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**Take a picture of religion:
Engaging students in the multisensory study of lived religion**

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how different media (including digital photography and sound recordings) can facilitate students' creative engagement with complex concepts in the study of religion, particularly those associated with a 'lived religion' approach. In doing so, it explores possibilities for object-based learning and multisensory learning experiences in Higher Education (see also: Chatterjee et al., 2015; *Innovating Pedagogy*, 2020; Kelly and Sihite, 2018; Medina, 2009). It adopts a case study approach, focused on the critical evaluation of a range of assessed and unassessed activities that form part of the undergraduate second year (Level 5) Religious Studies course 'A227 Exploring Religion: Places, Practices, Texts and Experiences' offered at The Open University (UK). These activities ask students to take photographs and make sound recordings of aspects of religion in their local environment and then share and discuss these with other students on an online platform. The findings of this study are of particular relevance to blended and distance learning settings (including socially distanced settings in the context of the Covid19-pandemic) in Higher Education, where opportunities for object-based, multisensory learning have been especially underexplored. However, they will be of interest to anyone looking for creative ways to engage students in the study of religion.

KEYWORDS

lived religion; material religion; student engagement; digital photography;
multisensory learning experiences; object-based learning; Higher Education

Introduction

While the 'lived religion' approach, which is based on a holistic approach to the study of religion as 'it is performed, experienced and developed' in everyday life (Gregg and Scholefield, 2015, 1), is now widely adopted in Religious Studies research, the teaching of the discipline is often still predominantly guided by the 'world religions paradigm' (Owen, 2011). This article critically evaluates an approach to introducing students to the study of 'lived religion', and in particular its sensory and material aspects, through activities involving students' use of digital photography and sound recordings in a distance learning environment. It looks at how this approach can contribute to students' knowledge and understanding by providing opportunities for creative learning experiences in the context of their local environments, whilst building confidence in their communication skills, strengthening a sense of community and enhancing students' enjoyment in their learning (Hernik and Jaworska, 2018; Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun, 2011).

The article begins by outlining the rationale behind the pedagogic approach to the study of religion and multisensory learning that informed the development of the undergraduate second year (Level 5) Religious Studies course 'A227 Exploring Religion: Places, Practices, Texts and Experiences'. Drawing on student and tutor feedback, it then focuses on the critical evaluation of four specific activities included in this course and considers how effectively these activities engaged students with relevant theoretical concepts and approaches and successfully facilitated engagement with other students. While the context of this case study is the Open University (UK) and its approach to distance and blended learning, this article considers the wider applicability of this multisensory approach to the study of lived religion in online, blended and face-to-face environments in Higher Education.

Teaching lived religion in a distance learning environment

'Exploring Religion' began its life in 2015 when members of the Religious Studies department at the Open University sat in front of a giant white sheet of meeting room paper. Rather intimidatingly, the only text on the sheet was a course code: A227. This was to be the new 'introduction to religious studies' course, designed to be taught over a period of nine months per year, which would have its first presentation three years later. In the meantime, the course team would need to produce over 250,000 words of text for books and online materials, find hundreds of images, create multiple films and podcasts, design online interactive activities and decide on an assessment strategy with the purpose of introducing students (likely well over 1,000 in the lifetime of the course) to the study of religion. There was agreement in the department that this course should be bold in presenting an approach to teaching and studying religion that tried to move away from the constraints of a 'world religions paradigm' or WRP (Owen, 2011; Cotter and Robertson, 2016) and towards a greater focus on 'lived religion' as well as sensory and material aspects of religion (Harvey, 2013; Harvey and Hughes, eds., 2018; Plate, ed., 2015; Gregg and Scholefield, 2015). That is of course not to say the department had previously taught Christianity/Islam/Judaism '101'; rather we had been deliberate in trying to push boundaries in our teaching to help students explore

religion as it is 'lived'. But even this had been done within the constraints of a 'world religions' architecture – individual blocks of study on the major faiths. This had meant some limitations to the degree to which we could adopt a 'lived religion' approach or do justice to the heterogeneity of traditions and the hybridity and syncretism which is so commonplace in religion. With 'Exploring Religion', however, our teaching would go more determinedly with the grain of our research. Rather than structure the module around distinctive traditions, and privileging authoritative individuals, institutional structures, doctrinal beliefs and sacred texts, we would address key themes as analytical frames of enquiry: place, practice, text (understood broadly) and experience. We decided to explore pedagogic approaches which would allow us to engage students with two key aspect of lived religion: the materiality and the sensorium.

The decision to try and teach 'beyond' the WRP was one which needed to be made with a realistic sense of how difficult this would be. The WRP model has been described by Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and John Zavos as one which 'conceptualises religious ideas and practice as being configured by a series of major religious systems that can be clearly identified as having discrete characteristics' (Hirst and Zavos, 2005, 5). According to Christopher Cotter and David Robertson, the critique of the 'WRP' has three main strands: that it determines and categories 'religion' in Protestant Christian terms; that it produces and sustains imbalances of power; and that it presents religions in terms of *sui generis* (2016, 7-9). Steven Ramsey argues that religion is constructed by individuals who encounter practices and texts 'in ways that relate to the particular context and the range of interests that enliven that context' (quoted in Cotter and Robertson, 2016, 10). However, while the underlying essentialism of the 'WRP' and its lack of cultural criticism has been problematised in much of recent Religious Studies academic scholarship, it continues to be the approach which is widely adopted in the teaching of Religious Education before students reach Higher Education. For this reason, also, the WRP has still tended to shape the *teaching* of Religious Studies in university departments, even where the research emerging from these departments is framed in radically different perspectives. As Suzanne Owen has urged, this is an incongruence which needs to be addressed, but a task which is not straightforward, because 'it means shattering world views, not creating them, which is arguably the agenda of religious education in schools and one reason why there is a gulf between school and university education' (Owen, 2011, 265).

The challenge which A227 faced was how to re-orient the teaching of Religious Studies in order to engage students with a lived religion approach, which for many would make the familiar (WRP) become strange. How could we support an approach to the study of religion that would refocus, as Kim Knott has argued, on the particular rather than the general (Knott, 2005, 118-9)? How, as part of this, could we introduce students to an approach to studying religion which places emphasis on embodiments and materialities, or what Graham Harvey calls 'the causes and contexts of an extravagant diversity of sensual forms and experiences' (Harvey 2018, 1)? Perhaps the most salient issue for our 'Exploring religion' course was this: if we were not going to start with what students have been taught religion 'is', then what would we begin with? It would be necessary to answer these questions and engage students with complex concepts, such as lived, implicit and material religion and

secularisation, while also operating through the perceived ‘constraints’ of distance and online learning.

‘Open Studio’ activities

The approach we adopted involved the use of an online platform developed by the Open University called ‘Open Studio’. Open Studio functions as an online pinboard where students can upload and share images, texts or sounds and comment on each other’s submissions. Where images or sounds were concerned, this enabled us to invite students to explore their local environments with a camera or a sound recording device (usually using their mobile phones) to ‘find’ examples of ‘religion’ in a wide range of places: this might include places of worship, war memorials, street signs, the sides of buses or the windows of take-away outlets, their local park or the shelves of their homes. By doing so, we were asking students to consider examples of religion as it is seen and heard in their immediate local context. This was a fundamentally different place to begin the study of religion: not with homogenising categories or lists or texts, dates or leaders, i.e. as religion ‘should be’ but ‘as it is’, and in relation to notions of material, lived and implicit religion and the often blurred distinction between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’. Instead of building upon the architecture of the WRP which students had relied upon at school and college, we hoped that these activities would help them to think about religion as something particular and contextualised by asking them to identify, share and discuss examples of materialities and embodiments of religion, i.e. sights and sounds, in their local environment. We also envisaged this as a very first step into fieldwork – aiming to help students to relate and understand the relevance of theoretical concepts and debates in the study of religion to life and society around them.

We used the Open Studio platform for four different activities as part of the course:

- **Activity 1:** ‘What is religion’ activity (week 1). The use of Open Studio began not with images or sounds, but text. This formative activity invited students to upload their own short definition of religion, in their own words. The rationale was to give students an opportunity to consider the understanding and assumptions they were bringing to the module; but it was envisaged that this activity would develop students’ familiarity with the software, and also give them an early experience of interacting with their peer group.
- **Activity 2:** ‘Take a picture of religion?’ activity (weeks 2 and 3). This was an activity that was linked to an assignment. Initially, in week 2, students uploaded a picture of ‘religion’ in their locality, along with a commentary (100 words max) on why their picture “might tell us something interesting about ‘religion’”. At this point, students also commented on the images uploaded by their peers. In week 3, students then completed their first summative assessment. In part one of this two-part task, they were asked to expand on their commentary, explaining at greater length (500 words) how the image related to the module theme ‘What is religion?’. In part two of this assignment, students then reflected in 500 words on the experience of taking part in the activity. Here, students could not only reflect on their developing understanding of concepts, but also on the process itself: for example, taking an image and engaging with their local environment, or the experience of collaborative discussion with other students, or even on technical or practical aspects or difficulties.

- **Activity 3:** 'Thinking about urban and religious change' activity (week 7). In this formative activity, students again explored their neighbourhood and took pictures, but this time with a more specific focus, as they were asked to locate examples of changes of building use, from 'religious' to 'secular' and vice-versa. As with previous activities, students could upload their work and commentary and interact with other students.
- **Activity 4:** 'What does religion sound like?' (week 23). This formative activity required students to upload recordings (e.g. from their phones) which captured what religion might 'sound like'. We envisaged this would be a more challenging task for students but anticipated that the experience of working with texts and images in the context of activities 1-3 would provide them with a solid foundation.

The Open University works with many students in secure environments and with accessibility issues. For this reason, it was important to offer alternative approaches to fulfilling the Learning Outcomes associated with the tasks above. Students were provided with a sample image bank (for the assessed Activity 2 'Take a picture of religion' activity) and were given the option of describing sounds or objects in writing instead of submitting photographs or sound recordings (or arrange other suitable alternatives with their tutor). In fact, all students were asked to provide a short literal description of what their image showed or what their sound was to make all contributions accessible to visually-impaired and hearing-impaired students.

While we used Open Studio, there are many other online platforms and forums that could be used for this purpose – and the activities could potentially also be replicated in a face-to-face setting, where students could share and discuss photographs or sound recordings in face-to-face seminars or tutorials.

Beyond the discipline-specific objectives, we designed these activities with the aim of facilitating object-based, multisensory learning experiences. While these kinds of experiences can be particularly challenging to facilitate in online learning environments, there is growing evidence that the engagement of multiple senses in learning experiences can improve learning outcomes and impact positively on the depth of learning and on the persistence of the memory of a learning experience (see for example, Chatterjee et al., 2015; *Innovating Pedagogy*, 2020; Kelly and Sihite, 2018; Medina, 2009). The pedagogic model underpinning Chatterjee et al.'s approach to object-based, multisensory learning draws on Kolb's (1984) cycle of learning. This highlights the importance of experiential learning and emphasises the circular relationship between active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation (Chatterjee et al., 2015, 1-2). Our aim was for the Open Studio activities to help develop students' understanding of abstract concepts, such as lived, implicit or material religion or secularisation, through multisensory experiences that involved active engagement with objects, buildings and sounds in their local environment via the process of taking photographs and recording sounds. The reflective observations students were asked to share formed a further important aspect of the learning design as a further step within the cycle of learning towards abstract conceptualisation.

We also hoped that the creative elements of the process of selecting texts, objects and sounds, taking photographs and recording sounds would impact positively on students' learning experience, in light of the fact that

creativity has been linked to increased levels of wellbeing, resilience, student engagement and depth of learning at all levels of education (Gauntlett, 2011; Robinson 2011; Sinclair, 2018; Watts and Blessinger, 2017, 226).

Another rationale behind the inclusion of the Open Studio activities was to provide students with further opportunities to engage with other students and develop their communication skills, attempting to overcome some of the perceived challenges that distance learning environments can pose. The Open Studio platform not only allows students to share images, texts and sounds with other students, but also gives them the opportunity to comment on each other's photographs, texts and/or sound recordings. There is a large body of literature that highlights the potential benefits of group work in Higher Education, especially if it provides 'opportunities for students to explain their reasoning to one another and to themselves, thereby promoting the cognitive restructuring that leads to learning' or serves as an 'avenue to incorporate diverse viewpoints and to develop communication and teamwork skills' (Wilson and Brame, 2018, 1). However, the design of group work activities can be hard to get 'right', which is why there is great interest in Higher Education research in 'how students access learning when working in groups' and in 'how to increase efficiency in group work and how to understand why some group work turns out favourably and other group work sessions result in the opposite' (Chiriac, 2014, 1). While the use of online platforms is becoming increasingly sophisticated and widespread, online learning environments can pose particular challenges to the successful facilitation of group work, as students' opportunities to see/ feel/ hear each other are limited, which can pose barriers to effective communication. However, students in distance learning environments are also at a particular risk of feeling isolated, which is why it is particularly important to find ways of helping them connect and interact with peers (Croft et al., 2010).

The critical evaluation of the Open Studio activities: Methodology

Our critical evaluation of the Open Studio activities was based on a mixed methods approach, with data collected in the spring of 2018 for the first presentation of this course in the academic year of 2017/18. The methods we used to gather a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data included a quantitative analysis of student submissions to the Open Studio platform, a questionnaire with a mixture of open and closed questions sent to students (with a 22.2% response rate)¹ as well as a more in-depth qualitative analysis of students' assignments related to Activity 2, the 'Take a picture of religion?' activity. For this, we focused on assignment submissions of 16 students from different tutor groups who consented to their assignments being included (and quoted) in our study. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with four tutors (i.e. half of the tutors teaching this course).² Our aim was to establish

¹ While 97 students were registered on this course at the time, we could only send out the survey to 72 of these students (given that the Open University restricts the number of times each individual student can be approached for surveys and some students). Of these 72 students 21 students responded in total. 5 of these partially completed the survey and 16 were complete responses, giving a 22.2% response rate based on complete responses only.

² It should be noted that at the Open University, courses are generally produced and managed by a central course team consisting of academics, who write the course materials (including the course book and website materials), produce the audio-visual resource for the course, design the assessment strategy and set the assignment tasks. The students are then

how students engaged with the Open Studio activities and why, as well as how these activities helped students with their learning on A227, both, in terms of the development of their subject specific knowledge (in particular, their engagement with key theoretical concepts relevant to the study of religion) and their interaction with other students.

Levels of engagement with each activity

In order to get a sense of the extent to which students engaged with the Open Studio activities, we gathered data on how many students created new discussion strands (or 'slots') for each activity by posting a new image, sound or text, how many times each slot was viewed and how many comments students made on other students' slots. It is important to explain that the Open Studio activities were set up in a way that limited each student to creating a maximum of one new slot for each activity (which is a set-up that the course team is reconsidering for future presentations of this course). While 97 students in total were registered to study this course, the Open Studio activities were conducted in the context of smaller 'tutor groups' of up to 20 students each, which we thought would allow more intensive student engagement and teaching.

Activity	Total no. of slots	Total no. of comments	Total views	Average (mean) views per slot	Slots with zero comments	Average (mean) comments per commented slot
Activity 1 'What is religion?' (text-based)	91	66	608	6.7	45	1.4
Activity 2 'Take a picture of religion' (image-based)	95	319	811	8.5	7	3.6
Activity 3 'Thinking about urban and religious change' (image-based)	25	24	99	4	15	2.4
Activity 4 'What does religion sound like?' (sound-based)	22	14	84	3.8	12	1.4

Fig. 1: Quantitative analysis of student engagement with Open Studio activities

Unsurprisingly, the Open Studio activity that students engaged with most intensely (in terms of the number of slots, views and comments) was the activity that was linked to a summative assessment, i.e. Activity 2 'Take a picture of religion'. 95 students (i.e. 98% of students enrolled on this course) posted an

taught in small groups across the UK and supported by tutors who are usually not part of the team that designed the course. However, the team that originally designed the course continues to be involved in the management of the course and quality assurance processes.

image on the Open Studio platform as part of this activity, and each image attracted an average of 8.5 views and 3.6 comments. Considerably fewer students engaged with the later activities, with only 25 students creating slots (attracting an average of 2.4 comments per slot) for Activity 3 (which asked students to post images of urban and religious change) and 22 for Activity 4 'What does religion sound like?' and an average of 1.4 comments per slot.

The fact that Activity 2 'Take a picture of religion' was linked to an assignment clearly played a role in the extent to which students engaged with this activity. Two thirds (67%) of students who responded to the questionnaire felt that the fact that this activity was linked to an assessment task influenced the intensity of their engagement with it. In open comments submitted as part of the questionnaire, some students explicitly admitted that they had not taken part in the later Activities 3 or 4 as they were not linked to an assignment, with a student commenting, for example, that 'as it was not assessed, it would take more time than I had to give' (A227 student, 2018, questionnaire response). However, the fact that the 'Take a picture of religion' activity was linked to an assignment might also have had some pedagogical disadvantages, with some students perhaps more hesitant to take creative risks in the choice of their photographs. It appeared that many students chose to 'play it safe', with many opting to share photographs of local churches or mosques. 65% of the images submitted were of buildings (three quarters of which were Christian churches), which suggests that buildings were the example of materiality most evident to students. 31% were images of other human-made objects, such as prayer mats, yoga mats, candles, crosses or various other artefacts, and 4% of nature (for example, images of trees). However, as tutors noted in our interviews, images that were more extraordinary and challenged preconceived, 'traditional' images of 'religion' often attracted more comments and initiated richer, more interesting debates. This included a photograph of a golf course, a river and a pub.

A large proportion of students also took part in Activity 1, which was text-based, and not assessed. The course team had envisaged Activity 1 as a more accessible, 'easier' entry activity as it 'just' involved texts, rather than digital photography or sound recordings. 91 students (i.e. 94% of students enrolled on this course) created new Open Studio slots for this activity, but almost half of these slots (a total number of 45) did not receive any comments, so there was considerably less engagement between students than there was in the context of Activity 2, where only 7 slots received zero comments. Tutor and student feedback suggested that students actually found it harder to engage with the text-based activity than with the image-based activities. As a tutor put it, 'the visual aspect made them more relaxed about commenting' (A227 Tutor, 2018).

Student engagement with key theoretical concepts

When we asked students in our questionnaire how much the Open Studio activities had helped them with their learning on the course, we received rather mixed responses (see Figure 2). Most students indicated that they found that the image-based activities, particularly the 'Take a picture of religion' activity (Activity 2), had helped them more with their learning than the text- or sound-based activities, with 33.3% of respondents stating that Activity 2 helped them 'very much' with their learning (bearing in mind that 16.7% claimed that this

activity had 'not at all' helped them). However, there was also a significant proportion of students (41.2% of respondents) who reported that the text-based Activity 1 helped them 'very much' with reflecting on their existing knowledge or assumption about the concept of 'religion' (compared to 33.3% who said this about the image-based Activity 2), while 25% felt that the sound-based Activity 4 had not helped them 'at all' with that (see Figure 3).

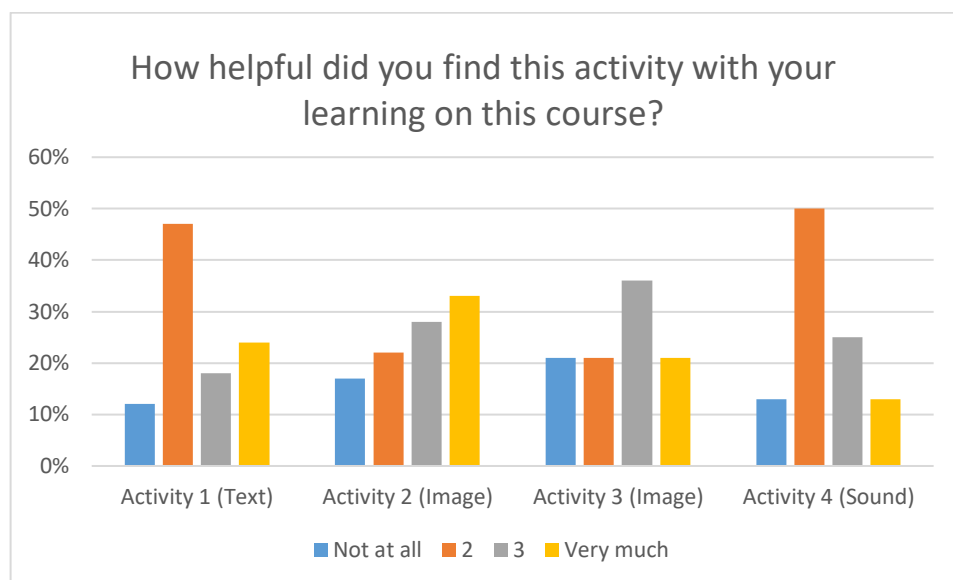


Fig. 2: Student questionnaire responses: How helpful did you find this activity with your learning on this course?

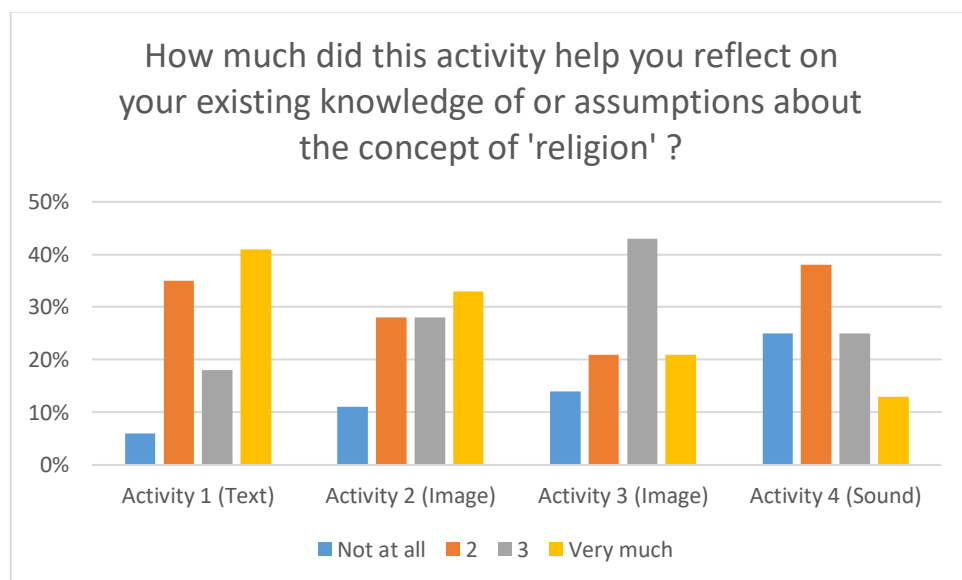


Fig. 3: Student questionnaire responses: How much did this activity help you reflect on your existing knowledge or assumptions about the concept of 'religion'?

A clearer, more nuanced picture of how these activities supported students' learning emerged from the qualitative analysis of assignments that students submitted (related to Activity 2) and the open comments they provided as part of the questionnaire. As explained above, the Open Studio activities aimed to engage students with complex theories, concepts and themes in the study of

religion, such as 'lived religion', 'material religion', intra-religious diversity or the often-blurred distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' and develop their understanding of the role of religion in material, visual and oral culture. Students' comments and assignment submissions indeed indicated that the activities helped many students understand relevant concepts and approaches, recognise their wider relevance (beyond the examples discussed in the course materials) and apply them to new examples from their own environment. In open comments submitted as part of questionnaire responses, students stated for example:

I found this kind of visual application to be a helpful way of learning. It placed the concepts into an everyday context.
(A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response³)

Or:

It did make me think about religion in my locality as opposed to religion as a 'top down' phenomenon.
(A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response)

Others argued that the activities made them realise 'how blurred the boundaries between religion and "secular" are' (A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response), saying for example that

Trying to find a suitable picture demonstrated the pervasiveness of religion within the secular world, from supermarket Sunday opening times, small spontaneous wayside shrines for road accident victims, to decorative features on individual houses.
(A227 Student, 2018, assignment)

Comments students made in the context of the questionnaires and as part of their assignments especially highlighted the importance they assigned to the *process* of choosing a building or object to photograph in preparation for the 'Take a picture of religion' activity. The vast majority of students (89% of survey respondents) posted photographs that they took especially for this activity. Taking their own photographs meant that students took the trouble to go out and tangibly engage with their local physical environment and material culture (engaging multiple senses, including sight, touch and sound). This may indicate some success in the approach of starting with 'what students know', but a common theme in students' comments was that Activity 2 ('Take a picture of religion') had encouraged them to look at their local environment with a 'fresh set of eyes'. Furthermore, a number of students noted that they initially struggled to think about what to photograph and assumed that they would not find suitable examples in their local environment and would have to look further afield. However, once they started looking, they began to notice examples of different aspects of religion 'almost everywhere' in their local environment, spotting religious references in buildings, street signs and many other objects that they had passed many times before without thinking about their religious

³ All quotes from student assignments, Open Studio submissions or questionnaire responses have been reproduced with the students' permission. This study has been approved by the Open University's Student Research Project Panel.

significance because they had 'slipped into the background of everyday life'. As one student put it:

The experience of taking part in the activity 'Take a picture of religion' was one that did challenge me to see the 'everyday' of my local area in a new light. [...] this activity has pushed me to think about what is around me in a wholly new context.
(A227 Student, 2018, assignment)

Activities 2 and 3 also prompted some students to find out more about local religious history. Some students were, for example, inspired to 'dig deeper' and research the history of local buildings that they had photographed.

Engagement with other students

The process of taking their own photographs also allowed students to personalise or 'put their own stamp' on their learning experience. Choosing their own examples facilitated the potential for greater emotional engagement, with some students choosing examples of buildings, places or objects that reflected their own personal engagement or relationship with religion, such as their local church, their own prayer mat or other objects that had meant a lot to them. Some tutors noted that particularly in the context of Activity 2 ('Take a picture of religion'), this 'genuine sense of personal engagement' had a really positive impact and was 'highly successful in promoting interaction and shaping group dynamics' (A227 Tutor, 2018).

Admittedly, a high level of personal engagement does not come without its challenges, as students can feel vulnerable revealing aspects of their personal environment or they can worry about offending others, particularly when commenting on images or sounds that other students chose. As the following comment reveals, some students felt nervous about posting something that might be perceived as offensive:

I was aware of the sensitivity of the subject. I didn't want to come across as being judgemental.
(A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response)

Another found 'communicating with other students quite difficult as some students can be quite blunt which leads to awkwardness' (A227 Student questionnaire response, 2018). Nevertheless, in the study of religion, it is important for students to practise and develop their skills of talking in a considerate way about potentially sensitive issues and to reflectively engage with their own personal attitudes and approaches. These activities offered students a valuable opportunity to practise these skills. The further development of these skills was supported by the reflective aspects of the assignment related to Activity 2 and by the feedback tutors gave to students on this assignment.

Engagement with other students and the development of communication skills were among the key intended learning outcomes behind the design of the Open Studio activities. However, when we asked students about their perception of the extent to which each activity helped them engage and work with other students, we received rather mixed responses (see Fig. 4). Despite

this varied picture, it may well be that Open Studio still contributed, in more general, relational terms, to building the online ‘community’ which is so vital, particularly to distance learning.

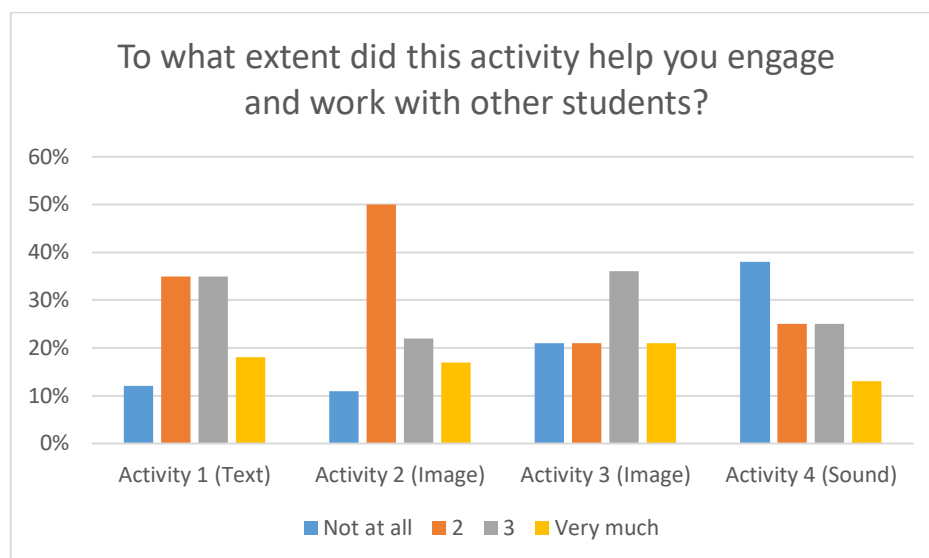


Fig. 4: Student questionnaire responses: To what extent did this activity help you engage and work with other students?

Again, the qualitative analysis of student assignments (related to Activity 2) and of open comments students submitted as part of our survey offered more detailed, conclusive insights. Some students commented, for example, that particularly in the context of the ‘Take a picture of religion activity’, they really appreciated the fact that the pinboard set-up of the Open Studio platform facilitated the display of the many different photographs next to each other as this helped to highlight the complexity of the concept of religion. They noted that while ‘no solitary image captured religion in its entirety; viewed together it was possible to gain an understanding of the complexity of defining religion’ (A227 Student, 2018, assignment). Some claimed that the activity had ‘opened my mind to other people’s perceptions’ (A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response), while others stated that ‘some of the photos and comments posted by other students have really helped me broaden my thinking and increased my ability to spot religion’ (A227 Student, 2018, assignment).

Some students appreciated that the Open Studio activities facilitated opportunities ‘of knowing a bit about each other’s views and for some, religions’ (A227 Student questionnaire response, 2018) or felt that ‘it encouraged dialogue between students and sharing ideas’ (A227 Student questionnaire response, 2018). However, others found the ‘pin-board look of the site [...] very confusing and annoying to navigate’ (A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response) or commented on the ‘bittiness’ or lack of flow of asynchronous written interaction with other students via the Open Studio platform:

In retrospect, I would have preferred a discussion with our group in person, rather than using Open Studio; sometimes it felt like we had to say something and it was quite hard to articulate my thoughts, but had I been talking to other members of the group in person it may have

been easier, as my thoughts would have evolved more naturally through normal conversation.

(A227 Student, 2018, assignment)

In the context of the Open University, there are some opportunities for face-to-face tuition – though attendance of tutorials is not compulsory. Within the context of this blend, some tutors decided to continue the discussion that started on the online Open Studio platform in the face-to-face setting or online synchronous tutorials, others suggested to integrate the Open Studio activity with discussions on online forums. This highlights that there are many ways of adapting or further developing these activities – and the discussion of the images and sounds recorded in particular - beyond the specific use of the Open Studio platform.

Student engagement and enjoyment

It was clear from many student responses how much they enjoyed taking part particularly in the image-based activities. A sizeable proportion of student survey respondents stated that they 'enjoyed' or 'very much enjoyed' taking part in the Open Studio activities (see Fig. 5). In fact, more than half of the respondents (i.e. 55.6%) felt that they had 'very much' enjoyed taking part in Activity 2 ('Take a picture of religion'). It is striking that the activity linked to the summative assessment was also the activity that most students enjoyed the most.

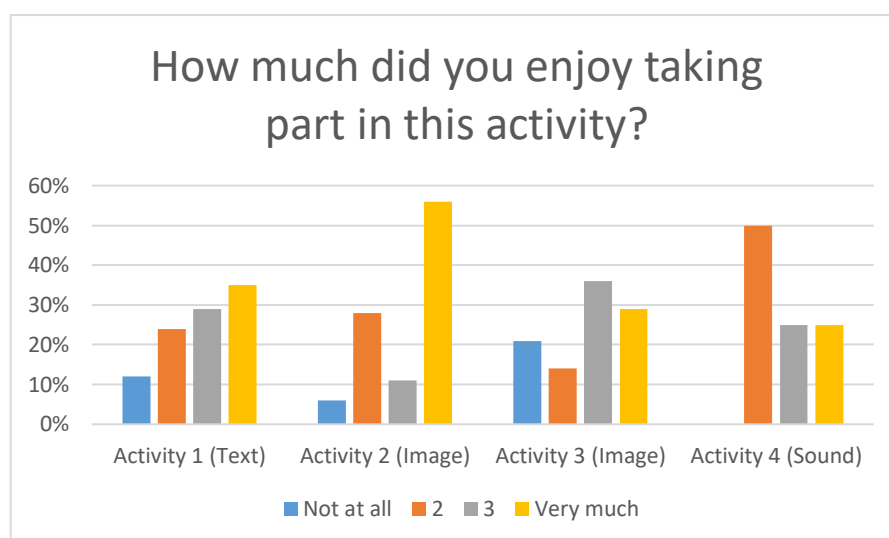


Fig. 5: Student questionnaire responses: How much do you enjoy taking part in this activity?

In open comments submitted as part of their questionnaire responses, some students offered more detailed insights into what they had enjoyed, pointing out, for example, how much they had enjoyed the creative process of choosing an object to photograph:

I enjoyed thinking about the image that I could use [...] - I used my own image and enjoyed planning and taking it.

(A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response)

Others commented on how much they enjoyed interacting with students, saying for example:

I also really enjoyed seeing other student's submissions and commenting on them.

(A227 Student, 2018, questionnaire response)

There are multiple studies exploring the influence of emotions on learning, which provide ample evidence supporting the argument that a sense of enjoyment and emotional engagement can be a good incentive for learning and impact positively on the depth of the learning experiences (Hernik and Jaworska, 2018; Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun, 2011). If students are having more fun, they are likely to be more motivated, satisfied, and more engaged with their studies.

Conclusion

When we conceptualised the activities for this course, one of the team joked that we were teaching lived religion, and disengaging students from the World Religions Paradigm, 'by stealth'. In hindsight, there was some truth in this. Our analysis concludes that digital photography in particular can help some students engage with complex theoretical concepts and approaches. As one of the A227 tutors (2018) put it, it can be a good way of 'tricking students into more theoretical engagement'. These activities require students to relate relatively abstract, complex concepts to new examples from their own environment – beginning with 'what they know'. This can help students grasp and understand these concepts and recognise their wider relevance beyond the examples discussed in the course materials. This works particularly well with the concepts of 'lived' and 'material' religion, as it encourages students to focus on what is 'out there' – everyday religion as it is lived and practised. This can also serve as an important first step into fieldwork – helping students appreciate the lived reality of religions and understand the relevance of theoretical concepts and debates in the study of religion to life and society around them. Digital photography in particular also offers an 'excellent opportunity to enhance [...] students' creative thinking and self-reflection' (Siegle, 2012, 285).

Student views on the collaborative aspects of the activities were rather mixed (evidenced, for example, by student responses to questions, such as: 'To what extent did this activity help you engage and work with other students?'). However, a significant finding has been the sense of enjoyment that many students commented on, particularly in relation to the activities using digital photography. This links to a growing body of literature that highlights the important role that a sense of enjoyment can play in engaging students in learning (see, for example, Hernik and Jaworska, 2018; Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun, 2011). The particular popularity of the activities involving digital photography also resonates with educational and neuroscientific research that argues that 'the majority of individuals learn best through visual stimuli' (Kelly and Sihite, 2018, 78) or through multisensory exposure to a combination of images, orally presented information and written texts (Medina, 2009).

The findings of this study are of particular relevance to blended and distance learning settings in Higher Education, where opportunities for object-based, multisensory learning have been especially underexplored. This includes socially distanced settings in the context of the Covid19-pandemic where activities involving digital photography, such as the 'Take a picture of religion' activity, could, for example, facilitate first socially distanced steps into fieldwork. However, these activities can be adapted in many ways and integrated into any blend of online and/or face-to-face learning that aims to creatively engage students in the study of religion.

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