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***Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project***

## **Performing Dialogue on Stage – Building Understanding in Class**

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### **Abstract:**

The goal of this curriculum project is to have my students research several world religions through a variety of methods and experiences, and then demonstrate this understanding by creating a one-act play that puts young people of different faith traditions in dialogue around a current events issue as they seek to reach a place of understanding from different perspectives.

This small group project will be the culminating assignment and assessment of unit focused on religious diversity in literature, politics, and everyday life. This unit is part of a 9<sup>th</sup> grade English I curriculum at a public high school in Vermont. The curriculum is loosely focused on a coming-of-age theme, which we address through a broad range of fiction and non-fiction literature. I believe that part of the coming-of-age experience is learning to be respectful in listening to the voices of others: trying to understand their background and perspectives. Knowing someone's different religious and cultural background can greatly assist in both understanding and reaching compromise on issues in the world today.

### **Essential Questions:**

How does religion affect one's world view and actions?

What current issues or concerns are impacted by people's views or perceived views of religion?

How can dialogue among people with different religious perspectives bring understanding?

## Unit Outline

The one-act play assignment will be incorporated into a current non-fiction unit on genocides. Students choose between reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *First They Killed my Father* by Luong Ung about the Holocaust and Cambodian genocides. We will explore the backgrounds of Judaism and Buddhism as a class a part of this unit. At the end of the readings/discussions, students will consider local or global problems in the world today that somehow tie into concerns related to religious differences. Students will then choose several religions to explore with more depth in relation to one of these local or global concerns and conduct research that will lead to the creation of a one-act play where they put people of different religious practices/beliefs together to dialogue around one of these social issues, in an effort to bring their characters to some level of common understanding around the issue.

The unit will proceed as follows:

1. I introduce *Night* and *First They Killed My Father* (as well as a brief intro to Nazism and the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia where students in each group research several websites to gather facts and then share them out to the whole class). Then students will choose which book they will read (some may read both) and read the first 20 to 30 pages in their assigned book before coming back to the next class to do number 2.
2. I will put Judaism and Buddhism on the whiteboard and ask students to list what they know or think they know about each religion underneath the topic to gauge their current level of understanding.
3. We will then look at Buddhism (I will create a powerpoint overview which may include a bit of this [Vermont Public Radio story on Buddhism in VT](#) and then ask students to do some research in pairs. Approximately how many Buddhist Centers are there in Vermont? What different kinds are there? Each pair will research one type of Buddhism through the websites of the temples/retreat centers in Vermont and report out on them. Once we have shared this overview of Buddhism in general, I will ask the students: Why do you think the Khmer Rouge prohibited the practice of Buddhism and killed monks?
4. We will then look at Judaism (I will create a powerpoint overview again) then ask students to do some research in pairs again. Approximately how many Jewish Synagogues and centers are there in Vermont? What percent of Vermont's population is Jewish. Each pair will research one of the Jewish Center's or synagogues and report out about what they discovered about them. We will discuss the variety in American Judaism. Once this overview has been shared, we will connect back to the history of the Jews and why Hitler targeted them, among others.
5. Students will then, over the course of the next few weeks, read their assigned book primarily as homework but some in class. We will do a few in class activities such as assigning students

an identity (i.e. Jew, handicapped, Nazi officer, Catholic, gypsy all of specific ages etc.) during the Holocaust and determining what would have happened to them during the Nazi regime and then the same with an identity during the Khmer Rouge takeover in Cambodia (former government official, Buddhist Monk, former military, teacher, French speaker, peasant, city business owner etc) and what would have happened to them based on the philosophies of these governments.

6. We will begin exploring religious differences through the “Call to Prayer” (or something like it) [case study from The Pluralism Project](#). We will consider the different stakeholders and their perspectives and listen to the Call to Prayer as well as some church bells as a part of this exploration.
7. I will ask the students- what other issues related to religion or presumed religious practice could bring up concern or questions/misunderstandings in a community? If they do not respond right away, I will specifically bring up current events or questions to spark ideas.
8. I hope to be able to have my students participate in some [Generation Global](#) learning opportunities first by learning how to conduct respectful dialogues and then to discuss issues through discussion boards or videoconferences with people in a different country and of a different faith. This would be a part of their research to learn the background of a faith and culture and how to dialogue about current issues with someone coming from a different viewpoint.

### **The One-Act Play Assignment:**

1. Once the students have finished reading the books and we have done the supporting activities noted, as well as some others, we will brainstorm topics through the essential question: What current issues or concerns are impacted by people’s views or perceived views of a religion or religions? After a list is made, students will break into groups, based on their interests to create a list of “actors” in each of the scenarios as well as their backgrounds. They will determine what they would need to research (creating a list of questions) to represent each person’s perspective. They would then conduct the research to answer those questions.
2. I will then discuss or read excerpts from [Fires in the Mirror about the 1991 Crown Heights riots by Anna Deavere Smith](#), and [other examples of one act plays](#), to give the students models.
3. Students will then work in groups on the One Act Play assignment described in detail on the following two pages.

## Exploring Religious Diversity through a One-Act Play

### Essential Questions:

How does religion affect one's world view and actions?

What current issues or concerns are impacted by people's views or perceived views of religion?

How can dialogue among people with different religious perspectives bring understanding?

Different worldviews often bring judgment and misunderstanding. Your assignment is to explore a current local or global concern through a **dialogue between teens from different religious or cultural perspectives**. In order to accomplish this, you will have to choose a scenario (we will brainstorm ideas in class) with your group and determine the different "actors (from different religious perspectives)" involved and research the beliefs and practices associated with this tradition (see research ideas below) in order to accurately represent each person's view.

Remember that your objective is to create a brief play (one act) in which an issue is discussed (possibly in a judgmental or ignorant manner at first if the actors do not have a true understanding of the beliefs or practices of the people they are talking to or about). Your goal is for the characters to reach a level of understanding of the other person's or people's viewpoint(s). This does not mean that the characters have to agree, but that they should come to an understanding about the other's point of view.

Keep in mind that you will need to choose a plausible plot line as well as setting (i.e. this conversation could really happen) and use dialogue and stage directions to move the play along in an appropriate manner. While it is realistic that there could be conflict around misunderstandings and misconceptions, keep this dialogue appropriate for school. **You must include at least two different religious/cultural perspectives in your dialogue, but can include more depending upon your topic.**

### Research Avenues:

You may use any of the following means to research the background religions (note that you must have at least two sources for each):

1. A personal interview with someone who practices that faith. (Ask questions like- is there a scripture that guides your faith? If so, what is it and what role does it have in your religious practice? What requirements are there for worship and life in your faith? What does a religious service look like? How does your faith affect your daily life? )
2. Online research (no Wikipedia) – remember to have valid sources such as the website of a local religious community or a local or national religious organization (see me or one of the librarians if you need help).
3. A visit to a local religious facility (with your own observations and possibly an interview of someone there as well).

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2. Writing: **Produce clear and coherent writing for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.**

**Anchor Standard:** Text Types and Purposes:

**2c. (CC W 3a-e) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, precise words/dialogue and well-structured event sequences.**

**Content:**

1 Beginning	2 Approaching	3 Proficient	4 Distinguished
I can identify the elements of fiction. I can create a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end that includes relevant details, a setting and characters.	I can create a narrative that uses the elements of fiction, relates a sequence of events, and includes relevant details.	I can create a compelling narrative that uses the elements of fiction (dialogue, pacing, a clear plot line) and , is intentionally structured, shows an awareness of purpose and audience, and includes sensory language.	I can create a compelling narrative that manipulates the elements of fiction and artfully incorporates sensory language and figurative language.

Performance Task Notes: At least two different religious perspectives must be accurately and appropriately presented in the play. Your objective is to have your characters come to some kind of an understanding of each other's views by the end of the play even though they may have different beliefs or practices.

## Common Core Standards for the Unit

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A

Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.C

Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E

Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

In addition, students will also work on the Speaking and Listening Standards as a part of the research process for this project.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.B

Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D](#)

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

***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](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***