconnected its developments are to the rest of the world. An understanding of the complexities surrounding the myriad issues grounds students firmly in the global/local dialectic. Students entering the realm of global politics need to develop a capacity for seeing other regional spaces from the perspective of indigenous communities, which, in turn, requires a culturally sensitive understanding of local issues. Such a worldview also generates an interest in exploring course themes among students. The realization of how developments in South Asia have implications closer to home stimulate students' curiosity to learn from the perspective of their local, regional, and national standpoint. While we study these points of contact, an understanding of how present-day connections emerge from historical roots becomes a classroom theme and has a significant bearing on student motivation to learn. This process expands the scope of the course in terms of content. The past matters more to most students when it can be connected to the present in a concrete manner. The starting point for discussion in this course is historically centered since the very foundation of the nation-building process for countries in South Asia is rooted in colonialism and subsequent independence from colonial legacy.

Interdisciplinarity provides the best approach to explore culture and society.⁴ Looking at issues through the multiple lenses of history, politics, sociology, and gender provides a way to learn about the beliefs, attitudes, and values of a particular society and culture. My course is essentially divided into three key parts: First, by exploring historical context since the end of colonial rule, discussions are centered on issues of religious nationalist movements, such as the role that Hindu and Muslim organizations have played in shaping people's ideas and way of life. Ideas of diversity such as gender, class, caste, and religion play out and are explored from a political and social lens. Furthermore, the course offers an exploration into issues of caste, language, class, and gender within the framework of religious nationalism. Because of this interdisciplinary method, attention may be devoted to study how these identity issues play out in the context of these societies.

Second, we explore issues of separatism and political movements across the region that emerge from diversity and pose challenges to the nation-building process.⁵ Here, we discuss several ethnic-based case studies such as the Kashmir conflict, the Baluchistan movement, the Sindhi-Muhajir conflict, and Tamil Tigers movement among others. Each of these movements is studied from the viewpoints of the different stakeholders involved

in these conflicts. To explore the narratives of the different stakeholders, we use the various lenses to discover and uncover these multi-layered and thickly constructed arguments. Interestingly, some of these conflicts are ongoing, while others have moved into different directions. Comparing the developments over time provides a good context to analyze the demands, strategies, and actions employed in the cultural construction of identity. As we look at each ethnic conflict, we see how many of the demands are centered around establishing one's identity and the strategies and actions of negotiation play out in similar ways across the different case studies. A cross-cultural comparison of these movements allows us to reflect on the challenges and helps us see what successes and failures have resulted in each case.

Third, and the final part of the course, explores a more explicit discussion of foreign policy and international players in the region's ethnic conflicts. This allows students to evaluate issues of international intervention in a countries' politics.⁶ Once again, this pedagogical approach helps tie a specific region to other areas of the world and to the foreign policies of the developed world. It sets up a discussion on South Asia's importance on the world stage, both economically and politically, and how, within the context of global governance, differently interested parties in the region make inroads into achieving their goals despite conflicting interests.

In the course, we explore how the issues of colonialism and "reclaiming identity" have emerged in the last seventy years of India's history. The idea of "connection" is juxtaposed to that of "disconnection." Social developments in South Asia require different methods of analysis as opposed to Euro-centric approaches and to those categories influenced by European developments. Understanding this juxtaposition paves the way for a discussion of how indigenous ideas that germinate from and have roots in the land of South Asia are context-motivated.⁷ For instance, we explore the idea of nation-building, which at the time of colonial independence in the 1940s was imported into this region from the West to reconstruct national identity. But while the West's understanding of independence meant one nation/one state, the same political construct was inapplicable to South Asian countries. In fact, in a country like India, nation building was centered on the coexistence of different ethnic groups.⁸ Therefore, in its original western conception, nation building was incongruent with the very fabric of Indian society.⁹ This leads the class into a discussion about how disconnection with the West serves as a moment of redefining what it means to be "us" in the countries of South Asia. It is a vision of redefining Indian identity that highlights the beliefs and values integral to preserving India's culture of co-existence and tolerance among different ethnic groups.¹⁰ Identity is bound and interlinked to the intricacies of society and ways of living. In fact, given how intricately religion is tied to the issues of politics we explore and compare the "secular" as conceived of in the West to that of the Indian subcontinent.¹¹ This is another example of connecting and disconnecting. Connect

to generate interest by exploring commonalities and disconnect in order to move into the deeper realm of a culturally sensitive understanding of indigenous ideas.

The main theoretical and conceptual approaches that have guided the teaching of this course on South Asia include (a) the interdisciplinary approach that is the basis of providing a holistic understanding of other cultures, and (b) the emphasis upon connection and disconnection as a means for a deeper analysis of the schisms that constitute the very fabric of society. Next, I examine what pedagogical and andragogical approaches are most useful for teaching such a subject matter.

Pedagogical and Andragogical Approaches

Historically, education was focused on imparting knowledge through a one-way process from teacher to student, however, such directed learning came under severe criticism with the realization that multiple directions of knowledge transmission exist and can coexist. Subsequently, multidimensional transmission of knowledge emerged as a powerful idea to achieve different learning outcomes as compared to a traditional approach to the classroom. It is this movement away from a “pedagogical” or teacher-directed learning style to an andragogical or “student-directed and experiential” style of learning that forms the basis of my teaching-learning style in “Nation-Building, Identity and Diversity in South Asia.”

Andragogy as a concept was developed in the work of Malcolm S. Knowles as “the art and science of helping adults learn in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children.”¹² When teaching older, more mature individuals, Knowles advocated for a shift from a pedagogical to an andragogical approach premised upon four characteristics differentiating adult learners from child learners. First, as individuals mature over the course of their lives, they move from a state of dependency to one characterized by more self-direction. Second, as individuals mature, they accumulate a lot of knowledge that provides a rich resource for further learning. Third, these same individuals also develop a readiness to learn oriented more toward their specific, real-life social circumstances. And fourth, mature learners are most interested in an immediate application of knowledge as opposed to postponed application.¹³ Here I would emphasize the importance of adopting an andragogical approach especially given the student body and the emphasis on skills development. Involving students in their own learning is one of the best ways to make the learning experience both effective and joyful.¹⁴ When teaching about another culture, a straightforward either pedagogical or andragogical approach will most likely not result in the desired outcome. Rather, it is important for a teacher to contemplate seriously how best to allow a combination of approaches to guide students in learning about a different culture. I have spent considerable time reflecting upon how best to implement these teaching approaches most effectively in my course. In the same way any reader encouraged by this essay to adopt a combined pedagogy-andragogy teaching strategy must tailor-make their

own course in accordance with course specific learning objectives, content, and audience in mind.

Both approaches are crucial to (or inform) how I teach “Nation-Building, Identity and Diversity in South Asia.” The first half of the course is primarily based on the more teacher-directed, pedagogical approach, which covers basic concepts and ideas. In the second half of the course, students explore ideas from an andragogical approach where learners become active decision makers in the learning process via experiential means. In this type of learning, both the teacher and students become knowledge creators and transmitters by applying ideas, reflection, and analysis to course concepts. There are three primary reasons I use a combination of both pedagogical and andragogical approaches in the classroom. First, most students are learning about these cultures and societies for the first time and lack any prior knowledge or understanding of the geographical area under consideration. Second, there is a need to employ learning tools that best present information to facilitate the development of life-long transferable skills such as critical thinking and reflection (an essential teaching goal given the liberal arts vision and mission of our campus). And third, the combined approaches allow for an inclusive teaching-learning style through various mediums that appeal to the students at my university, many of whom are first-generational learners from rural backgrounds. This subset of the student body learns best with the adoption of variable learning styles.¹⁵ Adopting these processes works seamlessly with a sustained and meaningful investigation of course subject-matter.

We begin with an exploration of ideas about British rule in India and how this solidified ethnic tension and division. Discussion centers on a range of key issues, namely: (a) the imposition of separate electorates for religious communities in India that sharpened the ethnic divide; (b) issues of census taking and what that meant for the potential political strength of each community; (c) how the new boundaries for an independent India were created; and, (d) how these same boundaries affected the overall well-being of the people. One of the most powerful mediums for helping students understand these intricate issues is through watching documentaries. I use films throughout the course because they are a powerful, learning medium, especially so for visual learners who retain information better when provided with a memorable scene to contextualize within a theoretical framework.

The most significant documentary we watch is *The Day India Burned: The Forgotten Story*, which features actual footage from the era. Video clips where students can hear people narrating their life stories provides meaning and context to the actual incidents they have read about. Listening to the narratives of those who lived through both independence and religious rioting brings a human touch to these events. The documentary also introduces students to the idea of how women’s honor is conflated with the “community’s honor.” Thousands of women were “martyred” by their own family members because of the fear that they would be abducted or raped by members of the “other” religious community.



Image 1: A couple migrating from India to Pakistan with their household goods and cattle during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in the last days of British colonial rule. The movement of people into or from the new states of the Hindu-majority Republic of India and the Muslim-majority Islamic Republic of Pakistan, is a key to understanding nation-building, identity, and diversity in colonial and post-colonial South Asia. This is a photograph taken by Doc Mariam, of a monument in Pakistan to this tragic event in which perhaps as many as 15 million people were displaced from the lands of their birth and as many as one half to 2 million were killed in related communal violence. It is used here under the provisions of Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_couple_migrating_from_India_To_Pakistan_with_their_household_stuff_and_cattle_during_Partition.JPG

As we watch such incidents, we debate the appropriate use of terms such as “killing” as opposed to “martyred” and how various narratives distort reality when putting forward their version of truth. Once complete, our discussion of the partition history provides a segue to our ongoing discussion of gender and religious nationalism. In doing so, students also explore this issue from the lens of present-day India. The contrast between past and present is eye opening and helps students understand the changes and continuities in women’s gender roles over time. They also recognize that with a greater awareness of society’s gender inequalities, an increasing number of women are making inroads into

gaining gender equality even though there is still a long way to go before equitability is fully reached.

Students watch *The World Before Her*, another powerful documentary that explores how the nationalist agenda has shaped gender identity. Thousands of women subjected to decisions made by the men of their community were martyred during the India-Pakistan partition. In post-independence India, Hindu nationalist organizations are using camps to train and inculcate ideas of “duality” in women. On the one hand, women receive martial arts training to fight the religious “other” and at the same training camps, women are taught to be subservient and follow the commands of the men in their community. The thought-provoking duality of “warriors and wives” and “modern and traditional” is presented in the documentary through the lens of a colonial versus decolonial agenda. The documentary includes actual footage from inside the camps and it is notable that this is the first time the training camp has been filmed. The documentary highlights the flexibility and complexity faced by Indian women as they navigate their gender identity across caste, class, and other divisions that exist in society. At the same time, it brings forth the idea that women are not a monolithic category and the multiple ways in which identities are conceptualized lead to varied experiences for women.

Similarly, we also watch videos and documentaries on caste and various ethnic movements as well as televised debates on the women’s reservation bill, which highlights the need and complexities involved in the demand for a quota system to increase the political participation of women, and the Uniform Civil Code, which highlights the debates surrounding the idea that all religious communities be governed by the same set of personal laws as opposed to the need to maintain separate and distinct legal codes for each community in order to preserve their unique religious identity. The course covers a wide spectrum of history and provides students with enough general context to grapple with ideas of how gender is shaped historically, what processes of change gender categories have undergone, and finally, a consideration of contemporary gender issues in the region.

The idea of British India is tied closely to that of colonial legacy. Even after independence in 1947, colonial thought shaped the idea of nation building even as nation-builders worked to break free from their colonial legacy. As a nation building agenda was being actualized, it led to clashes where people’s struggle for power became the focus of nation building; where ideas of liberation and grassroots-level, social movements came to the surface; where attempts to find indigenous voices and representations within such a large and complex country like India led to clashes between colonial and decolonial modes of understanding and creating society. The challenge was formidable given India’s ethnic diversity.

The course helps students explore the work involved in nation-building through role play and media articles. As students engage in role play, they place themselves in the

position of others to understand how and what people in those roles might have experienced. For instance, when students use role play to explore issues related to Sri Lankan ethnicity, they enact the position of various participants such as the Tamil Tigers, United Nations, Sri Lankan Government, Sinhalese, etc. This exercise immediately brings home the challenges of ethnic identity and conflict from all standpoints. I think role play interests students because it is both challenging and engaging. Students understand the challenges of maintaining the unity of the country, finding solutions to years of resentment, ensuring development, as well as encouraging an empathetic awareness of human rights and social justice issues. On the other hand, their involvement in role play allows them to learn about ethnic conflicts in the region and provides them a way to understand the issue from diverse perspectives. Solutions to India's ethnic conflicts are multi-layered and dense and a realization that the world is not black or white or even multiple shades of gray helps students develop critical thinking and analytical skills. I would like to share a word of caution here when planning a role play. If instructions for the role play are not clearly defined and understood, there is a danger that the role play may end up becoming a token exercise for students. Hence, processing the activity in depth, both before and after the role play, is extremely important for achieving meaningful learning such as engaging with the text and ideas articulated in the case studies.

Another andragogical assignment that students find extremely useful centers on media articles. Every student summarizes for the class two recent news articles each week. The small class size of twenty students allows time for each student to share information about their news story. I also expect students to submit their summaries online, so in large classroom sizes an instructor could alternatively have a few students share one time and others the next time. A discussion of these articles allows students to see the interconnection between multiple issues, some of which may arise organically from student conversation even though they are not directly listed on the syllabus. As students read about the recent news events each week, it makes them realize that what they are reading about in the classroom is playing out in real time, out there, in the real world. Relating classroom learning to actual events generates a lot of interest among students. Classroom discussion of media articles also encourages students to research past developments related to the issue under scrutiny. As students dig deeper into the issues, they gain an appreciation of the historical trajectory of various events and narratives reported upon in the media. Historical perspective makes for a great class discussion as past events are routinely tied to other happenings and as a matter of course they provide students with an opportunity to analyze interconnections.

One highly effective way to teach about South Asian conflicts is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). COIL is a process where students interact with students at universities in other countries, learning with them and from them.¹⁶ It provides an

opportunity for students to collaborate internationally using online mediums.¹⁷ The process allows my students the opportunity to meet with their counterparts from another culture and to discuss ideas. In doing so, COIL exposes them to diverse worldviews. My students have worked in a collaborative project with students at a university in India to exchange ideas and information about refugee and resettlement issues. Finding the right partner institution is always a challenge. In my case we were fortunate to work with a Tibetan University in India. The mission of this institution fits in well with our course content as they are an ethnic group working to preserve the traditions, cultural institutions, and educational system that define their group identity. Considerable effort and analysis must be devoted to designing a program that meets the needs of both institutions and, in our case, the faculty also spent a good six months prior to the start of the course working diligently on conceptualizing a project that met the learning objectives for both partner institutions. The students who participated were undergraduate students in their second or third year of college education. Coming from different cultural contexts and with different missions of education, it was important for us to identify how to meet the goals of each group and how to program in community building sessions from the beginning of the project. During these sessions, students from India and the United States met online and got to know each other. It started with each group asking the other questions about personal interests, family life, music, and movies before advancing to more serious social and political questions about political policies and social issues. Through these introductory sessions, the two sets of students achieved rapport building. Once the students were relatively comfortable conversing with one another, discussions centered on course content.

In the COIL-based project, using various social media platforms such as Facebook and Zoom, students shared articles, learned about topics of common interest such as education of and political support for ethnic groups. Students presented on relevant topics such as the Tibetan struggle and Native American history. Learning from students who are working hard to preserve their ethnic identity and who have experienced challenges and successes in their struggle to maintain their ethnic identity was an eye-opening and rewarding experience for students enrolled in my course. Students could recognize and acknowledge many similarities between what Tibetan students face with what other ethnic groups face based on our course readings.

While knowledge creation is a key outcome of employing this mode of learning, it also aids students in developing intercultural skills, interpersonal skills, analytical-ethical thinking, and a social justice perspective. As an expert in global education, Merry M. Merryfield, pointed out that through such international contacts “the lived experiences become, in retrospect, milestones in the development of a consciousness of multiple realities”¹⁸ During a survey to assess the effectiveness of their COIL-based projects, students shared

what they saw as benefits of interacting with their international peers, as suggested by these three responses to the survey:

- 1) The project offered a unique opportunity to reflect on major issues from different perspectives. I credit the class and the project for helping me be more compassionate and considerate of other people's opinions—especially when they are very different from mine.
- 2) I think it really helps understand another country's culture and how it affects or shapes their own opinions. I do think it is very beneficial for students at UNC Asheville, being at a fairly liberal university, to have ideas challenged or presented in a different way by people of other backgrounds and cultures.
- 3) Learning about ways students in other schools' experience universities, but also that technology isn't always going to be the same when trying to work internationally. So, you must be empathetic and adapt, sometimes with very short to no notice.

In the case of UNC, Asheville, our project was part of an initiative to learn about the history of an ethnic group and the ways in which members of that community work to preserve their identity. In the case of students in India, they wanted to interact with my students in order to understand how western societies work, build global partnership, and enhance their international communication skills. In the final version of the project, we were able to accomplish both these objectives at the two ends of the world. The most important starting point for developing such a project is finding the right faculty partners,¹⁹ ensuring that class times match given the time difference between the participating countries, encouraging students to keep in mind that their fellow students in another country may have different world views and ideas, and being prepared, as a teacher, to facilitate conversation between students even when there are differences, and modeling for students how best to maintain a good working relationship. Other scholars who have led COIL-based projects have faced similar challenges and opportunities. Being aware of and prepared to deal with problems when they arise is the best way to ensure the success of the project in the course.²⁰

Furthermore, a teacher's own personal life journey also matters. The long-term experience of another culture significantly shapes expertise. A professor who has a solid experiential foundation in multiple parts of the globe more effectively creates learning strategies and then implements those strategies with greater sophistication. This experience allows for a deeper exploration of the connection between the global and the local.²¹ If the teacher is well-versed with the lived realities of the societies that they are teaching about, they are better prepared to explore and discuss numerous topics in a comparative fashion. My own experience of being born and raised in India has provided me with the much-needed context to teach and explore the ideas of South Asian cultures and societies in a more concrete way.

For instance, in class discussion of the caste system or arranged marriages, I can offer views on various perspectives encountered first-hand. At the same time, I must do a self-check periodically to recognize my own biases to ensure that information presented to students is balanced and students feel free to formulate their own opinions about ideas discussed in the course.

In conclusion, it is important to state that the nuances of society and the lived experiences of people are varied and challenging. Understanding and articulating these experiences are best done by employing varied approaches to teaching and learning. In this essay I have covered two key conceptual/theoretical approaches (interdisciplinarity and the dialectic of connecting and disconnecting) as well as four pedagogical/andragogical approaches (documentaries/videos, role play, media articles, and COIL). In my classroom these approaches have been useful in imparting learning to students that builds both knowledge and skills. The nature of the subject students explore in “Nation-Building, Identity and Diversity in South Asia” is complex and a simplistic, unidimensional lens can never do it justice. It is imperative that students develop critical thinking, analytical, and reflective skills if they are to acquire an understanding that exceeds the superficial. However, while I have particularly found the approaches explored in this essay to be useful in my own teaching, it must be borne in mind that the approaches presented here are only some ideas of how to effectively teach such a course. It is important to adopt and adapt said approaches based on the needs and objectives of a course. The approaches discussed above help overcome the challenges of teaching about other cultures by creating opportunities for students to experientially learn about and interact with persons living in those particular societies. These useful approaches bridge the gap often encountered when studying societies from afar by helping students, in some small way, come to know about a people and their worldview despite lack of geographic proximity.

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NOTES

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