

An Ethnography of Teaching  
Gregory Price Grieve  
UNC—Greensboro  
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What drives my own scholarship, and what I find engages students are curious questions. By ‘curious’ I mean intellectually puzzling; questions that challenge students to apply their knowledge, and apprentice them into new ways of thinking and working. For instance, on the second day of a four-session unit on *samskaras* (the Hindu sacraments) I begin the class by asking, “Why would anyone marry a nut?” As I ask this, I hold up a bel nut (*aegle marmelos*)— an small, oblong, woody, yellowish brown fruit two inches in diameter. As I posed this question on a muggy afternoon, I could see the students perk up and shake off lunch’s sleepiness with a renewed interest in the material. I had assigned Michael Allen’s “Girls’ Puberty Rites Amongst the Newar of The Kathmandu Valley,” so one of the students put two and two together and answered: “Isn’t this part of Ihi, that Hindu ritual from the reading, where young girls are married to a god?”<sup>1</sup> I knew I had asked a good question, not just because a student had successfully been able to link it to the reading, but because I had addressed what Lev Vygotsky has called a student’s “zone of development”—that limin between what a learner can successfully do on their own and what the student will be able to do under the guidance of a teacher.

A student’s “zone of development” is a moving target. Yet, there are two tactics for hitting it bull’s-eye. First, is the use of “bridging knowledge” which brings the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Allen. “Girls’ Puberty Rites Amongst the Newar of The Kathmandu Valley.” In *Women in India and Nepal*. Ed. Michel Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982) 179-210.

student from the known into the unknown. Like my curious nut, bridging knowledge consists of questions, cases studies and problems that challenge learners to move from simpler ways of thinking about religion to new more complex and sophisticated forms of critical thought. At its best, religious studies makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. The classroom is no different. Students cannot help but learn by comparing the rituals, myths and religious practices of others to their own. Simultaneously, they expand an understanding of their own tradition by facing up to its own curious elements.

In the class on *samskaras*, I answered the student by saying, “Yes, this is part of a marriage, but what does being able to marry a nut tell us about marriage ceremonies?” In an earlier class session we had read van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*, so another student offered, “Isn’t marriage like a rite of passage?”<sup>2</sup> At this point, using marriage as a bridge, I lectured on the Nepali system of *samskaras*—from writing a mantra on the tongue: (*jihvasodhana*) to old-age ceremonies (*buraburi ja[n]ko*). Then to bridge students’ understanding of Hindu rites of passage to their own, I showed a short three-minute video clip from my own wedding, compared it with a similar clip from Nepal, and read a small handout on Nepalese marriage ceremonies. We talked about these rites of passage in relation to van Gennep’s threefold model, and tied van Gennep’s notions of separation, liminality, and reintegration into the students’ own life experiences—about the difference between receiving a driver’s license and a being baptized or bat mitzvahed.

Besides bridging knowledge, the second tactic for successfully addressing the zone of development is apprenticing students through the asking of increasingly sophisticated questions that challenge them to tackle new concepts, rethink prejudices, and critically re-examine their view of reality. For instance, after talking about marriage

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold van Gennep. *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

as a rite of passage, and after tying this rite of passage into *stridharma* (women's duties) that we discussed a few weeks earlier in a unit on the Hindu notion of personhood, I laid out the basics of Ihi—a Newar rite of passage in which girls aged 5-11 are symbolically married to a bel nut, a symbol of Lord Vishnu. At this point I broke them down into smaller groups, and re-asked the question. “Ok, we know its Ihi, and we know what happens during the rite. But why would someone marry a nut?” After letting them discuss it in the small groups, and also allowing time to tease the subtleties out of Allen's article, the students' zone of development had progressed to the point that they were able to answer the question. Slowly, as a group, the class cracked the problem of the nut: If you are married to an immortal god—even if he is symbolized as a nut—your husband never dies, and thus you are able to bypass orthodox Hindu widow practices.

The classroom itself is a rite of passage, which, if properly done, not only installs knowledge, but also transforms students into life-long researchers. If there is one thing that my half-decade of teaching has taught me, is that, for this transformation to occur, one must be attentive to “the learner's point of view.” I find that the most important skill as a teacher is to be mindful of when students need guidance and directions, and when, as they mature intellectually, students can be given more responsibility as independent researchers. Teaching, then, is a form of apprenticeship that piques students' innate curiosity in order to solve intriguing, beautiful, and important problems. Ultimately, I hope students will learn to solve curious questions of their own posing; a skill that will last long after the final exam.