The religion department at the University of Colorado, Boulder requires all incoming graduate students to take “Approaches to the Study of Religion.” The course has been taught every Fall term for over a decade by a variety of resident and visiting faculty. I taught the course for a three-year period from 1995-1997.

There are many concerns in teaching such a course. Should it be a history of the discipline? Should it be a balanced survey of approaches that distinguish the many fields within the academic study of religion? Should it include application as well as theory and if so, what areas of application will engage students representing a wide variety of interests? Should the course include field study methodology and experience? These questions and many others are not easily, and never wholly satisfactorily, resolved. Nonetheless, this kind of course is, I believe, remarkably important to meaningful graduate work and will significantly shape the students’ academic careers. I will describe in general terms, with reflective commentary, the course as I have taught it.

The course objective, as I have stated it, is “to provide graduate students with a foundational vocabulary, a basic familiarity with a variety of the most creative and promising theories and methods, supportive bibliography, and a clear understanding of each student’s selected field of concentration within the academic study of religion.” The course was presented in seven sections requiring six five-to-eight page papers and a “Profile of an Academic Field.”

First, the profile. During my years teaching, too often I found myself talking to students completing their M.A. degree who still did not have any sense of what they might do to either further their studies or to get jobs. I found that even at the point of completing their degrees many did not know much about the field in which they had done their research. I decided that in order for students in “Approaches” to prepare themselves to participate in, and contribute to, an academic field, each should have a clear and thorough understanding of her or his chosen field. Certainly not all students have chosen a field of concentration when they enter graduate study, but
I believe that the profile project gives even these students a chance to check out a potential field. I require that they prepare a profile including the following information (my descriptions here are greatly abbreviated): an annotated bibliography of books and journal articles (including the field classics, distinctive contemporary works, and text books), an annotated description of relevant journals, an annotated presentation of research tools, and an annotated list of important film and media resources. Further, students must write a brief history of the chosen field; they must discuss the shape of the field at present; they are to show how members in the field communicate with one another (newsletters, web-sites, organizations, etc.); and they are to identify all relevant Ph.D. programs, their significant faculty, and their entrance and degree requirements. I also require that they write a narrative describing the relationship of their chosen field to the general academic study of religion. Finally, they must include a personal statement commenting on how they see themselves contributing to their chosen fields. Students are encouraged to make extensive contact with leading scholars in their fields for suggestions and information as well as to make early contacts that they might continue to cultivate.

Students are encouraged to begin preparation of the profiles early in the term, because, in addition to the profile, they must read three to four thousand pages and write forty to fifty pages of essays. Most students present profiles of from fifty to one hundred-twenty pages in length. Students find this project, despite its demands, invaluable. Many shift their academic interests shaping them in a way more compatible with existing fields, scholars, opportunities; others discover in the midst of preparing their profile that a field simply will not support the kind of interest they hold. Many begin working toward acceptance in specific Ph.D. programs and some begin contributing to their fields in various ways. Throughout the three years I have taught this course, I have made previously prepared profiles available as models and as beginnings for new students. Now to the course content.

I think it is important to frame the whole course in cognitive, category, and metaphor theory and I use the works of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980; Lakoff 1987) for this purpose. Because these concerns are only now beginning to have a significant impact on the academic study of religion, students are invariably unfamiliar with these ideas and materials. The common absence of knowledge