

# Dead Religion and Contemporary Perspectives: Commending Mesopotamian Data to the Religious Studies Classroom

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## Abstract

Ancient Mesopotamian religion offers an under-appreciated body of data to religious studies. Because Mesopotamian religion is ancient and dead, it poses no threat to modern religious convictions. Students approach it with a curious antiquarian's interest rather than a threatened believer's resistance and thus freely adopt through it critical concepts in the study of religion. This essay shows how Mesopotamian data can illustrate three such concepts. Moreover, it suggests that because Mesopotamian culture is geographically and chronologically proximate to those that produced the Bible and Quran, this data can provide a unique bridge to critical discussions of the major monotheistic religions.

## Keywords

Assyriology and the study of religion, ancient Mesopotamian religion, mythmaking, insider/outsider, pedagogy, cultural embedded-ness of religion

“For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion.” So writes Jonathan Z. Smith in the introduction to his *Imagining Religion* (1982: xi).<sup>1</sup> Smith proceeds to explain that the primary skill in studying religion—though we may include teaching it as well—is the ability to exercise “articulate choice” when utilizing data in one’s work. One must ask: What data will best illustrate or demonstrate the concept at hand? For someone trying to convey broad categorical concepts to students in, for example, an “Introduction to the Study of Religion”

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<sup>1</sup> Smith invokes this maxim again in the opening lines of his work on ritual (Smith 1987: xi) but, oddly, misquotes himself.

course articulate choice is key to pedagogical success. Given the pragmatic basis for data selection, I offer in this essay an exploration of the utility of an under-appreciated body of data for illustrating three basic (and inter-related) concepts in religious studies. The body of data comes from ancient Mesopotamia. The three concepts that I will illustrate with it are (1) the social and cultural embedded-ness of religion, (2) the role of mythmaking in politico-religious ideology, and (3) the insider versus outsider perspective. This essay does not offer original research toward a comprehensive theory or even an overview of alternative approaches to these concepts. Nor does this essay specify how one should implement teaching them in the classroom—though I will draw upon my own experiences at times. Rather, the intention here is simply to commend Mesopotamian data as a useful and in many ways unique entrée to several critical concepts in the study of religion, especially as these are presented in introductory religious studies classes.

### **Apologia: Why Mesopotamia?**

With a virtual smorgasbord of religious data traversing human history and the globe, why do I wish to focus attention on obscure ancient Mesopotamian data? I offer three reasons.

First, I originally began drawing upon Mesopotamian data because I am academically trained in the discipline. Thus, I know the data and use it in my research and teaching.

Second, the study of ancient Mesopotamia, otherwise known as Assyriology, remains an arcane field. Due to its exotic materials and necessary preoccupation with philology, it has lain outside the mainstream of the humanities historically and thus the fruits of its labor are often little known to outsiders, even if there are notable exceptions (e.g., Smith 1978: 132-36). This is sometimes true even among scholars in fields closely related to Assyriology: Bibliacists, Classicists, and traditional Ancient Historians (i.e., of Greece, Rome, and Egypt). By choosing to illustrate the above named concepts with Mesopotamian data I intend to advocate reciprocal, inter-disciplinary activity between scholars of religion and Assyriologists and to offer to both some constructive ways the study of ancient Mesopotamia can be integrated into the humanities more broadly and into the study of religion specifically—a growing trend in the field of Assyriology (Veldhuis; Lenzi; Pongratz-Leisten 1999).

Finally, and most importantly, I believe Mesopotamian religion offers a unique pedagogical opportunity for religious studies, and I wish to commend

this data to others. Although I have hopes that Assyriology's characterization as intellectual *esoterica* is changing among scholars of the humanities (see, for example, Penglase), most average *students* still know very little, if anything, about ancient Mesopotamia, humanity's first urban civilization. It is this very situation, I submit, that can generate interest in the hearts and minds of students. That is, contemporary ignorance of such a historically important ancient culture—whose contemporary kin are constantly in the news these days—generates curiosity in many students. Moreover, the religious traditions of ancient Mesopotamia are very ancient and, historically-speaking, dead;<sup>2</sup> thus, studying ancient Mesopotamian religious ideas is of no apparent danger to modern religious convictions of any stripe. In other words, because ancient Mesopotamian religion seems to evoke in students a curious antiquarian's interest rather than a threatened believer's resistance, students tend to be willing to adopt and apply various critical ideas and approaches to this data. This in turn creates the potential to apply the accepted concepts elsewhere. Related to this is the unique fact that ancient Mesopotamia is geographically and chronologically (relatively-speaking) proximate to the origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Since ancient Mesopotamia is a historical neighbor to the locales that produced the three great monotheisms, the study of ancient Mesopotamian religion can create a bridge between the (sometimes harsh sounding) academic interpretations of these faiths and the students for whom these have such great personal significance.

I first realized Mesopotamian religion's pedagogical potential from a practicing Muslim student enrolled in my "Introduction to Mesopotamian History and Culture" course that I taught at Washington University in St. Louis a couple of years ago. After this student completed the final exam, the student walked out into the hallway, thanked me for the semester, and then added, "Because of what I learned about the history of Mesopotamian religion in your class, I will never view the history of Islam the same." I was astonished at this remark because I had not even mentioned Islam in the class. The student

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<sup>2</sup> I am not saying that Mesopotamian religion has no historical influence, whether directly or indirectly, on contemporary religion. Note, for example, how the ancient Near Eastern ritual gesture of prayer, the raising of hands—with special prayers even called *shuila*-prayers, i.e., hand-raising prayers—is reflected in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 8:22), the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:8), and, from there, among contemporary Restoration movements such as Pentecostalism. Moreover, I am aware of contemporary revivals of venerating certain Mesopotamian deities among neo-pagans. My point is simply that one would be hard-pressed to find a contemporary individual for whom Mesopotamian religion forms a key role in their religious identity.

had generalized the concepts used for understanding Mesopotamian religion and applied them to his personal religion with apparently revolutionary intellectual results. This new knowledge about Islam, the student implied, was a very good thing—perhaps especially so because the student had discovered it independently. I have used Mesopotamian data ever since when it seemed suitable for the teaching task at hand.

Although I began using this data for personal and professional reasons, and I am presenting it here with disciplinary goals in mind—at least, in the background, the final, pedagogical reason for utilizing Mesopotamian data is the most important in this essay and forms the impetus for the following comments.

### Three Concepts Illustrated

I

By social and cultural embedded-ness of religion I mean simply to say that religion, like all other human activities, is subject to the vagaries of cultural influence, sociological currents, and historical change. Religion is fully entrenched in human activity; it is a product of human beings. As such, any particular religious activity or system may begin, evolve, develop, and cease like any other human phenomenon. Furthermore, if this is so, one may study religious activity, such as prayer, or an entire tradition—for example, the history of Christianity or Islam—just as one would study political speeches or the history of the United States of America. That is, one may study religion without the invocation of supernatural forces, revelation, or other ideas that privilege a particular view and place it outside the realm of human scrutiny and verification (Martin: 137). With McCutcheon, I believe the academic study of religion has met its goal when it offers an interpretation that leaves no “extra” beyond the realm of explanation (2001: 88).<sup>3</sup>

For the instructor confronting the issue of cultural embedded-ness of religion in class, especially when that class is set within the pluralistic context of

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<sup>3</sup> When I introduce this idea to students, I choose several of them to come to the board and ask them to draw two circles, one representing religion and the other culture. The position of these two circles, they are informed, should represent their view of the relationship between religion and culture. The results are varied but generally one will find various degrees of overlap between the two circles or occasionally the two circles will not touch at all. Students are often surprised to see that when I draw my understanding of the relationship, the religion circle lies entirely within the culture circle: religion, on this view, is entirely embedded in culture—which, of course, problematizes the whole distinction as originally presented.

most universities and colleges, to show that religion, like all other human phenomena, is affected by cultural tides and historical change can be a challenging feat. On the one hand, using a common religion like Christianity to discuss the concept may result in the student simply setting the idea into a theological context without ever really seeing the concept for what it is. On the other hand, using a contemporary religious tradition that has no adherents in the classroom, if that is possible, can lead to dismissal of the applicability of the notion to the student's own religion. Students understandably resist thinking of their religion in strictly historical terms (Lincoln 2000: 416, 420).

A brief introduction to the development of Mesopotamian religion, as presented, for example, by Frans Wiggermann may provide a non-threatening perspective to illustrate the idea under discussion.<sup>4</sup> I would be the first to acknowledge that Mesopotamian religion is not the secret key to unlock the practical pedagogical difficulty mentioned just above—nor *the* key to any of the concepts illustrated herein. But a look at Mesopotamian religion in historical perspective does allow students an opportunity to consider within a historical-cultural setting that deflects explicit and immediate personal or contemporary religious ramifications that there is a close relationship between the flow of human society and the rise of various religious phenomena.

The earliest form of Mesopotamian religion indicates that the people of this region imagined their gods as elements of the natural world. For example, Utu or Shamash was the sun. Nanna or Sin was the moon. Enlil represented some form of the wind or a storm (Black and Green). As human security increased against the forces of the natural world via technology (e.g., agricultural surplus) and as social organization was increasingly centralized around human leaders in order to protect society against threats from other humans, the gods began to be conceived in anthropomorphic terms and were given positions within a divine, cosmic government. In other words, people's ideas about the divine powers of the universe began to reflect the new configuration of human political powers in society. It is no surprise, therefore, to learn that about the time the human institution of kingship was created so too was the notion of

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<sup>4</sup> Wiggermann's overview is selected here due to its general accessibility and chronologically wide-ranging view. On a different note, given the work's popularity, it seems required of Assyriologists writing about ancient Mesopotamian religion today to disavow the (in)famous argument for "Why a History of Mesopotamian Religion Should Not Be Written" in A. Leo Oppenheim's classic synthesis, *Mesopotamia: A Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. As others have pointed out (e.g., Bottéro 1992: 201, n.1), this was a particularly pessimistic, unfortunate, and ultimately contradictory assertion from one of the post-World War II deans of Assyriology. Although one must take his cautions seriously, they are not compelling reasons to abandon the attempt to understand Mesopotamian religion.

the kingship of the gods (Jacobsen: 77-91, especially 77-81). As various human political entities were organized into larger, regional units, there likewise developed a movement to place the various gods that were once of only local import into a centrally located, hierarchical pantheon of the entire region. The urban location of this centralized pantheon occasionally changed with major changes in the political tides; and the identification of the Mesopotamian supreme god of the pantheon concomitantly changed in light of the new terrestrial hegemony. Thus, the regional pantheon's seat may have been in Eridu, located in the far south, in the fourth millennium while the god Enki was supreme; eventually the seat found its place in Nippur, in central southern Mesopotamia, under the god Enlil in the third and early second millennia; and with the rise of Babylon and their god Marduk's exaltation to the head of the pantheon sometime in the second millennium, the central pantheon was moved to Babylon (Wiggermann: 1867-70).

This one representative, thumbnail description—which would obviously need some further clarification in a classroom presentation (and could itself eventually become the object of scrutiny)<sup>5</sup>—clearly shows how the broad social and cultural developments in Mesopotamian society are accompanied by changes in the perceptions of the divine realm. It also shows how the status of a god in the pantheon changed as political fortunes ebbed and flowed from one place to another. Religion and society go hand in hand.

The social and cultural embedded-ness of religion, however, is not solely manifested in the broad political developments of a region, of course. Local religious practice is also subject to social, cultural, and even environmental forces. For example, one of the oldest temples excavated in ancient Mesopotamia was dedicated to Enki and is located in the (then) marshy environs of the ancient city of Eridu, present day Abu Shahrain in southern Iraq. One of the principal sources of food in this city was fish and other aquatic creatures that were harvested from the nearby marshes. Thus, fishing was a major factor in the local economy. Is it an accident, therefore, that archaeologists have found remnants of fish offered on the altars in two different archaeological levels of the excavated temple (Late Ubaid, Levels VII and VI; Danti and Zettler)? Is it only chance that the city god, Enki, was symbolized in iconography by water, a fish, or a turtle (Galter: 104-110)? If we accept the idea that religion is

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<sup>5</sup> For other renditions of the religion of ancient Mesopotamia in English, see Bottéro 1992: 201-31; Bottéro 2001; and Jacobsen. See also Paul-Alain Beaulieu's entry in Johnston: 165-72 (and note that this volume contains other entries touching on religion by various scholars throughout pages 243-656). Despite the advances, there is still much interpretive work to be done in the field of ancient Mesopotamian religion.

socially and culturally embedded, then the answer is, of course, no. The reason the local economy is so well-represented in the cult offerings to the city god is because economy and religion are closely intertwined.

If students can accept this idea about Mesopotamia as exemplified in the admittedly *very* brief descriptions and generalizations offered above,<sup>6</sup> then they may be willing at least to entertain the idea that the same forces are at work in contemporary religious activity. Take, for example, the following question that strikes a note with many students in the Midwest: Is it an accident that women began to be ordained in mainline Protestant churches only after women were given the right to vote or did women's political empowerment eventually influence their ecclesiastical empowerment?<sup>7</sup> When one illustrates the idea under discussion with this contemporary question, especially after having given some historical examples from Mesopotamia, students should be tempted, at least, to see the question from a non-theological perspective—even students who believe the recent ordination of women represents the proper restoration of an early Christian practice.

## II

The role of mythmaking in politico-religious ideology is a concept rooted in a particular social theory of religion called social formation, which Burton Mack has articulated most clearly and applied fruitfully to Christian origins (see Mack 2000a; 2000b; 1995). In short, mythmaking is a socio-rhetorical strategy that social groups utilize to legitimate, authorize, and eventually reify their beliefs and institutions—essentially, their position in the world—to themselves and perhaps to others. Lincoln provides several interesting examples (1989: 15-50).

It is very difficult for students to accept the idea that we so-called “modern” individuals still invoke, use, adapt, or create myths in our everyday lives. But

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<sup>6</sup> Lest I do injustice to the assyriological data, I should say that Mesopotamian religious history is vast and the historical sources for some places and times can be almost an embarrassment of riches, as sources go for the ancient world. Thus, I emphasize that the above is but a sketch of a generalized history and a snapshot of one particular place; it cannot do full justice to Mesopotamian religion. Still, I am equally convinced that informed generalizations are the responsibility of specialists, whose work can be quite helpful to non-specialists and absolutely necessary for instructors of introductory level courses. Thus, a scholar who takes the time to read a few books and articles on Mesopotamian religion from the hand of a knowledgeable specialist, in my opinion, should be able to draw on Mesopotamian religious data confidently for examples in the classroom.

<sup>7</sup> For a similar point within a discussion of dealing with cultural anomalies (e.g., a female Anglican priest), see Bowie: 52.

because ancient Mesopotamian religion is a religion in which most students would expect to find myth operating, it offers the perfect backdrop for understanding how mythmaking works in other cultures—and thus creates an analogy that may help them to see it in their own culture.<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate the idea of mythmaking in politico-religious ideology, I have chosen what is probably the most famous cultic celebration known from ancient Mesopotamia: the Akitu or New Year's Festival. This multi-day rite involved various ritual activities in the temple, a procession of the city god to a house outside the city, a ritual battle there, a procession back to the god's own temple a couple of days later, the king's "taking of the hand" of the god, and the god's pronouncements of the fates (i.e., that the king will continue to reign over the land). On the fourth day of the Akitu festival, at least according to some first millennium sources, the famous *Enuma Elish* was recited. This myth depicted the defeat of Tiamat, the embodiment of the forces of chaos, by Babylon's national god, Marduk. We need not go into the details of this festival further in this context; the main outline is generally accessible in the various handbooks and several specialized works (Cohen: 400-453; Pettinato; Pongratz-Leisten 1994, note the review of Lambert; Pongratz-Leisten 1998-2001; and Bell: 17-20). What is important to my point here is the following: Evidence shows that Sennacherib implemented an Akitu festival in his own capital city after he destroyed the city of Babylon in 689 BCE and replaced the Babylonian god Marduk, who was central to the Akitu in Babylon, with Assyria's supreme god, Ashur. In fact, Sennacherib went so far as to have the entire *Enuma Elish* re-written to suit the new setting and the new Assyrian intention. Where the myth mentioned Marduk, the new Assyrian recension read Ashur. Never mind that the text of the *Enuma Elish* had glorified Marduk for hundreds of years by this time in Mesopotamian history. Never mind that it would have been well-known to the elite that Marduk was *really* the star of the "original" ritual and the ancient myth. Sennacherib had destroyed Babylon. There was not going to be an Akitu festival in the venerable culture capital because Babylon was in ruins.<sup>9</sup> In order to maintain continuity with the tradition, Sennacherib decided to create a new Akitu festival with a new divine hero. Moreover—and this is probably the real intention of the Assy-

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<sup>8</sup> For the exact reverse pedagogical use of analogy, i.e., moving from relatively modern times back to ancient, see Chance.

<sup>9</sup> I should note that the city was eventually rebuilt and did again celebrate the New Year's festival with Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*. In fact, our best sources for the New Year's festival are from the later period. I am speaking in the text above from a view immediately after Sennacherib's conquest of Babylon.



ian Akitu—holding the Akitu in the Assyrian capital would exalt Assyria's position to that of a New Babylon. Thus, the re-tooling of a traditional myth supported a political program.<sup>10</sup>

This is an explicit and deliberate case. There are, however, other, more subtle examples that one could cite. For example, one could discuss the Neo-Assyrian kings' self-presentation as an embodiment of Ninurta, a warrior god, to legitimate imperial expansion (Annus: 94-101). With regard to the Akitu, if one makes students understand that large bodies of the population of the Assyrian capital would not have traveled far beyond the hinterland of their city and thus would not know much about what was happening in the rest of the world, and, if one can help students imagine that, had the new Akitu ritual continued to be celebrated in the Assyrian capital, within a couple of generations this new ritual would have felt like a "natural" or expected part of the capital city's reality, then the students will begin to see how even deliberate deployments of myths to shape a culture and their expectations can become a part of the society at an unconscious level.

After helping students recognize how mythmaking works in a culture completely unrelated to their own time and space, it may be easier for students to consider how mythmaking is operating in their own. After a few other examples, it may even be easier for students to engage works much closer to their own lives, works, for example, like Richard T. Hughes' *Myths America Lives By*, which examines major myths that have shaped American social, cultural, and political history from its origins to the present—myths such as the Chosen Nation, the Christian Nation, and the Millennial Nation, or Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (2003), which analyzes the role of religion in the 9/11-related rhetoric of Osama Bin Laden, George W. Bush, and Jerry Falwell, or Morris Fiorina's *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, which argues that the notion of a culture war in America is a rhetorical construction being used by political elites and journalists to further various agendas—agendas he believes that are disconnected from the living practice of average Americans.

### III

The concept of the insider versus outsider perspective is rather simple in its basic formulation: Those who engage in a practice or believe a particular idea

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<sup>10</sup> For a similar point about the Akitu festival and the *Enuma Elish* as it relates specifically to Hellenistic Babylonia (though now somewhat dated), see Smith 1978: 68-74.

view it differently from those who do not so engage or who are not so inclined to believe. This definition here is perhaps simplistic, but, as with the other concepts, the intention here is simply to illustrate, not to theorize (see rather McCutcheon 1999 and Headland, *et al.*).

Unlike the other concepts illustrated above, it is not so difficult for students to determine where they stand with regard to their own specific religious practice or beliefs if they have any: they are insiders and often confess it quite proudly. The difficulty for them will more likely lie in their inability to accept the validity of the outsider's view of these same practices or beliefs. The following is an attempt to illustrate how using Mesopotamian data can effectively bring this to students' attention while also making them realize the privileged treatment insider's grant to their own views. Although an essential idea in religious studies, an appreciation for the insider/outsider differentiation will have ramifications in many areas of the student's thinking on culture.

The illustration for this concept comes from Mesopotamian prophetic texts in which a deity, Ishtar, speaks to an Assyrian king. The following examples are generally representative of the Neo-Assyrian corpus as a whole. Ishtar says:

Fear not, king! I have spoken to you, I have not slandered you! I have inspired you with confidence, I have not caused you to come to shame! I will lead you safely across the River. (Parpola: 7-8 [1.6 iii 30'-iv 4]; Nissinen: 107)

Again from Ishtar we hear:

Do not trust in humans! Lift up your eyes and focus on me! I am Ishtar of Arbela. I have reconciled Ashur to you. I protected you when you were a baby. Fear not; praise me! (Parpola: 6 [1.4 ii 27'-33']; Nissinen: 105)

There are many other Mesopotamian prophetic texts that could be cited here. For the present purposes, the two selections offered above have been chosen because they sound familiar and foreign at the same time. The "fear not" refrain, which shows up frequently in Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts, and the "do not trust in humans" admonition sound quite biblical (for the former compare, e.g., Isaiah 41:10 and 43:1 and for the latter, Psalm 146:3 and Isaiah 31:1). But several other phrases and certainly the invocation of the Mesopotamian deities are exotic to most people's ears today.

When I have presented these texts to students, I usually ask the students' for their own ideas about the origins of the divine messages. I ask them if they believe the Mesopotamian deity actually spoke the words of the prophecy through the prophet or prophetess. Then, playing off the old revivalistic ges-

ture of acceptance, I ask for a “show of hands”—which implicitly makes a point for some in the class. I suppose there have been no outspoken neopagans in my classes because no hands go up; no one believes the goddess Ishtar spoke these revelations. I then ask: “Who told the prophet or prophetess to say these words? Where do you think they got their message?” One brave soul may offer something to this effect: “They made them up.”

After explaining that I do not think we must necessarily impugn the integrity of the Mesopotamian prophets, that is, we need not think the prophets were deliberately trying to deceive their audience, I explain that we may understand the origins of the revelations in this manner because, of course, we do not adhere to the Mesopotamians’ ideas about the gods. They believed in their religion and worldview; they were looking at it from the “inside.” We, on the other hand, do not believe and are thus on the outside looking in.

Ancient Mesopotamian culture, of course, is geographically and chronologically proximate to two very well-known and privileged cultures within much of contemporary religious tradition, namely, ancient Israel via the Hebrew Bible and ancient Arabia via the Quran. For the present purpose, I will focus on Israel. But as mentioned above, Mesopotamian religion has its uses for understanding religion based in the Quran, too.

After students have adopted a critical approach to ancient Mesopotamian religion, and prophecy more specifically, making comparisons to ancient Israelite religion as presented by the Hebrew Bible sets the significant similarities of the two squarely before the students and requires them to make a conscious interpretive decision as to how they will treat this comparative data (at least, in an academic setting): will they privilege biblical Israel (i.e., Scripture) as an insider or treat it as an outsider?

With regard to prophecy, I then ask them: Who do you think spoke to Jeremiah or Isaiah? Whence did the prophets’ message come? How shall we understand the phrase “thus says the Lord” in light of the contemporary locution “thus says Ishtar”? I do not solicit answers; I only ask the questions. Moreover, I certainly do not see it as my responsibility to persuade them of one answer or another in terms of their religious beliefs and practice. I only intend to assist them in their educational experience of the academic study of religion by making them see that such a decision is necessary.

## **Conclusion**

I realize that my choice of data may not be immediately practical for many religious studies professors who know little to nothing about Mesopotamian

religion—something easily remedied given the references attached to this essay. Even so, my main point is simply this: if data may be chosen on a purely pragmatic basis, there is infinite room for creative and strategic choices in the classroom. Due to its position in and significance for human history, and its relationship to privileged cultures of contemporary religious import, ancient Mesopotamian religion offers a very interesting and fruitful body of data to illustrate several critical ideas in the study of religion. Moreover, it can do this in an original and non-threatening manner. These are qualities that should commend this data to pedagogical development and utilization.<sup>11</sup>

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