

Online Learning for Constructive Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The Wilmette Institute is working towards constructive engagement by raising the capacity of participants to meaningfully contribute to social discourse and social action. This presentation will explore how Bahá'í online learning can lead towards personal and collective transformation with participants applying spiritual principles and academic knowledge to grassroots efforts. Learn how learners, faculty and administrators create a learning community in courses such as **Anti-Black Racism in the U.S.**, **Climate Change**, and **Sustainable Development** that nurture constructive engagement.



Mission Statement of the Wilmette Institute

An agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the U.S.

The Wilmette Institute is a higher educational institution offering courses in Bahá'í history, texts, and the Bahá'í approach to social transformation. We are committed to a diverse academic community in our student body and faculty. Our courses facilitate consultation, action, and reflection leading to personal and collective transformation for the common good.

We seek to provide innovative and transformative learning experiences for university students and others who want to make the world more compassionate, just and inclusive.



Guiding Principles

- Universal peace and justice will be realized through a global consciousness of the oneness of humanity and the interconnectedness of the earth and all its inhabitants.
- Both science and religion are essential to building an ever-advancing civilization.
- Systemic social problems require a holistic approach to discover lasting solutions.
- Scholarship does not begin and end with words but combines theory and praxis in study, consultation, action and reflection.
- Sustainable social change requires the development of human capacity, in order for people to become protagonists of their own material and spiritual development.



The Wilmette Institute's Desired Learning Outcomes (University courses)

The Wilmette Institute designs its courses to meet these learning outcomes. Every course does not focus on all these outcomes:

- **Knowledge:**
Demonstrate knowledge and interdisciplinary insights gained from the courses.
- **Abilities:**
Analyze complex and interrelated local and global problems through critical systems thinking.
Explore the intricate connections between spiritual and material solutions to social issues through research, praxis, and the arts.
Engage in public discourse and social action in interfaith and intercultural contexts.
- **Application:**
Apply knowledge, spiritual principles, insights, and skills to:
 - one's individual reality,
 - community-building efforts,
 - participatory social action, and
 - social discourse, with the goal of both spiritual and material progress.



Theoretical Framework and Praxis

Critical Pedagogy - Rooted in Critical Theory, Critical Pedagogy distinguishes between traditional educational structures and liberatory education. The goal of critical pedagogy is emancipation from oppression through an awakening of the *conscientização* (critical consciousness) where education becomes key to not only read the “word” but “read the world” and to generate the will to transform it. (Paulo Freire)

Global citizenship education - “is a *transformative, lifelong pursuit* that involves both curricular learning and practical experience to shape a mindset to care for humanity and the planet, and to equip individuals with global competence to undertake responsible actions aimed at forging more just, peaceful, secure, sustainable, tolerant and inclusive societies.” (Council for Global Citizenship Education) <https://www.globalcitizenshipfoundation.org/gced>

Application of Learning - WI students create a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) based on the course’s learning outcomes and assess their learning at the end. Faculty advise students about ways they can apply learning locally and help them develop lines of action. In addition to a student satisfaction survey and course evaluation, we survey students three months after the course ends about how they have applied their learning to their individual lives and community building efforts. We publish the resulting student work on our website and in our ENewsletter.

Case Study: Climate Change p1 of 2

Meet Sue Blythe



1 Sue joined the Climate Change course in 2013, with four other Baha'is, forming a local study group.

3 Sue and her study group worked together on a number of projects.

2

At the end of the course Sue's faculty-mentor, Christine Muller, asked:

"Now that you know this, what are you going to do?"

a) Interfaith Panel Discussion
Garden Club, Gainesville
5 religious groups (2013)
100 participants

b) Movie Nights
Gainesville, 50-100
participants (2013-14)
PLUS
various workshops

c) Collaborations with
Unitarian Universalists
example Earth Day (2014)
@ Quaker Meeting House

4 Sue kept working on various initiatives, expanding her contacts, and then...

5 Sue started interacting with a local university, and invited Matteen Kashef to take the Climate Change course (2020).

6 Matt invited 2 Friends of the Faith to join Sue for an intergenerational project.

Matteen Kashef
President, Bahá'í
Campus Association
University of Florida
(Gainesville)



U of FL
Interfaith
Climate
Action
Network

7

Matt wrote articles on his experiences which were published by WI and BahaiTeachings.org.

Sun, April 26, 2020

WI Webinar:
Intergenerational
Climate Collaborative

[FL student's unified approach to climate crisis](#)
[Changing the Way We Think of Climate Change](#)

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Sue & Matt seek ways “youth & elders can collaborate in the journey to justice for the environment.”

“Baha’is for Race Unity” in Arizona

Gwen Etter-Lewis, Faculty

In February 2020, 12 residents of the Marana-Tucson-Oro Valley (Arizona) cluster registered for **Anti-black Racism in the U.S.** Participants were recruited at a gathering open to the public. The group was sponsored by the Marana LSA and led by Jeanais Brodie.



Jeanais Brodie

Not only did the group continue meeting and planning outreach on Zoom, but their efforts blossomed into a second study group of 12 members, about to embark on the same course in June, sponsored by the Tucson LSA. The new group is being facilitated by two members from the original group.

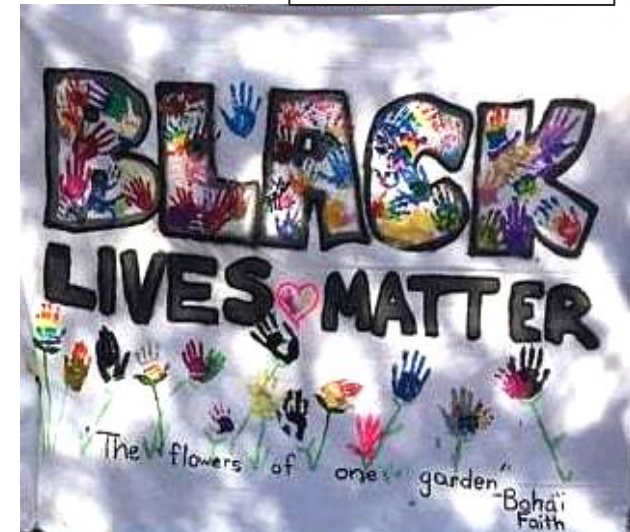
Some 40-50 residents of the cluster now meet regularly on Zoom for devotionals, video screening, and discussions. The mixed-race group is called “Baha’is for Race unity.” See [More details of their efforts](#), and a [video clip](#).



Sarah Taraz



Michael Parker



BLM banner with Baha’i quote used in a recent march (Tucson)

Learning about Unity through course on Kitab-i-Aqdas

Colette Harrison took her first WI course early in 2020. You can read the paper she wrote at the end of the course [here](#). What follows are some highlights.

1. Framework for a global society

I have gained a new appreciation for the depth of wisdom offered in the Kitab-i-Aqdas, not only as a “code of conduct” but as a source of inspiration for the soul and something that “binds the hearts.”

...from this newfound perspective, I begin to have a better understanding of how it serves to bring about the framework for a global society to emerge.

4. Multicultural mural project

The library group is planning a Race Amity Day interfaith multicultural celebration/picnic with a mural project from drawings submitted to them that depict the intersection(s) of the many facets of the Dayton, Ohio community.

2. Interfaith discussion group

Colette organized an interfaith “Passage into Spiritual Maturity” library discussion group’—based on the Aqdas, the Bahá’í Writings in general, and supportive materials by selected Bahá’í authors.

3. Seeking sustainable action

“Through an in-depth exploration of the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas I believe it is possible to formulate sustainable plans of action that can be tailored to the needs and exigencies of the communities in which each of us live, while also demonstrating our interconnectedness to a wider whole.”

Impact of Anti-Black Racism Course

From a Baha'i perspective, the course explores subjects including the construction of race, colonialism and slavery; stereotypes and cultural appropriation; Prison Industrial Complex and Black Lives Matter; segregation, gentrification, environmental racism, and reparations; racism and technology; black women in the U.S.; Civil Rights Movement; and constructive resilience and community building.

Impact within the Baha'i community:

Witnessing the need of the Persian community to understand racial discrimination in the U.S., a few participants collaborated to create a Persian version of the video, *Slavery to Mass Incarceration*, created by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). The Baha'i friends worked with this social justice organization to allow the community to make the Persian version of the video. These friends saw this project not as a completed task but as the beginning to raising awareness with multiple activities.

(More details in [**WI Newsletter**](#), June 2019)

Working with the wider community:

Participants finish the course with a lens that combines the material and spiritual dimensions for racial justice and unity. A wide range of actions have resulted from creating special devotional gatherings, forming book clubs, contributing to social discourse, writing editors to ensure diversity of authors, raising awareness through talks, the written word, youth discussion groups, and the arts.

Reaching Younger Populations

Courses addressing the needs of youth and young adults include:

[Transformative Leadership for Youth](#)
(11 to 17 yrs)

[Foundations for Relationships](#)
(18 to 30 yrs)

Our [library of public webinars](#) have become a space for [young student voices](#).



Youth Video:
[“Give Light”](#)

Courses for University

WI is forming partnerships with institutions of higher education to offer selected courses for credit, and developing web talks for academic audiences on a wide range of topics.

