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Using Narrative Case Studies In An Online World Religions Course To Stimulate Deep Learning About Islam

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to examine how a narrative case study in an online asynchronous world religions course affected learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others. The world religions course examined a variety of religions including Islam. Ten participants received information about the Five Pillars of Islam; they then analyzed a narrative case study written by the instructor that was a fictional representation centering around the Five Pillars. Following this analysis, learners used the Five Pillars of Islam to construct their own narrative case study. Pre and post assignment data were collected and analyzed. The data sources included: responses to a survey; narrative answers to open-ended questions; written analyses of the narrative case study; responses to telephone interviews; and, written original narrative case studies. Results indicated that learners demonstrated positive changes in their beliefs and attitudes about Islam, and experienced different ways of thinking. In particular, participants demonstrated changes when they: (a) expressed new understandings of Islam as framed through self reflection; (b) compared Islam to a personal prayer life; (c) reflected new appreciations of the Islamic faith; and, (d) recognized stereotypes about Islam. The different ways of thinking that participants experienced occurred when

they; (a) created mental images; (b) understood comprehensively and analytically; (c) reflected understandings in constructing an original narrative; (d) applied content to real-life; and, (e) enjoyed analyzing the case.

Keywords: Teaching World Religions, Islam; Deep Learning, Narrative Case Studies

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Introduction

As evidenced by the current situations between the United States and Iraq, the United States and Al-Qaeda, Muslim-Hindu uprisings in India, the spread of the Taliban outside of Afghanistan, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, the world's population is drawn into and affected by the beliefs and values of others. Many of these conflicts' causes emanate from peoples' religious experiences.

Now more than ever, it is crucial that people not only know about the various religions of the world but understand the perspective and intrinsic views held by believers. Opening to the faith and spirituality of others is to show affection for others, which ultimately leads to new understandings and respect for their humanity (Ruland, 1985). As citizens of the world, people living in the 21st century need to understand others and, in times of value-laden conflict, to truly comprehend others' religions.

Religion has multiple meanings. According to Paul Tillich (1948), religion is defined as "that which is of the ultimate concern" (p. 273). With this description, religion is a very broad experience that affects all people. More specifically, Vernon Ruland (1998) of the University of San Francisco describes religion as "the quality that permeates that life; the center from which everything derives its meaning or without which all else would be meaningless" (p.10). Finally, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (2002), a commonly used source for world religions texts, defines religion as, "a personal awareness or conviction of the existence of a supreme being or of supernatural powers or influences controlling one's own, humanity's, or all nature's destiny" (p.1918).

A collective approach to the study of religion would use or blend definitions so as to encompass the broadest possible approach to understanding all of the world's religions. However, designing world religions courses with such a broad comprehensive treatment often creates a learning environment that

leads to surface as opposed to deep learning (Masuzawa, 2005). The consequence of such a pedagogical approach is that the learner leaves the course with a simple fact-based understanding of complex beliefs and values held by others. Further, such a simple or surface knowledge does not invite the learner to change his or her own understandings about the beliefs and values held by others.

While educators agree on the need to develop courses that cultivate deep learning, the challenge persists as to how to do so in a fast paced, technological age where the instructor has less opportunity to interact personally with learners and draw out deep insights and meanings from the presented material. As an instructor of asynchronous online world religions courses in the community college setting for over nine years, I have discovered that a real challenge persists as to how to present an enormous curricular subject such as world religions, often times in an abbreviated semester of 8 to 14 weeks, without resorting to a fact-based, surface treatment of the material. As such, I have continually experimented and sought out pedagogical devices that will lead the learner to draw deep and meaningful understandings from the study of religion. When a learner leaves my course, it is my hope that the person is able to make connections between the values and beliefs of others and his or her own values and beliefs. I have sought to design a course in which each person's view of the human condition is altered and new meanings and ideas about the world have emerged.

One promising tool that appears to facilitate a deep learning experience is the narrative case study. A narrative case study is a short account written for the sole purpose of leading learners to understand specific curricular content objectives by examining the actions and dialogues of others. The narrative blends fiction and non-fiction into a story that the learner analyzes after studying basic core tenets of a religion or religious system. The purpose of this research was to examine how a narrative case study in my on-line asynchronous world religions course affected learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others.

Review of Supporting Scholarship

Four categories of ideas and information were central to this study. Although the major philosophical underpinning of the study encompassed the implementation of deep learning in a religious studies context, many significant strategies of learning were utilized as a means of facilitating a deep learning experience for the study of Islam. This section explores deep learning as well as narrative text processing, writing to learn, and case study instruction.

Deep Learning

For several years, many courses in higher education have been dominated by pedagogical methods that reflect surface learning where facts and concepts are emphasized by the external demands of testing, institutional goals, or society (Atherton, 2005). Instead of instilling wisdom in learners, this approach encourages an artificial form of learning wherein the aim is to please teachers on various short-lived assessments (Ramsden, 2003). Learners often are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of disassociated facts and theories or memorize data about philosophies and principles without applying them to individuals and real-world situations. This approach often results in learners obtaining a short-lived knowledge of a very specific field of study, a curriculum that is shallow in its depth, and a cursory view of meaningful, interdisciplinary connections (Lombardo, 2006).

A generative goal of education is to guide learners toward developing the necessary tools and learning strategies needed to think deeply and productively about broad–based subjects, including historical and social phenomena (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Pring, 2000). The intent is to have learners move beyond simple recitations of facts and figures to a relevant knowledge where they move outside of the basic realm of information to thinking about problems, analyzing issues, making inferences, and relating various pieces of information for the purpose of drawing conclusions (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Joyce &Weil, 2000).

Designing a course with these objectives is to guide learners toward deep learning. Deep learning forms a learner in such a way that he or she can apply theories to everyday practices and behaviors (Atherton, 2005; Pring 2000). Deep learning is a "comprehensive understanding of a domain of study" (Lombardo, 2006, p. 2). The goal is to have learners internalize new understandings and directly apply these new thoughts and ideas to previous knowledge. Simply put, deep connections are made between the new understanding and previously held ideas and beliefs (Atherton, 2005; Bransford et al., 2000). When learners successfully engage in deep learning, they are self-reflecting. That is, they are thinking about how they interpret events and ideas in their own life. By challenging learners to engage in this form of thinking, the instructor helps learners ultimately create new understandings and new operational knowledge (Lombardo, 2006; Pring, 2000).

Narrative Text Processing

Narrative texts represent the world by describing characters' experiences during sequences of events (Graesser, Golding, & Long, 1991). Research in cognitive psychology and reader-response theory has shed light on the role of narrative texts in deep learning.

Cognitive psychology. Research in cognitive psychology has shown that narratives appeal to the natural attributes of human memory (McCauley, 2000). Once learners begin to hear a story, they tend to automatically search their long-term memory to locate a story that is similar (Shank, 1995). A level of understanding develops while the listeners are engaged in the process of searching their own memories and making connections to prior knowledge resonating from prior stories (Shank, 1995). While they are searching for a familiar or related story in their memory, learners begin to apply concepts to someone else's story. By engaging in this extraction and construction process, learners produce deeper and deeper levels of understanding (Shank, 1995).

Research has suggested that engaging in story is an effective means of learning about the customs and rules of other societies (Hsu, 2008). This learning process occurs as individuals experience narrative that appeals to their emotions and capacity for empathy (Hsu, 2008). The degree to which narrative influences others' beliefs rests on the existence of prior knowledge and experience. As learners process a narrative, on an unconscious level they apply theories and philosophies about the beliefs and values of others to their own beliefs and values. During this process, they are beginning to create new understandings about both their own beliefs and the beliefs and values of others. The more a person relates to the life experience or emotions of the characters in the narrative, the greater their immersion in a state Green calls "narrative transport" (as cited in Hsu, 2008, p.51). This purposeful strategy of inviting learners to relate their own experiences to that of others is a form of deep learning(Smith & Colby,2007)

Reader-response theory. Reader-response theory offers key insights into the experience that an active reader or listener brings to a narrative (Karolides, 2000; Tompkins, 1980). According to reader-response theorists, the reader does not sit by passively when reading text, but participates as an active actor in a process of generating new meaning from the text. During reading, there is an engaging mutual process that exists between the reader and the text.

According to Louise Rosenblatt (1978), "The relation between the text and the reader is not linear. It is a situation, an event in a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (p.16). As such, if learners enrolled in a world religions class are actively reading a narrative on religion or a religious system, they are doing much more than seeking out clues and answers from the printed material. The learners bring their own cultural and societal biases, including perceived religious or spiritual beliefs, to the actions, ideas, and dialogues found in the text (Karolides, 2000). The impressions brought about within the text in conjunction with the background provided by the reader at

a particular point in time lead to a new experience where a unique meaning is understood (Beach, 1994; Karolides, 2000). This new meaning often creates new insights and understandings about the values and beliefs of others. By bringing their emotional and intellectual engagement to the text, respondents create a response that unknowingly is shaped by their own perceived identity with or distance from the characters (Karolides, 2000).

Writing to Learn

When all goes well, writing, as a mode of learning, engages learners with content and activates thinking (Emig, 2003). Writing can lead learners to new insights, new ideas, and new knowledge. Although writing often is a mainstay of everyday communication and frequently is used pedagogically for assessing the transmission of information, it can create opportunities for learners to grasp content and analyze it critically. In commending the value of writing in order to learn, George Newell (2005) claims that the "process of writing will somehow lead inevitably to a better understanding of information gleaned from texts and from a teacher's presentation" (p. 238).

The constructivist school of thought has influenced the writing to learn movement in education (Newell, 2005). According to the constructivist view, which aligns with the cognitive psychology and reader response theories of reading presented earlier, writers actively participate in the creation of knowledge. Similar to readers who often "compare a speaker's or character's experience with their personal experience" (Beach, 1994, p. 762), writers break down barriers between themselves and their subjects and actively place themselves in the roles of others. When learners place themselves in the roles of others, they are moving toward deep learning.

Case Study Instruction

Scholars have noted some general characteristics of effective case studies (Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, Turoff, & Benbunan-Fich, 2000). Effective case-studies tend to be authentic, ill-structured, and

open-ended -- just like problems in real life (Bernard & Lundgren-Cayrol, 2001). Real-life problems, as opposed to unlikely or implausible actions and dialogues, tend to engage learners (Vinaja & Raisinghani, 2001). However, little research is available to guide pedagogues in the design and use of on-line case studies in a world religions course devoted to deep learning.

As used in my pedagogy, a narrative case study is a short narrative written by the instructor for the sole purpose of getting learners to understand specific curricular content objectives by examining the actions and dialogues of others. Learners study the tenets of a specific religion or religious system through various means, then they read the actions and dialogues of characters who embody these tenets. The purpose in creating the narrative case study is to guide the learner toward a deep learning experience where the learner does not simply accept the material at face value, but questions and analyzes it. Here the learner contemplates the personal relevance of the material and the potential applications of it. In an online setting, the learner is completing this activity without the benefit of a face-to-face classroom environment where colleagues and an instructor would be able to probe and offer immediate possible meanings. Since online learners are working independently on this assignment, the question remains as to how a narrative case study in an on-line asynchronous world religions course affects learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to examine how a narrative case study in my on-line asynchronous world religions course affected learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others. This research was conducted utilizing an action-research mixed-methods methodology (Stringer, 2007).

Setting

Learners participating in the research were enrolled in REL 243 (World Religions) at Rio Salado College, a member of the Maricopa County (AZ) Community Colleges. Learners enroll in the online course every two weeks. Once they are assigned an official start date, each learner receives a 15 week calendar that reflects when lessons should be completed and assignments submitted. Due to the asynchronous nature of the class, the average learner is engaged only with the online material and does not have an opportunity to process the content with peers. After assignments are submitted, they are scored and returned by me within five calendar days.

The demographics of those who participated in the research study represented a traditional range of online learners at Rio Salado College. Seven of the 10 participants were women. While four participants ranged from 29-39 years of age, one was 42 and the remaining five were 18-28 years of age. Eight of the participants resided in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area, while the remaining two resided in Tucson and Florence, Arizona. One participant, who just completed a tour of duty in Iraq, was in the Earmy University partnership with Rio Salado College, a program where active duty U.S. Army personnel take online courses through Rio Salado College and other online colleges throughout the country.

Although learners entered the course in two week intervals commencing on August 25, 2008, all fifteen original research participants were presented with a due date calendar for assignments and a due date calendar for completing the extra research study assignments. Assignments were collected at various times during fall 2008 with all ten participants finishing the data collection pieces of the study by January 5, 2009.

Action Steps

World religions is an undergraduate survey course that is designed to expose learners to the major developed and indigenous religions of the world. After examining indigenous religions, several developed Asian Religions, and two other Abrahamic religions, learners are required to complete a unit on Islam. The unit begins with the life of Islam's founder, Mohammed, and ends with a discussion of contemporary Muslim sects and practices. Learners read two chapters in a textbook, read an online summary provided by me on the main tenets of Islam, completed two multiple choice quizzes, and wrote a brief essay describing the Five of Pillars of Islam. The specific actions examined in this asynchronous online world religions course consisted of two learning tasks. In addition to the above assignments, participants produced a written analysis of a narrative case study, and then they constructed a narrative case study.

Written analysis of a narrative case study. Each learner was invited to analyze a narrative case study on Islam so as to stimulate deep learning (Appendix D). The procedure for analyzing a narrative case study was to examine the actions and dialogues of the characters in the story so as to identify the Five Pillars of Islam. When learners are analyzing a piece of information in this fashion and drawing conclusions, they are engaging in deep learning. (Bigge & Shermis, 1999;Joyce & Weil, 2000). In their written analysis, the learner was to specifically name the pillar, identify how it was represented by the actions and dialogues of the characters, and show the direct correlation between the actions and dialogues with the definitions and attributes of the pillars. For example, after reading the narrative case study provided, a learner may have written in their analysis," Sadia professed her faith with the creed or Shahada when she stated, 'O'merciful God, I know of your oneness and praise the name of Mohammed your prophet.'" This statement would be appropriate because Shahada is the first pillar that is a profession of faith. It also is the acceptance of this confession of faith and its faithful repetition that

constitute the first step to being a Muslim. The significance of the Shahada is the belief that the only purpose of life is to serve and obey.

Construction of an original narrative case study. Under the theoretical umbrella of writing to learn to stimulate deep learning, the participants were invited to construct their own original narrative case studies. After they prepared a written analysis of the narrative case study provided, each learner was asked to write his or her own narrative case study based on the Five Pillars of Islam using the same technique of embedding the curricular content in the actions and dialogue of the characters (see Appendix C). Learners were provided with the already analyzed narrative case study as a sample. Although they were asked to submit the original narrative case study within five days of receipt of the assignment, specific length or writing style were not included in the instructions so as to provide as much creativity as possible with the writing process.

Writing a narrative case study allows the learner to apply content facts to sophisticated actions, dialogues, and events, which is a form of deep learning (Smith & Colby, 2007). With analytic writing, such as constructing a written narrative case study based on how characters live out their religious beliefs, learners were prompted to engage in a deeper form of understanding. By producing their own original narrative case study, a learner has the opportunity to participate in a "more lasting intellectual representation of the content (that) seems to develop through an integration and reformulation of ideas" (Newell, 2005, p. 240).

Data Sources

Data for this study came from surveys, the written analyses of a narrative case study, the written original narrative case studies, and telephone interviews. The following describes each data source.

Surveys. At the beginning of the unit, learners were asked to complete a survey that measured their personal beliefs and attitudes about Islam (see Appendix B). The purpose of such a pre-assignment survey was to capture an initial snapshot of the learners' attitudes and provide quantitative data on those attitudes that could be used for comparison (Johnson, 2002).

The pre-assignment survey included statements that were considered to be inaccurate stereotypical beliefs about Islam. Using content analysis research, I noted and collected statements from assignments and email correspondence over the past ten years of teaching courses with curricular content on Islam(Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) The survey incorporated five statements that included beliefs or assumptions about Islam or the role of Islam in the lives of others. Beliefs about violence, the role of women, tolerance for other religions, the worship of a singular Abrahamic god, and the events on September 11, 2001 were poignantly and directly stated in survey prompts. Each statement was accompanied by an open-ended question that allowed the participant to clarify why they held such beliefs or values about Islam.

After they completed the pre-assignment survey and the written analysis of the narrative case study assignment, learners were asked to complete a post-assignment survey designed to measure their beliefs and values about Islam (see Appendix D & E). The post-assignment survey listed the identical statements and questions about participants' beliefs and attitudes about Islam, but it also included open-ended questions about analyzing a narrative case study and constructing a written narrative case study. The quantitative data on learners' beliefs and attitudes about Islam collected from the post-assignment survey were used for comparison with the pre-assignment survey. The qualitative data on learners' responses to analyzing a narrative case study and constructing a written narrative case study were analyzed separately.

Written analysis of a narrative case study. Participants' were given a narrative case study written by the instructor to analyze as a learning task for this study's action. This narrative case study also served as a source of data. Once the appropriateness of the case study was determined, it was given to learners to analyze. Because of the difference innate to what each learner brings to the narrative case study, learners would draw different interpretations of presented religious practices and values. Participants' written analyses of the particular narrative case study on Islam used in this study reflected their understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others.

Constructed original narrative case study. Participants' construction of an original written narrative case study, which they completed as a learning task for this study's action, also served as a source of data. In the narrative case study that they constructed, learners represented in a concrete way their understanding of the Five Pillars of Islam. This assignment required them to organize and interpret in a very real and meaningful way the Five Pillars of Islam. As a data source, these constructed narrative case studies reflected both the participants' understandings and appreciation of the Five Pillars and of Islam as a whole.

Interviews. Interviews enable learners to describe their interactions in detail and on their own terms (Stringer, 2007). I used interviews (see Appendix F) to afford participants the opportunity to describe their interactions with the case studies and to explore and share their beliefs and attitudes about Islam.

The interviews were a blended approach of structured and informal (Franklin & Wallen, 2006). The structured component of the interview helped to maintain consistency as the same questions were asked in the same order (Franklin & Wallen, 2006; Johnson, 2002). By being consistent, I was able to minimize the impact of variables that do not pertain to deep learning. Utilizing a computer audio recording program allowed me to focus on learners' responses and to develop immediate follow-up

questions that represented individual understanding, beliefs, or attitudes about Islam and a learner's experience with the narrative case study.

During the semi-structured interview process, I posed questions that probed learners about their experiences analyzing the narrative case study on Islam and creating an original narrative case study on Islam. A special emphasis was placed on participants' experiences that represented deep learning.

Analysis

The data consisted of 185 minutes of digital audio files, 36 pages of audio transcriptions, nine written narrative case studies of 1-2 pages each, 35 pages of pre and post lesson surveys, and 13 pages of analyses of the narrative case study.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data aggregated from the pre- and post-assignment surveys were compared through a repeated measures analysis of variance test (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Olejnik & Algina, 2000). The effect of time was significant, $F(1, 9) = 21.87$,

$p < 0.001$. As Table 1 shows, the post-assignment survey mean, 4.08, was statistically significantly different than the pre-assignment survey mean, 2.98. The partial eta squared effect size, 0.71, is extraordinarily large for a within-subject factor based on Cohen's criteria (Olejnike & Aljina, 2000).

Table 1

Means Comparison for Survey (N = 10)

Pretest	Posttest	$M_2 - M_1$	p	h_p^2

M	2.98	4.08	1.10	<.001	0.71
SD	0.70	0.71			
95% CI	2.48 - 3.58	3.48 - 4.58			

Note: Maximum score = 5

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data consisting of the written analyses of narrative case studies, open-ended questions on the surveys, written original narrative case studies, and telephone interviews were analyzed with a content analysis approach (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Employing a grounded theory methodology (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006), each response was unitized and coded as individual "units of meaning" (Stringer, 2007, p. 98). Units of meaning consisted of learner comments that indicated their understandings and appreciation of the beliefs and values of others. In particular, units of meaning consisted of comments indicating deep learning such as words, phrases, sentences, or ideas that reflected profound understanding about Islam or one's beliefs, understandings, or attitudes about Islam. The following deep learning indicators (Lombardo, 2006) were used to focus the content analyses of the various qualitative data sources:

Comprehension and analytical understanding

Critical thinking

Holistic insight and interdisciplinary application

Self-reflection and self-awareness

Demonstration of application and value to life

Expansion of consciousness

Open to growth

After categorizing the data by source (i.e., interview transcriptions, written analysis of the narrative case study, written original narrative case studies and open-ended survey questions), I identified each respondent in the data source and collated the sources accordingly. Each source was then analyzed in great detail by using color highlighting pens to identify discreet units of meaning that pointed to deep learning or beliefs and attitudes about Islam. As much as possible, the verbatim principle was employed to prevent an insertion of my own views or interpretations of the data into the analysis (Stringer, 2007).

Each category was then labeled according to the various perspectives that participants shared during the study. Categories and subcategories emerged as this process brought in units of meaning from all four qualitative sources. Main categories that were generated included self-reflection and self-awareness, application of theories to everyday practices and behaviors, comprehension and analytical understanding, value to life, and connections between new understandings and previously held ideas and beliefs. A written record was maintained of all categories, including those that may not have represented deep learning or changes in beliefs and attitudes about Islam.

All relevant participants' comments were analyzed for word choice. Participant verb choices, other forms of the same word, and other words that were repetitively used by the participants were listed individually for each participant along with the number of times they used the word. I then developed a grid for words that were used by several participants. Coded on the grid were participants' names, thirteen words used by more than one participant, and the number of times each participant used the word. Words noted on the grid included the following: 1) know/knowledge, 2) understand, 3) think/thought, 4) learned, 5) different(ly), 6) real(ly), 7) appreciate/appreciation, 8) realized, 9) analyze/analytic. 10) comprehend, 11)

believe, 12) experience, 13) change. After detecting these patterns of word choice. I then merged the themes into triangulated, data-based assertions regarding how a narrative case study in my on-line asynchronous world religions course affected learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others.

Results

My analysis of the data collected during this action research led to two assertions. The assertions are (a) learners demonstrated changes in their beliefs and attitudes about Islam and (b) learners experienced different ways of thinking.

Assertion #1: Learners Demonstrated Changes in Their Beliefs and Attitudes about Islam

Data collected in this study revealed that learners generally demonstrated changes in their beliefs and attitudes about Islam. Learners were observed to engage in a process of changing their beliefs and attitudes and, after doing so, ascribing new meaning to the knowledge they acquired. The survey scores revealed a significant change in overall belief about Islam, and the qualitative data revealed the process of change for the learners.

Prior to the lesson, learners held pejorative viewpoints about Islam that correlated Islam with intolerance, violence, oppression of women, and terrorism. Specific changes that I noted involved learners demonstrating a new understanding and appreciation of the faith itself, devoid of the cultural stereotypes listed above. Learners demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of the Pillars of Islam in a manner that was self-reflective and personal. Prior to the unit of study, learners ascribed pejorative views to Islam, but after the unit of study learners reflected an appreciation of the Pillars of Islam to the extent that they saw the pillars containing some elements that were similar to their own faith experience. In particular, participants demonstrated changes when they (a) expressed new understandings of Islam as framed through self reflection,

(b) compared Islam to a personal prayer life, (c) reflected new appreciations of the Islamic faith, and (d) recognized stereotypes about Islam.

Expressed new understandings of Islam as framed through self reflection. After analyzing the narrative case study on the Five Pillars of Islam, several learners made connections between their own religious beliefs and those of Muslims. When learners engaged in such comparisons, they demonstrated active self-reflection. To illustrate, one respondent commented, "I do believe that they are a lot like me. My religion is different from them, but I believe they have a lot of similarities I believe in"(rd\ sur)[1]. Other learners were even more specific about the comparisons between their own religious convictions and those of Muslims. Allison stated, "It just caused me to pause and think about how…how very different Islam is from, my Christian faith in terms of how much is required. I don't think anyone in my church or denomination is going to hold it over my head if I make it to the Holy Land or not" (as\int).

Statements by other participants, although brief, also pointed to active self-reflection. Chuck stated, "the Koran is like the Bible" (cs\int), and later said, "I see from their side instead of just our side" (cs\int). The reflection was very introspective for Rebecca, who stated, "I do believe they are people like me" (rd\int). Another learner's comments not only echoed personal reflection, but also contained the reflections of a friend, with whom the learner dialogued on her own volition.

I am Catholic and I realize through their religion, it's very similar in that they put God first…you just realize that they're more like us, a different culture we don't know. After reading the narrative and learning about the Five Pillars, my opinion was pretty much changed. My best friend, she's Catholic too, [she] was like wow I didn't realize that's how similar these religions were. (eo/int)

[1] Parenthetical information specifies data-based support for the assertion. The first letter string identifies the pseudonym for the participant. The second letter string identifies the data source (int = interview; sur = survey; oncs = original narrative case study).

Significantly, the deep learning principle of self- reflection was articulated by every research participant, including one who had analyzed the narrative case study but had not written her own narrative.

Compared Islam to a personal prayer life. In demonstrating a comparison to one's own devotional life, some learners focused on prayer. They commonly associated their own relationship with praying to a monotheistic god who was the same god of a Muslim. One respondent stated, "When you hear that they pray 5 to 8 times a day, you think wow, that's a lot in the [day] okay, I pray before bed, and other times, so it's not so different" (tw\int). At first this learner was clearly conscious of the number of times a Muslim may pray, but by relating those actions to her own life, she came to draw a comparison that emphasized the similarity to her own prayer life.

Reflected new appreciations of the Islamic faith. In the interviews, learners reflected an appreciation of some specific aspect of Islamic faith independent of comparing it to their own religious beliefs. One learner commented, "I am exposed to a lot of Protestants and Judaism, where I grew up. Even those religions …people (are) very ritualistic…I saw in this Islam faith not just ritualism but whole-heartedness(ca\int). Another respondent focused on the structure of daily religious life for Muslims. He stated, "Praying five times a day…they really take that to heart, so I think that's definitely a very positive thing for them"(ck\ sur). Another learner was not specific in his appreciation of Islam, but did gain appreciation of the faith that affected his personal life. He stated, "I have some friends that are Muslim too so I guess it kind of makes me understand or appreciate them a little bit more and some of the things that they have to do on a daily basis (mm\ sur).

In constructing an original narrative case study, the participants reflected an appreciation of Islam in their representations of some of the pillars. In their characterizations, several learners reflected excitement over the pilgrimage to Mecca. Theresa's character, Heba, states, "I know I am just so excited because of our trip to Mecca next week" (tg\oncs). Another learner created a character, Prathan, who "enjoys the peace that comes

with consistent submission to Allah and his will" (as\oncs). Other learners depicted characters who were pleased to give alms. Mercy wrote, "Amir went to bed feeling very excited about the next day when he would give the money he set aside and the money his family had given him to the Muslim family that was having difficulty" (mm\oncs). Another learner reflected a character who "enjoys his time of prayer with his family" (ca\oncs). Rebecca writes of a character, Shillan, who has cancer but who longs to be "well for the fasting month of Ramadan" (rd\oncs). Most of the constructed narratives reflected an affirming depiction of at least one pillar of Islam.

Recognized stereotypes about Islam. Toward the end of the telephone interviews, I provided the respondents with a quote from a nationally recognized radio broadcaster. During the broadcast, the radio commentator linked the Muslim hijackers who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 to a current group of Muslim inmates in a British prison who requested that the toilets in their restroom be turned around so that they were not using the facility while facing Mecca, a sacred place. The broadcaster implied that all Muslims were terrorists who deserved no special treatment. The purpose of my prompt was to determine if the participants could easily recognize this stereotype about Islam.

In all cases, the respondents stated that the radio broadcaster's comments reflected a strong religious stereotype about Islam. One respondent stated, "I think it is based on ignorance, and probably a lack of knowledge, and personal…inactions or convictions in their own lives to generate a comment on that"(mm/int). Another learner ascribed a nefarious motive to the radio broadcaster's comment, stating that, "That's a shallow comment because it had nothing to do with the first part…He was trying to take one story personally, a horrible comment, I think he's trying to build a case against Islam by making additional comments, and by tying it in with a different story"(ca/int).

The ability to recognize Islamic stereotypes extended beyond the interview prompt. In responding to one open-ended survey question, one participant commented, "It [the narrative case study] put the life of a

regular Muslim family in perspective so I can relate to them in the fact that they are people too instead of Satan in human form which many Americans think about Muslims"(bj/ sur).

Assertion #2: Learners Experienced Different Ways of Thinking

The majority of respondents stated that they experienced different ways of thinking by analyzing and responding to the narrative case study. Nine of 10 respondents used the word, "different," or the phrase, "different way of thinking," in both their survey responses and telephone interviews. These different ways of thinking represented a deeper sense of understanding of content, in this case the Five Pillars of Islam.

Overall, different ways of thinking led to new insights and understandings. During her interview, Kay stated,

When I first went into this class, to be honest with you, I was probably ignorant about the culture and what they believe in [Islam]. They just don't necessarily believe in hating Americans or blowing up the United States…When you read the narrative you find what's important to them, giving back…After reading the narrative and learning about the Five Pillars, my opinion pretty much changed. (ko\int)

Michael also reported that the narrative case study prompted different ways of thinking. He stated, "It [narrative case study] definitely taught me a lot of new things, a lot of information, and opened my eyes up into different understandings of religion, cultures, to see how some similarities are in my beliefs altogether different"(mi\ sur). The different ways of thinking that participants experienced occurred when they (a) created mental images, (b) understood comprehensively and analytically, (c) reflected understandings in constructing an original narrative, (d) applied content to real-life, and (e) enjoyed analyzing the case.

Created mental images. Many learners were aided in their analysis of the narrative and their understanding of the content by creating pictures or images in their minds of what was occurring with the characters. Allison stated, "I understand the characters, they have a name and you're picturing them. When you read a case study you're kind of picturing them walking in the busy streets…In time, it just becomes a

little more real than simply reading an academic text" (as\int). Another respondent went beyond creating a mental image of the story and inserted herself into the narrative, as this comment shows, "It was really interesting to try and image myself or someone else I know in that situation" (mm\int). Other learners related a sense that the narrative was a "real world experience" for them (as\int) or that it gave them a "vivid understanding of what or how…[Muslim] people conduct some of their daily living" (mm\int).

Understood comprehensively and analytically. Analyzing the narrative case study on the Five Pillars of Islam led learners to demonstrate a comprehensive and analytical understanding of the content. Mercy stated, "I learned differently. I can remember each pillar right off the top of my head just by thinking about the narrative."(int.) On a survey prompt, Kay revealed that she had to "think in a different way. [I] had to become more analytical."(sur.)

Reading about the lives of others created a much deeper level of knowledge. Learners applied the basic content to real situations, a mainstay of deep learning. For example, Sherry stated, "It kind of forced me to go to another level of what they (pillars) are…to comprehend them more in a(n) application…it kind of brought in my thinking on it rather than here's the topic and learning about it, a place of actually having to incorporate it into a different way of thinking." (int.)

Reflected understandings in constructing an original narrative. Although many learners stated that constructing an original narrative case study was challenging and difficult, the original narrative case studies constructed by the learners revealed a thorough understanding of the Five Pillars of Islam and their application to the daily life of a Muslim. Every learner represented each pillar accurately and in such a manner that revealed a very complex and deep understanding of the practice of the religious concepts. For example, when explaining the Pillar of Salat, or daily prayer, learners not only depicted a character praying, but they referred to characters praying a number of times per day in a meaningful and reverent way that reflected praise and submission. Allison wrote about her character, "Although he felt tired from staying up too late the previous

night, he would never consider skipping the 1st prayer of the day" (as\oncs). Rather than simply mention that a character is praying, the writer here refers to the challenges of everyday life and the centrality of prayer in that life. This reflects a deep level of understanding of the pillar as the learner has applied the principle to her own creation.

Another learner depicted the Hajj as a very meaningful experience for one of his characters. When describing the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Charles' character not only plans the trip with his spouse and children, but states that, "[it will be] time spent at the Ka'ba with other members of the same faith. It will be refreshing for the soul, mind, and body" (ck\oncs). Again, the learner is writing about a piece of content in such a way that reveals depth and holistic insight about the Hajj rather than simply articulating that it is the annual trip to Mecca.

Applied content to real life. Participants frequently applied case contents to real life. Mercy stated during her interview, "It makes you think of things in real life, you can actually put yourself in that position as someone really living at that moment"(mm\int). This notion of putting oneself in an actual situation was a recurring theme.

Learners applied contents to real life in concrete terms. The words "real*"* or "reality*"* were used by respondents over 200 times. For instance, Allison stated, "We got a chance to actually think of religion in people's lives in an everyday sense, in a very practical sense. It was enjoyable. It was a real world experience" (as\int).

The process of analyzing the actions and dialogues in the narrative case study led many learners to a deep knowledge of Islam and its role in everyday life. Mercy said, "It (the narrative case study) made me think about how I would act if I were a Muslim" (mm\int). Another participant stated,

I felt the story was a reflection on how you would go about your daily life, through your eyes what would constitute a day of someone who adopts these religions and practices them…it just made me appreciate actually learning about religion. It made me appreciate how focused they are on religion. (mm\ int)

Enjoyed analyzing the case. Each respondent described the experience of analyzing the narrative case study as enjoyable. Allison stated, "I enjoyed the case study. I looked forward to reading paragraph after paragraph about the characters and how their faith was part of their daily life" (as\int). Other learners used terminology such as "enjoyed," "fantastic," "really good," "interesting," and "fascinating*"* when describing the process of analyzing the narrative. In response to an open-ended survey question, Jane stated, "I have learned a lot. I don't get to associate with many people from other religions and found it fascinating" (jg\sur).

Limitations

This study is limited by the nature of how participants were recruited into the study. Participation was solely voluntary. Since there was not a reward or incentive to participate in the study, any social desirability on the part of learners to please the instructor was mitigated. As an online, asynchronous, general prerequisite course, I did not have a long term relationship with learners. This action research was intended to address the impact of a narrative case study on learners enrolled in this specific course and was not designed to address personal change in belief in the long term.

Conclusion

Discussion

As an instructor of World Religions, I have noted that students bring to the study of Islam stereotypes and pejorative views of Muslims' practices and beliefs. Many views have been shaped by the events of September 11, 2001, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the continual conflict among Arabs and Israelis over the future of Palestine. A survey of learners' perceptions of certain aspects of Islam conducted prior to the unit of study on Islam revealed that these learners did, indeed, hold stereotypical views of Islam. The purpose

of this research was to examine how a narrative case study in my on-line asynchronous world religions course affected learners' understandings, appreciation, and respect for the beliefs and values of others. To stimulate deep learning so as to facilitate change within the learner, participants were asked to identify the Five Pillars of Islam within a narrative case study and to generate their own written narrative case study illustrating the Five Pillars of Islam. The data collected in this action research demonstrated that change took place among learner's beliefs and attitudes about Islam.

My surprise in this study was the means by which new understandings of Islam occurred; namely, they occurred through the lens of the participants' own religious lens. Learners made comparisons and contrasting statements about the Five Pillars of Islam as it related to their own religious practices and spiritual beliefs. At times during the interview, participants appeared to be more focused on what they learned about themselves as opposed to what they learned about Islam. In a secular world religions course, this method for change in meaning would not be something that would be an expectation for learners.

As a teacher of religious studies, I acknowledge that a person's spiritual or religious practices will certainly enter into the course and its outcomes; however, it is not the intent to ask learners in a secular world religions course to analyze their own faith-based perspective. Nevertheless, the study revealed that my learners' new understandings of Islam were engendered by their framing of meaning through their own personal faith-based convictions and practices. I inferred from their statements that the majority of the learners held Christian beliefs.

A religious lens may also be reflected in the culminating assignment of constructing a narrative case study. In their written original narrative case studies, learners tended to focus more on one aspect of the Five Pillars, that being either Zakat (almsgiving) or Salat (daily prayer). Both of these pillars have similar expressions in the other Abrahamic faiths of Christianity and Judaism. These faiths affirm also the private and

communal role of prayer and the sacrificial nature of almsgiving. It was interesting to note that the one pillar that finds less similarity with these faiths, that of the Shahada, was depicted less in the constructed narratives.

The Shahada, or profession of faith, is a requirement for all Muslims. In one form or another, Muslims proclaim that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah. Although the Shahada was mentioned in the constructed narrative case studies and was identified in the analysis of a narrative case study, learners included little explanation or expansive detail with this pillar. Most practicing Christians or Jews, for example, probably would easily see a connection between their own faith and the Muslim practices of almsgiving, prayer, pilgrimage and fasting. The creed, however, would not be a daily practice, but would appear in text or in a specific liturgical practice. This focus on familiar practices may correspond with my early assertion that learners were continually comparing their own religious beliefs and practices with those of Muslims.

Although learners on the whole found it difficult to construct an original narrative, they were able to objectify their new understanding of the Five Pillars of Islam into a concrete story. The characters in the narratives reflected in word and deed a positive disposition toward the Pillars. In some cases, the tenets were depicted in an idyllic way with characters attributing great meaning and significance to them. In addition, the women in the narrative were depicted as thoughtful and faithful women and were treated well by the male characters of the story. This depiction of characters contrasts with findings from the initial pre-assignment survey that reflected learners' beliefs of women being treated poorly in Islam.

Implications for Practice

There is no typical on-line learner of today. Rather, the strong diversity of on-line enrollees affirms the need for different learning experiences that reach more learners. Assignments that are meaningful to more learners and that appeal to a diversity of learners are in high demand. By continuing to design narrative case studies and invite learners to construct their own narrative case studies, I plan to not only facilitate new

understandings for my diverse learners, but also to offer them an enjoyable experience. For educators who wish to stimulate deep learning under the same conditions as this study, it is reasonable to assume that utilizing teacher generated narrative case studies and inviting learners to write their own narrative case studies would indeed offer a pedagogical platform for new understandings and new insights.

Closing Word

A very promising finding of this study was that learners processed their thoughts about the written case study analysis and constructing a written narrative case study with others. Several respondents indicated that they spoke with their families, intimates, and peers in other classes about Muslim beliefs and practices. In fact, one respondent mentioned that she sought out an old friend from previous employment who is Muslim to discuss the assignments. As an educator, it is always a point to relish when learners take experiences outside the confines of a course and are open to the views of others.

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APPENDIX A

PRE-ASSIGNMENT SURVEY

1. Pre-Survey of Beliefs and Attitudes about Islam

Please match your response to each comment below with the scale provided

Scale: 1-5: 5 =Absolutely True, 4=Likely True, 3=Neither True/False, 2=Somewhat False, 1=Absolutely False

Muslims practice a religion that supports or condones violence.

The God to whom Muslims pray and worship is the same as the god worshipped by Christians and Jews.

Muslims are to blame for the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001.

Women are treated very poorly if not disrespectfully in Islam.

Muslims are intolerant of other religions.

For the following five questions, please reflect on your rating of the items above. Why did you choose the rating that you did for each question.

2. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims practice a religion that supports or condones violence."

3. Why did you choose the rating you did for "The God to whom Muslims pray and worship is the

same as the god worshipped by Christians and Jews."

4. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims are to blame for the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001."

5. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Women are treated very poorly if not disrespectfully in Islam"

6. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims are intolerant of other religions."

7. Gender: 1. Female 2. Male

8. Age: A)18-22 b) 23-28, c) 29-39 d) 40-45 e) 46 or older

9. How many courses have you completed that have contained content about Islam?

a) 1 b)2 c)3 d)4 5)5 or more

10. How many years of post secondary education have you completed?

a)1 b)2 c)3 d)4 5)5 or more

APPENDIX B

STUDENT GUIDE FOR PRODUCTION OF A CASE STUDY

World Religions (REL 243)

Directions: Write a narrative case study based on the Five Pillars of Islam using the technique of embedding the curricular content in the actions and dialogue of the characters. The narrative case study that you analyzed prior to this assignment serves as one example of the construction of narrative case study designed for the study of a particular religion or religious tenant.

Please be certain that your narrative case study contains the following components:

1. Narrative contains the Five Pillars of Islam
2. Narrative reflects a direct correlation between the action and conversations of the characters and the Five Pillars of Islam.
3. Narrative is sufficiently broad in scope to develop the concepts for understanding.

Guidelines for presentation and submission of narrative case study:

1. Writer uses clear, direct, easily understood language.
2. Proofread and invite peer readers to check for grammatical, spelling or typographical errors.

3. Presentation is double-spaced typed, attractive and has appropriate headings.

APPENDIX C

WRITTEN ANALYSIS OF A CASE STUDY

Case Study on the Five Pillars of Islam

REL 243

World Religions

Assignment: Case Study Analysis on the Five Pillars of Islam:

- Directions: **Once you have completed the essay assignment on Islam, please read the attached narrative case study very carefully**. Analyze the case study to determine which Pillars of Islam are represented in the characters' actions and conversations. Be certain to show the direct correlation between the action and content of the conversation with the definition or attributes of each Pillar.

"O'Merciful God, I know of your oneness and praise the name of Mohammed your prophet." Sadia was able to make her profession of faith this morning as she does every morning, but for some strange reason, she felt that this day would not be ordinary. After helping her husband and older children get off to work and school, she grabbed her two little ones and fled quickly out the door. Sadia was rushing to the market this morning, because she needed to get back to the Mosque by noon. She is never late to the Mosque on Friday and wants to show her children that we can rush through the vegetable stand but

not through their relationship with Allah. Her youngest, Abduallah hears the familiar cry of the vegetable vendor, "...closing in ten minutes...." Oh my, says Sadia nervously, we will have to eat leftovers tonight..." Sadia quickly dashes down the narrow street to her family's mosque. A nice surprise awaits as her husband greets her in front of the mosque. "Why are you here today? Sadia asks. Her husband, Ahmet, smiles and says I have a surprise for you, but I will have to tell you later, after prayers.

Ahmet was so eager to tell Sadia that he had received a bonus at work and that he could now take her and her sister on the annual trip to Mecca. He knew how eagerly Sadia wanted to visit Mecca, but they never seemed able to come-up with the necessary funds. During the Imam's talk, Ahmet was trying to think of a way to tell Sadia about his bonus and the trip when all of a sudden, some very anxious news came from the Imam. It seemed that a terrible earthquake had struck Pakistan; the Red Crescent Society was asking for alms to build shelters and provide food and water for those who were suffering. Ahmet became troubled and began to question whether his bonus should go for alms or for his family's pilgrimage to Mecca.

After noontime prayers, Sadia went home with the little ones as Ahmet returned to work. During the afternoon, Sadia was very excited about the surprise that awaited her at dinner. Meanwhile, Ahmet was listening to everyone at work talk about the devastation in Pakistan and was watching images of people in great need on the Al-Jazera news network all afternoon. He decided that giving alms was going to have to take precedence over the trip to Mecca with Sadia.

Sadia's oldest son Tazik arrived home from school as he always does. Running into the house, Tazik threw his books on the kitchen table, kissed his mother on the cheek, and grabbed his soccer ball. "Wait," shouted his mother. "Your father has a surprise for us tonight. Please put the ball away and stay inside awhile." Tazik began to whine about his plight and begged his mother to let him go to the field with the others, but Sadia reminded him that he needs to be with his family just like when they break the fast together during the holy month.

Ahmet came inside and his wife was waiting for him. She and the children were very excited. Ahmet told her that there would be no surprise because of the day's news. He quickly and quietly explained that he had received a bonus at work and wanted to take her and her sister to Mecca this year, but the disaster in Pakistan produced so much devastation and suffering that he heard the call of the Imam today and decided that his bonus would have to go to those in need. Sadia began to cry. Ahmet was so upset that he had disappointed his wife that he begged her to stop. Sadia composed herself and told her husband that she was crying not because of the disappointment of not going to Mecca, but because of how caring and loving her husband was and that he roll-modeled for her what it meant to follow the will of Allah.

APPENDIX D

POST-ASSIGNMENT SURVEY

1. Post-Survey of Beliefs and Attitudes about Islam

Please match your response to each comment below with the scale provided

Scale: 1-5: 5 =Absolutely True, 4=Likely True, 3=Neither True/False, 2=Somewhat False, 1=Absolutely False

Muslims practice a religion that supports or condones violence.

The God to whom Muslims pray and worship is the same as the god worshipped by Christians and Jews.

Muslims are to blame for the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001.

Women are treated very poorly if not disrespectfully in Islam.

Muslims are intolerant of other religions.

For the following five questions, please reflect on your rating of the items above. Why did you choose the rating that you did for each question.

2. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims practice a religion that supports or condones violence."

3. Why did you choose the rating you did for "The God to whom Muslims pray and worship is the

same as the god worshipped by Christians and Jews."

4. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims are to blame for the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001."

5. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Women are treated very poorly if not disrespectfully in Islam"

6. Why did you choose the rating you did for "Muslims are intolerant of other religions."

7. Have you ever analyzed a narrative case study for a college course before?

A) Yes

B) No

8. How would you describe the learning experience of analyzing a narrative case study?

A) Very useful or interesting

B) Interesting or useful

C) Somewhat interesting or useful

D) Neither interesting or useful

E) Definitely not interesting or useful

Please describe what the learning experience meant to you.

9. If you completed the case study assignment, how many hours did you devote to this assignment from beginning to end?

A) 1-3 B) 4-6 C) 7-9 D) 10 or more

10. Did you find value in creating your own narrative case study on Islam?

A) Yes B) No C) Did not complete the assignment

Please describe your experience with creating a narrative case study.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Sample Interview Questions:

1. What was your overall experience with the narrative case study assignment?

2. Do you believe that completing the case study aided your understanding of the basic components of Islam?

3. Do you recall how the following Pillars of Islam were present in the narrative case study: Shahada (creed), Salat (prayer), Zakat (almsgiving), Ramadan (fasting period), Hajj (pilgrimage)?

4. After completing the case study, do you feel that you have changed your views of Islam?

5. Did you find value or personal meaning in creating your own narrative case study on the basic religious tenants of Islam? If so, why? If not, why not?

6. After writing your own narrative case study on Islam, did any of your preexisting beliefs or attitudes change about Islam?

7. Prompt for telephone interview:

Recently, it was reported in the news that a British prison changed the direction of its toilets to accommodate religious Muslim inmates who are forbidden to face or turn their backs on their direction of prayer, which must be directed toward Mecca, while using the bathroom. When hearing this news report, Rush Limbaugh responded on his national radio program, "What do they do on an airplane? Go to the cockpit and say, 'I got some box cutters, and if you don't turn this airplane 45 degrees for the next two minutes, I'm going to hijack you?

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