



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

I'm From Faith: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Literacy

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Abstract:

The goal of this project is to integrate a richer discussion of religious identity and belonging into an existing full year course focusing on human rights issues occurring from power imbalances. The course aims to develop students' cultural literacy and cultivate an appreciation for diversity in American society.

In the "Introduction to Cultural Literacy" unit of the course, students will read and reflect on George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I Am From" (full text is below), and discuss the importance of both religious and cultural traditions and experiences in shaping our sense of self and community membership.

Classroom Community and Student Learning Styles:

Diverse class of high school students varying in race, religion, ethnic background and first languages. The social justice class attracts students of extremely diverse learning abilities and styles.

This unit has a cross-curricular focus which is required by New Jersey state standards. Lessons and activities are geared toward all levels and styles and learning. In addition, the nature of the course encourages open dialogue about race, culture and other identity issues. Finally, the unit provides a method of examining cultural compositions which is accessible to diverse learning styles.

Assumptions and preparatory activities:

A significant amount of time will be spent on teambuilding and creating a safe space for class discussions and dialogue. The students will have already created their "conversation norms" and would have previously engaged in numerous discussions and sharing activities. Still, all sharing is voluntary. Classes are very diverse with a range of religions, races, ethnic backgrounds, languages and socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, the classroom is certainly a microcosm of the community.

Prior activities would include but are not limited to: the “What is Dialogue” chapter from [Generation Global’s *Essentials of Dialogue* handbook](#); group development questions, ice breakers and basic social justice terminology such as “social group,” “oppression,” “privilege”, etc. In addition, students would have had activities that focus on listening skills and questioning techniques such as the ASKeR analysis (also from *Essentials of Dialogue*).

Key concepts/Enduring understandings:

- Develop a framework for understanding cultural diversity which includes religion.
- Develop listening skills and improve communication
- To increase awareness of some of the different experiences.

Activities and Procedures:

Part I – What does it mean to be “from” somewhere or something

1. Ask students: When someone asks, “Where are you from?” How might people respond? Write students’ answers on chart paper.
2. Have one student read aloud an example of an “I am from” poem. Ask for thoughts and reflections.
 - a. Have another student read another poem. Discuss.
 - b. Have students read silently to themselves one more.
3. **Process.** Possible processing questions:
 - What are the commonalties? (These could also be literary techniques.)
 - Which poem resonated with you the most?
 - What do these poems tell about their authors? Beliefs? Experiences? Culture?
 - Which poems talked about Religion? How do you know?
 - Where are they “from?”
 - What does “from” mean?
4. Revisit the question -- “What does “from” mean in the context of I am from.” Write responses on new chart paper. (New list might include, experiences, culture, religion, language, physical place etc.)

Ask students to compare/contrast the lists from before and after the poems were read.

Part II – Write an “I Am From” poem.

1. Based on the sample poems and brainstormed list students, will brainstorm ideas of their own about where they are from – students are free to include as much or as little as they wish. Using a template, write their own “where I’m from poems.”
2. Students voluntarily read their poem to the class. Students are invited to ask questions of the person who read their poem keeping in mind the ASKeR analysis for their questions.

3. Process:

- What are all the different aspects of identity?
- How does religion factor into one’s identity?
- How did it feel to read your poem?
- How did it feel to listen to others’ poems?
- What was it like to write the poem?
- How did it feel to be asked questions about you and your poem?
- What was it like to ask questions?
- What did you learn from this activity in general? What did you learn about yourself? Others?

4. Connection to social justice issues relevant to religion:

- What are the stereotypes associated with some of the social identities shared in the poems? Religious identities?
- How does media represent various religions? Examples?
- What particular benefits/challenges arise from religious diversity?

Part III – Expand examination and discussion to local community.

1. Engage students in small group discussions using the following question: “How can we use what we learned to examine the cultural within our community?” Students from each group will report out about what was discussed. Ideas will be posted on chart paper.
2. Walk around community and have students point out observations – local businesses, foods, houses of worship, etc. Go to the Roselle Park Museum. Students will be given either a chart or questions to jot down notes about what they saw or heard. The handout will be based on what they discussed in class.

3. Students will be in new groups to discuss what they discovered. Possible questions: “What did you see? Hear? Notice? What does this tell us about our community?”
4. Students create list on chart paper to answer: “Where is Roselle Park from?”
5. What did you notice in the community that you would label as religious?
6. What is the role of religion in our community?
7. Small or large group discussion depending on student engagement and comfort level. What are the benefits and challenges that arise from living in a small very diverse community? Which have you personally seen, felt or experienced?

Teaching Points:

- Communities are formed based on a variety of factors.
- People have multiple identities.
- Diversity comes in many forms
- Diverse groups of people come together to form communities with distinct characteristics.

Part IV – Develop understanding and appreciation for diverse communities beyond hometown.

Generation Global: Video conference with another US school. Perhaps collaborate with the teacher to do “Where I’m from” activity as well. Schools exchange poems from student volunteers. ASKeR question analysis can be used to navigate dialogue between schools. Use the idea of “from” to discuss religious and cultural diversity in our community. Could possibly give copies of “I am from poems” to other school. Questions for other school based on types of questions used for I am from activity in our classroom. Teacher would review with students what it felt like to share in the class and to be mindful and sensitive when asking questions of students from other school.

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.

“Where I Am From” – George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--
snapped before I budded --
leaf-fall from the family tree.

For more information about George Ella Lyon's work, and suggestions for teaching with her poem,
see <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>