

Postgraduates Producing Knowledge

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Abstract

Introducing this special issue, “Postgraduates Producing Knowledge”, the editor provides background. The articles in this issue arose out of an ongoing experiment in knowledge production in a postgraduate course on theory and method in the study of religion in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. Although the articles in this issue are of interest in their own right, the process of their publication reveals important features of the production, authentication, and circulation of knowledge in the academic study of religion and religions.

I have two jokes that I always use if I am ever asked to welcome a new group of postgraduate students. After saying, “Welcome, welcome, welcome”, I tell the first joke: An undergraduate degree prepares you for honours, an honours degree prepares you for masters, a master’s degree prepares you for a PhD, and a PhD prepares you for unemployment — but at least you will have something to think about. The punchline of that joke is not entirely true. According to an article in the *Mail & Guardian*, “A survey of PhD graduates in religious studies [at the University of Cape Town] finds everyone working, with roughly one-third in academic positions, one-third in community work, and one-third in professions such as teaching, public health, government service and international market research” (Chidester 2011).

My second joke speaks to the theme of this special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion*. Unlike undergraduate students, who can get away with

being consumers of knowledge, postgraduate students must be producers of knowledge. Honours students honour their subject; masters students master their subject; and doctoral students doctor their subject, in producing new knowledge about religion and religions. All right, these are not necessarily funny jokes; but they tend to generate laughter, perhaps nervous laughter, from postgraduate students who realise that they are entering a serious rite of passage from being consumers to being producers of knowledge.

For the past decade, the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town has been conducting an experiment in postgraduate education. In a required semester course in theory and method, “Critical Terms for Religious Studies” (see Chidester 2000), students face and embrace the challenge of becoming knowledge producers in the academic study of religion and religions. The students in this course are mainly Honours students, beginning their postgraduate work, but some Masters and doctoral students might also be included in the mix. All are given the assignment of writing an original 7,000-word article for a specific journal. At mid-semester, they submit the draft of the article to their instructor, who pretends to be the journal’s editor, critically assessing the draft and suggesting revisions. After undergoing this rigorous process of review, they rewrite their articles for final submission. By participating in this experiment, postgraduate students gain a sense of what goes into the production of knowledge, the authentication of knowledge, and the circulation of knowledge in academic practice within the humanities and social sciences.

First, in the production of knowledge, they become authors, writing for an implied audience in which potential readers do not want to know what they have learned. Rather, the readers want to know what can be learned from them. By engaging in the alchemy of theory and data — in which theory without data is empty, but data without theory is blind — they must produce something original. For originality, they can look at something new in an old way, or they can look at something old in a new way; but to produce knowledge they cannot use the phrase “look at” when they formulate the rationale for their research. New knowledge is not produced out of merely looking at something, but requires theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous engines of argumentation, interpretation, explanation, or analysis. The tendency of students to say that they are going to “look at” something, I find, is symptomatic of a larger problem in the study of religion: the assumption that the study of religion is important because religion is important. If that is the case, then all we have to do is just look at it. But the importance of religion tells us nothing about the importance of the *study* of religion. What is its value proposition? How does it produce new knowledge?

Second, in the authentication of knowledge, postgraduate students are introduced to the international gold standard of authentication: the double-blind peer-review process. Behind the scenes of every journal, leading scholars in the field generously share their time and expertise in evaluating potential articles; assessing, in effect, whether or not they count as new knowledge. At the *Journal for the Study of Religion*, we are grateful for the support of peer reviewers (whom we fondly refer to as *pirs*) in providing this essential service. In previous years of “Critical Terms for Religious Studies”, the instructor pretended to be both the journal editor and the peer reviewers. During 2012, however, all pretending was abandoned when the students submitted their articles to the *Journal for the Study of Religion*. Accordingly, we followed our usual process in sending each article out to three reviewers, who did not know they were assessing the work of postgraduate students. Besides advising whether an article should be published, substantially revised, or rejected, the reviewers provided enormously valuable feedback, introducing students to the seriousness (and sometimes severity) of having knowledge authenticated in the study of religion.

Finally, in the circulation of knowledge, some of the postgraduate students are being published in a journal that is accredited in South Africa and internationally circulated, the *Journal for the Study of Religion*. The five articles in this special issue have successfully passed through the ordeals of producing, authenticating, and circulating knowledge in the study of religion. Consistent with our usual ratio at the journal, about one-third of the submitted articles were cleared for publication. For those that did not succeed, we must not assume failure. Some great work, even if it was referred back for substantial revision, is still circulating in the research of the postgraduate students who participated in this experiment. We anticipate its publication. At the same time, we must recognise that an academic journal is not the only means for circulating knowledge about religion and religions. Our postgraduate students, I trust, will find their own ways to engage and transform those circulations.

Works Cited

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