ACTS OF FAITH
TEACHING MODULES
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In Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation, Eboo Patel writes about his personal journey as an interfaith leader. From growing up Muslim in the Chicago suburbs to starting a national organization dedicated to religious pluralism, Acts of Faith covers a range of issues and themes related to Eboo’s personal story, religious diversity in America, and interfaith leadership. The following teaching modules are examples for ways to utilize Acts of Faith in a college classroom.

These modules are organized by topic—essentially, different approaches to the leading concepts and themes of Acts of Faith that may be helpful to faculty members teaching the book. Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) based the modules on conversations we have had with several faculty who shared how they have taught the text in their courses. The topics are: spiritual autobiography, interfaith literacy, personal leadership, interfaith dialogue and engagement, and service work. Each example includes learning objectives, descriptions, and assessment suggestions for the activity.

The different modules include plans for time spent in the classroom with students and assignments for students outside of class. We wrote them with the intention that they might work in many courses within a range of disciplines. For example, a class focusing on religious narratives within American history or religious diversity in America might choose to focus on spiritual autobiography, while a class focused on models for interfaith action, leadership, or social entrepreneurship might find the personal leadership activity most helpful.

If you have further ideas for using Acts of Faith in the classroom, please let us know. Email Cassie Meyer, Director of Academic and Curricular Initiatives at cassie@ifyc.org with examples of how you have used Acts of Faith in your courses or with new suggestions.
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS:

- Understand the role of religious identity in the shaping of Eboo Patel’s personal and leadership development
- Begin to articulate their own religious, spiritual, and philosophical values and how those values motivate them to serve and act on issues important to them

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

This activity utilizes Acts of Faith as spur for students to think deeply about their own religious, spiritual, and philosophical development and how that is reflected in the values they see as most important. Courses that focus on autobiographies and first-person narratives will find this activity especially useful.

When introducing Acts of Faith to students, ask them to pay close attention to the experiences, mentors, and actions that Patel highlights as influencing his Muslim identity. As a way to further add context, ask the students to pull out one such religious influence from Patel’s time as a high school student, as a college student, and as young adult. Remind students to highlight both what influenced him (the specific incident) and why and how it influenced him (the reason it changed him and the future actions it led him to take). Students should prepare these examples before class and be ready to discuss them. Have students share their examples in small groups during the class period.

If you would like to further build on this exercise, ask students to write a reflective paper or design a visual representation of their own spiritual development. Ask students to include examples, like Patel did, of specific experiences, people, and texts that influenced them and ask them what they have learned about their own faith or non-faith background from people of religious and secular traditions. How has a Jewish student, for example, been influenced by a Christian friend or a Hindu text? What values do they hold important as a Jew and why are those values important to them? Has their own faith ever motivated them to act on a social issue? If you ask students to share these stories with one another, be sure to set up a safe space in which to do so. Ask students to set their own guidelines as a group, like active listening, respectful dialogue, and not sharing personal information outside of class.

ASSESSMENT:

For the portion of this activity addressing examples from Acts of Faith, and the classroom example following that, students should have three clear examples from the text highlighting Patel’s spiritual development. Especially strong examples will connect directly with both Patel’s Muslim faith and his desire for interfaith cooperation. For the second part of the activity, strong papers or presentations will show a student’s willingness to thoughtfully discuss personal religious and spiritual experiences while also contextualizing them with pertinent examples of how other people and experiences have influenced their faith or non-faith.

FURTHER READING:

- The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The Long Loneliness by Dorothy Day
- I Asked For Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS:

- Identify leadership abilities that Eboo Patel and other leaders develop as young people in college
- Articulate their own interfaith leadership qualities and ways to strengthen them

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

This exercise encourages both analysis and action. The class should read both *Acts of Faith* (or a selection of *Acts of Faith* focusing on Patel’s leadership development) and another first-person text from a young leader. Depending on the course or your personal preference, the comparative text can be historical (i.e. a text from a past leader or activist) or from a present-day leader. After reading both texts, ask the students to write a paper comparing the two texts. How did both Patel and the other young leader display leadership and get others involved in their vision? What did they do differently? What characteristics or events influenced their decisions? And, importantly, how did being specifically a young leader shape their development?

For the second part of the paper, ask the students to write about their own perceived leadership abilities. What do they view as their leadership strengths? Where do they have room to grow? What issue or set of issues is important to them? How can they, as a young person, begin to affect change on those issues? Ask the students to end the paper with a specific next step they can take to develop their leadership abilities.

As a possible in-class follow-up activity, ask the students to discuss in small groups some of the questions they addressed in their papers. What common conclusions did they draw about leadership from young people? What were some of their personal next steps?

ASSESSMENT:

For the comparative part of the paper, students should highlight specific examples of leadership in *Acts of Faith* and the companion text. They should be able to explain why Patel and the other young leader took these actions and what motivated them to act. Excellent papers will detail how Patel and other young leaders utilized their youth to further affect change.

In the second part of the paper, students should be able to reflect in a meaningful way about their own leadership characteristics. Thoughtful answers can display a range of leadership qualities applicable to diverse situations or highlight a few strong leadership qualities that apply to different types of actions. Their “next steps” should display how they are connecting their existing leadership qualities to a practical action in the near future.

FURTHER READING:

- *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* by Eboo Patel;
  - Chapter 5: The Art of Interfaith Leadership
INTERFAITH SERVICE PROJECT

OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS:

- Identify Eboo Patel’s beliefs and influences in regards to service
- Explain their own motivations for serving others
- Start to think about how they can continue to serve their community

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

This activity is intended as a supplement to a service project undertaken by a class or group. If you are planning a service project, think of events that combine service with intentional engagement of religious diversity. Events like serving food at a church homeless shelter, volunteering at a Jewish soup kitchen, or participating in a fast-a-thon with a mosque all offer opportunities for exploring shared values. The Religious Life office, the campus Service Center, the Student Affairs department, and service-focused student groups can be great partners when planning these projects.

In a class discussion prior to the service project, ask students to identify instances of service in *Acts of Faith*. What service experiences does Patel highlight? How do values from Islam affect his belief in service? How do these service experiences affect him as a young leader? Why does Patel think service projects are so important for bringing together young people of different backgrounds, and why does he think it is important for people of different backgrounds to serve together?

Following this discussion, ask students to keep these questions in mind during the service work itself. Following the activity, have the class gather to reflect on their work. If possible, ask members of the organization or group you were working with on the service project to join in the discussion. Ask what motivated them to get involved with this particular issue. Following that, ask everyone why it is important for them, as an individual, to serve. Then broaden the discussion by asking students to articulate what value they see in serving together. How did the work they did embody shared values? Are there important reasons to work together as group in addition individual motivations for serving?

In conclusion, have students to think about how they can continue to serve, and create social change, beyond this activity. How can they continue to affect social and societal change while, at the same time, bringing people of different religious and secular backgrounds together? Ask your service partners to share their ideas and ask students to draw both from *Acts of Faith* and their own experiences. You can ask them to discuss them in the group or have them do a written reflection for the next class session.

ASSESSMENT:

In the pre-service discussion, students should be able to connect specific examples from *Acts of Faith* with broader themes from the text about the value of service. Students should articulate how those specific experiences influenced Patel’s own development. Further insightful comments will address how a religiously diverse group of young people can affect social change as a group.

For the post-service discussion, students should be able to articulate their own values and how they connect those to the service project. Students’ proposals for further service should articulate relevant and practical activities related to their own interests and values.

FURTHER READING:

- 10 Popular Better Together Campaign Events - bit.ly/10PopularBT
INTERFAITH LITERACY

OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS:

- Identify how Eboo Patel’s education influenced his personal commitments to interfaith cooperation
- Identify characteristics of interfaith literacy and its connection to students’ lives and education
- Design a course statement or syllabus for a course about religious literacy and/or interfaith literacy

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

Throughout *Acts of Faith*, Patel writes about his own education—both inside and outside the classroom. To begin the discussion, define interfaith literacy for the students as having four components: an appreciative knowledge of other traditions, the ability to define values that all religious and secular traditions share (i.e., mercy, compassion, etc.), an understanding of the history of interfaith cooperation, and the development of a personal theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation.¹ Ask students to identify certain people (professors, faith heroes, etc.), incidences, books, or other educational experiences in *Acts of Faith* that may have contributed to Patel’s interfaith literacy. Write these examples on the board. Ask your students to briefly explain why or how these experiences influenced Patel. Then, once you have a substantial list, ask students to take ten minutes to compile their own personal list of interfaith influences. Examples might include: their own religious or non-religious background, friends of different faith or secular identities, visits they have taken to different religious sites, books or other texts about another religion that they have read, etc. Once students have had time to compile their list, ask for a few volunteers to share their lists with the class. Ask those volunteers why they chose those particular experiences.

To explore interfaith literacy further, you can ask the students to compile an educational statement or two-week syllabus for an imagined class on interfaith literacy. What texts, assignments, and activities would students include in this course? How would they explain the importance of this course to other students?

ASSESSMENT:

For the initial class list of Patel’s influences, students should be able to name significant influences that contributed to his interfaith literacy. Examples would include: Dorothy Day and the Catholic worker’s house movement, Azim Nanji’s mentorship, his Rhodes thesis, etc. The individual list for each student will obviously reflect their personal history. Look for thoughtful and well-considered examples from students, especially as they directly relate to their personal development. Look for students to connect these past experiences to their lives and activities in college or future commitments.

Strong responses for the syllabus/educational statement assignment will display an understanding of interfaith literacy through pertinent examples of texts and assignments that would expose other students to knowledge from other religious and non-religious groups.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT

OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS:

- Recognize examples from Acts of Faith of interfaith dialogue and engagement
- Identify important characteristics of interfaith dialogue
- Articulate a personal story of interfaith dialogue

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

Taking place over two class periods, this activity utilizes passages from Acts of Faith to encourage student interfaith dialogue. Before the first class period, ask students to come to class with an example an interfaith conversation or dialogue from Acts of Faith. Examples could include Eboo Patel’s conversations with Brother Wayne, his visit to the Dalai Lama, or his discussions with Nivita in England. Open up a discussion about the examples the students have—which conversations were beneficial and which were more difficult or did not go well for Patel? Make a list on the board of the qualities of both types of dialogues. Towards the end of this discussion ask students to think of an example, to be shared in the next class, from their own personal history of an interfaith encounter or conversation; these encounters should have, in some way, addressed values arising from their religious or non-religious identity. They can also be either positive examples or more difficult ones.

In the next class period, ask students to pair off (or gather in small groups) and share their stories with their partner. Introduce the activity by setting a safe space for discussion; emphasize to students that they are only speaking for themselves, not their entire tradition, and that, when both speaking and listening, they should show respect for their partner. Give adequate time for each student to share their stories. Before they tell their stories, ask both the storyteller and the listener to think of why this engagement was meaningful and what stood out from having talked with an individual of another tradition specifically about religious and philosophical issues. Once everyone has had time to share, ask the whole class if any of the stories had similar themes. Start to compile a list of these themes. Which dialogues were most successful? Why? Which were least successful and why? How can the positive examples be used to inform future interfaith dialogues or conversations that students might have—whether those conversations are casual or more intentional?

FURTHER READING:

- Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America by Eboo Patel;
  - Chapter 5: The Art of Interfaith Leadership
- Common Knowledge: An Interfaith Literacy Podcast - www.ifyc.org/podcast
ASSESSMENT:

For the first activity, students should come prepared with relevant examples from *Acts of Faith* of interfaith dialogue and engagement. They should be able to thoughtfully discuss why, or why not, Patel highlighted these experiences in the book and what he learned from them. For the second activity, students should be able to share a meaningful story connected to interfaith dialogue. These stories should offer clear and sincere moments of engagement with other individuals and/or groups and the students should be able to articulate why this particular incident was meaningful to them. The discussion following the storytelling should produce student comments connecting their own experience (and, in especially strong comments, Eboo’s experiences as well) with a more generalized set of suggestions for interfaith dialogue. A strong list of examples of tactics for interfaith dialogue can be seen as a “best practices” document for future reference.

FURTHER READING:

- *Shared Values Facilitation Guide* - bit.ly/AllShrdValues