

Tina Pippin, Agnes Scott College



The 2010–2011 AAR Excellence in Teaching Award recipient is Barbara (Bobbi) A. B. Patterson, associate professor of religion at Emory University. She is the founder of the [Theory–Practice Learning Program](#) at Emory University, a key director in the [Emory Scholars Program](#), a co-inaugurator of Emory’s [Sustainability Initiative](#), and a member of Emory’s Collaborative for Contemplative Studies. Patterson is a past member and co-Chair of the Teaching Religion Section of the AAR, a past member of the AAR [Teaching and Learning Committee](#), and is currently the Chair of the AAR [Sustainability Task Force](#). She helped to develop the required teaching program for doctoral students in the graduate division of religion at Emory University. On top of all this, Patterson teaches courses for undergraduates and graduate students, such as Introduction to Religion, Theories of Religion, Religion and Ecology, and Contemplative Practices and Social Change.

Patterson’s nominators, colleagues, and students note her pedagogical creativity both in and outside the classroom. One colleague relates, “Bobbi is a campus icon of the holistic and transformative educator,” and another adds that she has “developed models for others to emulate.” Patterson has led many faculty workshops at Emory University and beyond on teaching (from pedagogical methods to service-learning and community engagement). She has also team-taught with colleagues in interdisciplinary courses. Her colleagues emphasize Patterson’s attention to the context of her classes: “She is always completely alert to the dynamics in the classroom and ready to shift her presentation of material in light of what she sees going on.” The most used word to describe Patterson’s pedagogy is “transformative;” for example, a former doctoral student states, “Because of this embodiment of her ideas and ideals, to be with Professor Patterson is to be part of her teaching, learning, and service matrix. One cannot be unaffected.” A current student describes her teaching as “life-altering” and “an invitation to transformation....The result is spectacular vitality, responsibility, coherence, and

change.”

Patterson points to her main influences in her teaching as students, because she initially worked in campus life as a chaplain. She states, “I came to trust students’ intuition and gifts. We are their first line of opportunity for them to participate in a mature, adult relationship....There is no partner as good as students.” Patterson works with many partners — both scholars and peer colleagues as well as students and community partners. Advanced undergraduate students serve as peer educators, codevelopers, and teachers of a class. Peer educators are allies and as such are crucial in building trust and community in the classroom.

Along these lines, Patterson offers a description of her pedagogy that is influenced by a part of her doctoral work in psycho-dynamic theory. She believes in paying attention to the developmental, spiritual, and intellectual focus on sequencing; that is, how students’ minds and priorities work and how these are linked to an intellectual trajectory. She believes that she must know where the student is developmentally. For undergraduates, “their task is to break the rules.” She adds, “You don’t ignore this in your teaching; you must take it seriously to be effective in the classroom.” In other words, the psychological gap with the teacher has to be acknowledged and translated. Practically, she orders in a sequence the kind of assignments in an undergraduate course. She asks, “Who is it that’s trying to get information? Can they get information? Do they know what it means and how to use this information?” This action/reflection model helps students explore their ethical decisions and implications. In order to achieve these goals, Patterson uses learning agreements, learning contracts, integrative papers, “analysis, practice, reflection” exercises, mid-point evaluations, and learning portfolios to track student learning, along with technology and media. Check out the [May 2010 Spotlight on Teaching](#) for more information about these materials.

Other influences on Patterson’s pedagogy include the civic education movements (Tom Ehrlich, Lee Shulman at the Carnegie Foundation, and Ira Harkavay), Eugene Boyer (*Scholarship Reconsidered*), bell hooks, Parker Palmer, John Dewey, L. S. Vigotsky (sociocultural theory of cognitive development), Robert Zajonc (cognition theory), Dwight Giles (service learning), contemplative practices, and many others. Patterson also credits having a community of peers in the guild and at Emory University as major influences.

In the next decade Patterson plans to think about how climate change is a good metaphor for a need or call for becoming more flexible and adaptable than we have ever tried to be before. She wants to engage further the complexities of students: “What do they need me for?” Patterson is

exploring the intersections of ecology, pedagogy, and social change in her next book, *Giving Back and Not Burning Out: Spiritual Practices for Ecosystems of Service*

Please join us at the AAR Annual Meeting for a conversation with Bobbi Patterson on Sunday, October 10, 2010.