

## Grace G. Burford, Prescott College



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I teach at Prescott College, a private, four-year, liberal arts college in north-central Arizona that defines itself in terms of commitments to environmental concerns and to experiential, student-directed learning. The residential program enrolls 450–500 students, and employs approximately forty full-time faculty members. Our typical class size, 10–14 students, is determined, in part, by the size of the vans we use for taking students out into the field. At Prescott College almost everyone uses site visits for teaching everything from ecology to playwriting, from rock climbing to economics. But before you dismiss my comments here as irrelevant to your teaching situation, note that I began teaching twenty years ago, and I mainly learned to use site visits in the far less supportive context of courses I taught at a private university, a state college, and a state university — before I came to Prescott seven years ago.

Reasons abound for *not* using site visits. They require a lot more work — planning and conducting a site visit involves much more time and effort than planning a lecture or class discussion, or showing a video, or inviting a guest speaker to come to class. They involve communicating with strangers; figuring out what relevant sites or events an entire class of undergraduates can visit, and how to do that appropriately to both the course and the site/event visited; arranging transportation; designing good assignments to get the most out of the visit; learning about appropriate behavior and other site-specific expectations; preparing the students; spending substantial time with students outside regular class meetings; and always following up, both with the students and with the people who made the visit possible.

Site visits expose us, our students, our institutions, and the religious individuals and groups we visit to risks that simply do not arise when we stay safely in our classrooms. Site visits — so much harder to control than classroom situations — can prove pedagogically scary, especially when we teach about a tradition outside our “comfort zones” of previous training and experience. The element of surprise such activities introduce often becomes a pedagogical good news-bad news scenario, as when a local expert says or does something we could never have predicted, much less said or done ourselves. In addition, like the scientist running an experiment on nuclear particles, we must anticipate and take into account our own influence on the event we study, and — more like a psychologist than a nuclear scientist — we must consider the ethical issues inherent in our study of religious people. Finally, site visits take us out into the world, where we encounter unforeseen delays, often in vehicles with dubious safety records (e.g., 15-passenger vans) that use a lot of irreplaceable planetary resources.

In comparison, lectures, class discussions, videos, and guest speakers begin to look easier, safer, and cheaper — and certainly can be pedagogically effective. So why bother with site visits?



Site visits provide learning experiences that could never be achieved in the classroom. The very reason site visits pose greater risks than classroom activities — less control over what happens

— provides a powerful rationale for doing them. This element of unpredictability generates excitement and encourages the kind of active and interactive involvement that energizes a class not only during the site visit itself, but throughout the rest of the course. One colleague of mine takes her students to Mesa Verde National Park, where they sit in the middle of a large wildfire-burned area and the students make observations and argue about fire ecology. Another takes his “Image and Power in Mass Culture” students to Las Vegas to do “proletarian shopping,” and says this kind of hands-on experience “seals the enthusiasm” in a way that discussion from a distance can never accomplish. I take my “Studies in Buddhism” classes to the Thai temple west of Phoenix, where we spend two days and a night participating in a traditional seasonal celebration. The students take food to donate, learn how to dress and behave at a Buddhist temple, and chant, eat, and converse one-on-one with Theravada Buddhists. When I co-teach “Religion and Science” with a geologist, we spend two days at the Grand Canyon interweaving activities that introduce the students to how humans interact with the canyon religiously and scientifically. All of these site visits provide the participants in each class (faculty and students alike) shared experiences to draw on as these courses proceed.

I offer here a basic three-part model, and then some specific practical advice, for using site visits in religious studies courses. First, before the site visit, choose and then discuss with the students one or two problems, or specific topics or questions, to focus on during the visit. Don’t worry that students will see only what they will look for specifically. But do know that if they do not look for some specific things, they will not discern much of anything. Second, during the site visit, collect data; this is what the visit itself is all about. This aspect of the site visit will go more smoothly if you have discussed with the students beforehand specific ways to collect useful data at the kind of site you will be visiting. Third, after the site visit, use the topic-focused data you collected. You can do this in many ways, such as through a formal written follow-up assignment, or a freewrite at the beginning of the next class, and/or a group discussion of the experience. However you do it, be sure to do it. If you omit this part, you might as well have stayed in the classroom.

Begin by incorporating one site visit into a course you have taught before. Do not expect it to be the best site visit ever. Every site visit contributes something, and you can build up and improve your repertoire at your own pace. If at all possible, personally reconnoiter the site you want to use, to assess how and to what degree it might enrich your course. I have broken this rule a few times without disaster, but doing so certainly ramps up the potential for surprise during the actual site visit.

Whenever possible, arrange to have someone else guide the students through the site visit, even if that site falls within your field of expertise. That way the students will interact with someone other than you, which gives them a different base of authority. Model the kind of open-minded enquiry you want the students to experience; dare to be a student yourself during

the visit, but avoid dominating the experience with your questions. Although this approach to a site visit requires that you temporarily let go of pedagogical control, you will resume the seat of authority soon enough, and nothing someone else tells the students will permanently ruin their understanding of the subject at hand. Avoid taking the class somewhere just to look at or watch something; on-site interpretation, especially by a local expert — or, even better, by several such informants — reinforces the important difference between site visits and sightseeing. Once the course is under way, involve students in planning the specifics of the site visits as much as possible, especially if the trip will require meal preparation, since group eating always promotes group bonding. You will probably need the students' involvement to schedule activities outside of regular class times anyway, so let them solve that type of difficulty as much as possible. They can also help with carpool planning, and can effectively critique each other's proper clothing and behavior before the trip.

Last fall I took a group of world religions students to the Scottsdale Islamic Community Center (mosque), as part of our study of Islam. I first arranged with the Islamic Speakers Bureau for a speaker (Dilara) to meet us there on a mutually available day, and then reserved a Prescott College van. On the morning of the trip, the students appeared, sleepy but dressed appropriately (per our previous discussions in class), each having typed up two questions concerning our focal themes, modernization, gender roles, interreligious relations) to ask at the mosque, and carrying notebooks and pens, lunches, water, some money for unforeseen needs, and head scarves (women only).

Road construction in Phoenix delayed our arrival, but we were still able to meet for an hour with Dilara before the midday prayer service. Dilara discussed Islam, answered some of the students' questions, and taught us how to do the prayers. As usual, prior to this visit I had reminded the students that I expected them to learn how to do all of the practices we would be taught there, but that whether they actually did them was up to each of them to decide. On this occasion, the male students joined the other men up front, the female students and I joined the women in the back, and we all participated in the prayers. After the prayer service, Dilara showed us around the mosque. Despite the fact that our delayed arrival at the mosque shortened our site visit considerably, the experience proved pedagogically worthwhile. In the site-visit response essays they wrote for the following class meeting, and in subsequent class discussions, the students recounted and incorporated in our study of Islam specific points of practice and belief that they learned at the mosque, many of which they would never have read in an academic book on Islam or learned from me. In addition, these students — many of whom were taking their first religion course — demonstrated notable sophistication in their reflections on the experience itself. Several raised thoughtful questions about the influence of our presence on the activities we went there to study. Others brought up the possibility of commodification or exploitation of a religious tradition through site visits, and we discussed how to avoid this potential pitfall.

Something that happened at the mosque illustrates the importance of making the effort to integrate site visits into our courses. When we met Dilara at the mosque, a student from a nearby institution of higher learning joined our group. Each time Muslims who were attending the service at the mosque asked the students (in a friendly way) who they were and why they were there, my students explained that they were studying Islam in their religion class at Prescott College, and had come down to learn about Islam firsthand. Each time the other student responded that she, too, was studying Islam in a class (at her university), and said — sounding somewhat annoyed — that she was there because her professor was “making everyone in the class visit a mosque.” The Prescott College students, slightly appalled, silently exchanged looks every time she said this. For that student, the site visit clearly represented a taxing deviation from her pedagogical norm. In contrast, the students in my class — accustomed to site visits as an integral part of their education — valued this visit as a unique experiential learning opportunity. This attitude, coupled with our advance preparation for the visit and the students’ focus on completing the follow-up assignment, guaranteed that this site visit contributed significantly and uniquely to the depth and quality of learning in this course.