

## "Hosting a Dinner Party for Friends": An Interview with Excellence in Teaching Award Recipient Martha J. Reineke Tina Pippin, Agnes Scott College



Martha J. Reineke, professor of religion at the University of Northern Iowa, is the recipient of the 2012 AAR Excellence in Teaching Award. She teaches courses in the philosophy and world religions department, such as "Religions of the World," "Why We Believe," and "Religion and Society." Reineke believes that students need to be able to understand the religious background to newspaper headlines — using both global and local examples — in order to be more informed citizens. Higher education works to create a citizenry and religion plays an important role in understanding the world.

Reineke teaches in a public university system that specializes in career-based learning and that continually reassesses their liberal arts majors, especially departments of religion and philosophy. Understanding and building the role of the study of religion in public universities is a high priority for Reineke. In the midst of fears of downsizing, she works to build awareness about the importance of the study of religion and also the relevance of the religion major. The religion major provides an interdisciplinary space for the mentoring and support of undergraduates who study religion and provides preparation for lifelong learning.

"It's like hosting a dinner party for friends" is Reineke's description of her conversational model of pedagogy. She takes a developmental approach to teaching and writing, drawing on the work of Susan Wolcott and her study of the stages students go through in a college class (for Wolcott's materials, [click here](#)). Wolcott's rubric has helped Reineke negotiate students who engage in "packaging ambiguity as a black and white difference" and hearing the professor as ideologue. Reineke finds it helpful to key each developmental stage to intentional classroom exercises in order to develop a bridge on which to meet students. Her interest is in "bringing students forward" — to do so implies assessment of student learning and their whole experience of a course — and on her teaching methods and student assignments [see Barbara E. Wolvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*, Blackwell, 2008, and Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, Jossey-Bass, Second Edition, 2003].

How does Reineke provide critical space for student voices in courses of controversial topics in religion? The strategy she's developed over the years is to create a comfort level for students to speak out in large classes. She forms small student groups in the classroom and students stay with the same group throughout the semester. Many pedagogical goals are at work in the small group technique; in classes of 25–35 students the creation of a safe space and level playing field makes it so that more students can speak. This structured approach, with group clerks and clear assignments, also helps to build classroom community [see [Reineke's syllabi and other materials](#) on the AAR website].

When I asked Reineke about what drives her commitment to being "a more effective teacher each year" (her words from her teaching statement), Reineke drew attention to the self-gift of a new book each fall. This year's book is by Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Harvard University Press, 2012), plus the website

[The Writer's Diet Test](#)

. She also finds attendance at a teaching workshop at her university useful to help her jump-start the teaching year. Reineke's advice: do one of the things (not twenty) you learn in a teaching workshop in a course. She believes it is the lifelong experience of a teacher to maintain openness to learning about new methods and theories and take risks. Self-awareness as a teacher is key. Reineke holds that creativity is so important — it prompts us to think about our teaching in new and different ways — and that we will do things we didn't think we'd do in our classrooms.

Although Reineke did not experience a teaching course in graduate school, she discovered her love of pedagogical theories and practices at teaching workshops in her first job adjunct teaching at a community college, at teaching sessions at the AAR Annual Meeting, and at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. As a member of one of Barbara Walvoord's workshops on teaching introductory religion courses, Reineke kept a "teaching diary" that pushed her to reflect and assess on her teaching in new ways. She believes that we become good teachers because we do something about it. More advice: read pedagogical theory and apply it.

Please join Martha Reineke for a conversation on teaching at the annual AAR meeting in Chicago on Su

