



*Liz Wilson is a professor of comparative religion at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in religion. She also teaches undergraduate classes in the Asian/Asian American studies program and the women's, gender, and sexuality studies program. Holding degrees in religious studies from Davidson College and the University of Chicago Divinity School, Wilson is author of *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) and editor of *The Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religion* (State University of New York Press, 2003). Her research is in South Asian religious history, especially Buddhist and Hindu, with a focus on gender, sexuality, death and dying, and family structures.*

## **The Potential Benefits of Split-level Classes**

When two courses offering different levels of instruction (e.g., a 400- and 500-level course) are combined, the result is a split-level class. The graduate and undergraduate courses will typically have separate learning goals and requirements. At Miami University, Ohio, graduate students are given assignments that draw on more sophisticated skill-sets (such as the ability to work extensively with primary texts in original languages), require more nuanced analysis, and often demand more depth of coverage than what is typically required of undergraduate students.

Split-level classes offer a level of curricular flexibility in situations where there may not be adequate enrollments otherwise. Departments with few opportunities to offer graduate-only seminars can benefit from the relief from enrollment worries that comes with this curricular option. Split-level classes are also helpful for faculty recruitment and retention in that these classes provide faculty who enjoy working with graduate students the opportunity to include a graduate studies component along with an undergraduate component. Clearly, there are good pragmatic reasons to offer split-level classes; but there are also good pedagogical reasons for doing so.

Split-level classes offer undergraduates the chance to collaborate with graduate students as well as with faculty instructors. While the presence of graduate students can be intimidating for some less confident undergraduates, there are many benefits. Graduate students can model some of the skills and demonstrate the use of methods of inquiry that the typical undergraduate

has yet to develop. Graduate students can provide a range of mentoring opportunities for the undergraduates in the class, especially when instructors plan assignments and orchestrate other opportunities that facilitate the mentoring process.

Religious studies as a multidisciplinary field can be daunting for any novice wishing to understand the contours of the field. How does one enter into ongoing academic conversations if one is not sure what disciplines are legitimately included, much less the scholarly conventions used by specialists in the different subdisciplines that make up religious studies? Those who are new to the major often need help learning to frame their research as contributions to the field. At a state school such as ours, where few students declare religion as a major in their first year as undergraduates and often come to the major as third- or even fourth-year students, even majors in their junior and senior years may feel uncertain about what the parameters of the field are and what constitutes a legitimate contribution. Instructors, of course, play a key role in fostering methodological awareness, but the added mentoring and modeling of skill sets by graduate students can make a difference for undergraduates.

Undergraduate methods courses are obviously designed to teach undergraduate students the contours of the field of religious studies and to facilitate methodological self-awareness. But it is often the case that these goals are achieved very gradually over the course of a term or a semester. Thus for many undergraduate students, it is only at the end of a methodology course that the student has a grasp of the parameters of the field that leads to a sense of basic research competency in the field of religious studies as a discipline. A split-level class that follows an undergraduate methods class is an ideal follow-up course. In our undergraduate program, we offer an undergraduate methods class at the 300-level and two split-level classes at the 400- and 500-level, which give undergraduates the opportunity to develop research projects that build on their growing competence as researchers within the discipline of religious studies.

Undergraduates in split-level classes can make greater strides in learning the contours of the field and their capacities for contributions to the field than undergraduate students in classes without a graduate student component. Ideally, graduate students can serve in split-level classes as models of methodological self-awareness. Graduate students generally come into our MA program with undergraduate training as religion majors. In addition, during their first semester on campus, graduate students enroll in a seminar on theory and methods in the study of religion. Those experiences tend to give our graduate students a sense of the various subdisciplines within religious studies, along with awareness of key categories and concepts in the field (such as ritual, myth, power, and the like). It is, of course, not always the case that graduate students are methodologically self-aware. Some of our strongest undergraduate majors exceed the typical first-year MA student in academic abilities. But it is generally the case that graduate students who enroll in split-level classes with undergraduate students often have a

self-awareness about what it means to make contributions to the field, which can help provide a sense of orientation for undergraduates who are wondering what they are working toward in their research and how to know when they have succeeded in saying something significant.

The process of articulating categories and concepts in the field can also be of benefit to the graduate students themselves, giving them opportunities to develop their thinking by instantiating with concrete examples what may previously have only been vague, inchoate abstractions. Another way that undergraduates can provide assistance to graduate students is in raising questions about the use of highly specialized terminology that may not be as effective as plain speech. In a split-level class, then, the mentoring process can go both ways, with undergraduates providing forms of guidance to graduate students even as graduate students assist undergraduates.

- [Start](#)
- [Prev](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [Next](#)
- [End](#)