

## Innovative Approaches to Teaching and Learning about Religious Diversity

A seminar linking graduate students at the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Montréal made possible through funding from *The Religion and Diversity Project*.

### Summary

On Tuesday 24 January 2012, graduate students enrolled in a course taught by Nancy Nason-Clark of the Sociology Department at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) joined with graduate students in a course taught by Solange Lefebvre of the Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religions at the Université de Montréal (UdeM) participated in a joint seminar. The theme of the seminar was Insider/Outsider or Proximité/Distance which offered the graduate students an opportunity to consider these issues in relation to their research in a context which included linguistic, disciplinary, cultural, pedagogical, and geographic diversity.

Prior to the seminar the students were invited to read two articles:

Merton, R. (1973). The perspectives of insiders and outsiders. In *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, Pp. 99-136. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nason-Clark, N. (2002). From the heart of my lap-top: Personal passion and research on violence against women. In J. Spickard, M. McGuire and S. Landres, *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, pp. 27-32. New York: New York University Press.

The participants at UNB had created blogs and invited the UdeM participants to join with them in writing, reading and commenting on blog posts based on the assigned texts, their personal research experiences, and the seminar.

The seminar was conducted using webinar technology. This enabled participants in Fredericton and Montreal to speak and listen to one another from their respective classrooms as well as to view power point presentations and websites that accompanied the lectures. The afternoon began with Nancy Nason-Clark's presentation of her research on religion and domestic violence focusing on issues associated with insider/outsider status. This was followed by Lamphone Phonevilay's presentation of his research on la communauté catholique laotienne de Montréal in which he emphasized the project's relation to proximité/distance both theoretically and methodologically. Informal summaries of the presentations were offered for unilingual participants at each campus by bilingual colleagues on site. The presentations were followed by questions and answers from both campuses. The webinar lasted slightly over an hour and a recording is available: <https://sas.illuminate.com/p.jnlp?psid=2012-01-24.1021.M.D8C44198E9863B58335439B11AF235.vcr&sid=2008076>.

Graduate students at both universities found the webinar session intriguing and intense. In the days following the experience the feedback was very positive. Students found the readings helpful in regards to orienting them to the theme. Unilingual students were grateful for translation during the webinar and found the research presentations engaging. The presentations helped to make abstract concepts concrete.

Participants at UNB found the process of writing blog posts as well as reading and commenting on the writing of others helpful in deepening their understanding of the research process and the theme of insider/outsider status. These students were not part of a course dealing specifically with religion and were initially a little apprehensive when the idea of the seminar with all graduate students studying religion was introduced. UNB students were MA and PhD students in either Sociology or the InterDisciplinary Studies graduate programme who were registered for a sociology course on Research Design. After overcoming their hesitancy, they participated enthusiastically and were a little disappointed that the UdeM students did not write blog posts or offer comments on theirs.

The group of participants at Université de Montréal was significantly more complex. More than 30 students participated in this experience and academic backgrounds were also considerably more diverse. Most of the students were registered in a graduate program (M.A. or Ph.D.) dealing with religion or theology, but we also had a few graduate students registered in International Studies, Urbanism, Comparative Literature Studies, Cinema Studies, Philosophy and Sociology, who were also interested in some particular religious topics and coming from different universities (Concordia University and Université du Québec à Montréal). Half of them were registered in a compulsory course for graduate students, *Religion, culture and society*, taught by Solange Lefebvre whose main objective is the religion in the public sphere. The other half were members of an interesting experiment also headed by Solange Lefebvre since January 2012, a *Qualitative Research Laboratory of Montreal Religious Groups*, whose main goal is training the graduate students regarding qualitative methodological fundamentals when researching religious groups. These graduate students were exclusively interested in religion and they are all invited to develop an empirical research of a determined religious group settled in Montreal. It is important to mention that this laboratory is not a compulsory course or academic activity so far. Both groups of students meet once a month. Regarding linguistic aspects, the majority of our students could orally understand English at a functional level, but informal summary translations of presentations and discussion were appreciated, especially by unilingual and foreign students. The majority of our students found the texts very useful in a methodological point of view. The proposed readings helped them particularly to understand some difficult theoretical aspects that are rarely treated in methodology courses. Prior to the experience, they were all excited and intrigued. Nevertheless, they participated spontaneously and even some of them spoke in both languages. In the days following the teaching experience, the feedback was quite positive. Most of our students pointed out that they were especially grateful since they could realized that the same methodological difficulties are shared by a large group of specialists, and that dialogue is always possible no matter the subject of research. However, in spite of our continuous

invitation to share their ideas in the blog, even in French, they did not show any interest, which is a disappointing result for both universities. Our hypothesis is that the courses our students are taking do not deal exclusively with methodology and research design as the University of New Brunswick course, and they found the posts too deep and specialized. Solange Lefebvre thinks that the experience was remarkable but the fact that it was presented to the students just the week before, did not let the group get into the experience enough. She personally went on the web site build by the Fredericton team, and was impressed, but a little overwhelmed by the quantity of information on it. She had some trouble getting on the blogs themselves and received many emails inviting her to respond to some very riche posts. Simple put, she do not have time to invest that much during these particular days. Our students also pointed out that Skype could be a more spontaneous way to communicate than webinar, especially during discussion, although they recognized the usefulness of webinar, mainly to share PowerPoint shades. Actually they proposed a combination of both for the next time. For a future initiative, Montreal suggests that we organize this more in advance, as to include the experience in the seminar itself, maybe on a period of two weeks. It is a pity that this web site was build without answers from Montreal, and we are sorry for that. It could be a linguistic matter though, since our students are francophone. This added to the complexity of the whole thing. The theme was well chosen, and Nancy's and Lamphone's presentations excellent. The group really appreciated the content. We thank the Fredericton group for their generosity, and we are sorry we could not respond properly to their magnificent web site.

Some preliminary lessons learned from this collaborative experiment:

- Graduate students may be apprehensive about collaborating across universities or between disciplines but their experience is very positive, from both pedagogical and content points of view;
- Graduate students in many of the social sciences are unfamiliar with the study of religion and exposure to research topics and ongoing research projects of graduate students in religious studies/theology/religion is very helpful in challenging erroneous beliefs;
- Employing divergent technologies enable students in different locations across the country to connect with each other and this is especially helpful for students in less populated areas of Canada.

Prepared by: Cathy Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark, Solange Lefebvre and Giomny H. Ruiz