ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PROJECT: Barriers and Bridges to Faith Dialogue in Composition Spaces

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Discussion of religious faith in a secular classroom presents particular challenges for both students and professors. The intent of this study is to examine the barriers to such a dialogue and to explore possibilities for constructive, academic inquiry for students of faith and those who interact with them. The focus of this study is on the composition classroom setting where first year students often share their religious faith through writing opportunities and class participation. The spotlight is on Christianity, primarily, due to the high number of Christian students within United States universities, and the historically close relationship between Christianity and rhetoric/composition studies. This assessment is designed to (1) assist religious students in understanding the nature of their audience in an academic, diverse setting, (2) alert professors to the complexity of the religious student’s challenge to be understood within the college classroom and (3) assist in building bridges for a dialogue problematized by many barriers.

This study concludes that the historical influence of Enlightenment-driven epistemology in academia, including positivist objectivity, certainty, Scottish Common Sense, and a dichotomous view of knowledge, has also shaped religious knowledge. The result is often a mischaracterization of religious epistemology and miscommunication. This study posits that
some of the religious/academic bifurcations are developmentally driven for college age students, and that productive dialogue is possible once the complexity of religious identity and epistemological constructs are identified and evaluated in light of educational priorities.