



INTERFAITH
CENTER OF NEW YORK



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

A Trio of Lenses on Religion: Individual, Neighborhood, and Community

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Abstract

This project serves to engage students in activities and community interaction that act as “windows-and-mirrors” into religious traditions and lived practices. In doing so, students will not only learn more about religion as a lived practice, but the individual, neighborhood, and community lenses will encourage embodied knowledge about and empathy for their fellow global citizens.

Curricular Context

For at least the past 15 years, we have facilitated a six-week World Religions project for the first-year students. We go on site visits (Noor Islamic Cultural Center, KTC Buddhist Temple, Congregation Tifereth Israel, etc.) and have guest speakers (Christianity panel, Druid priest, etc.); however, I have grown concerned that the students aren’t getting a personal look into what religion looks like in lived lives. While at site visits, we usually get a tour and a run-down of basic doctrine (no service observation or participation), but the students are not getting an affective educational experience about topic that, by its very nature, is personal. By incorporating the voices of the community into the project, the students will not only learn more about religion as a lived practice, but this additional lens will encourage not just knowledge about, but also empathy for, their fellow global citizens. I like to look at these types of activities as “windows-and-mirrors,” in that the students will get a window into other religions (and their cultural contexts), while also seeing similarities reflected back.

School Community

This collection of activities is for a group of self-selected (and parent-supported) juniors and seniors who have opted to take part in the Mosaic program, a two-year, half-day, humanities program that serves artistic, intellectually-curious, and socially-minded students from 10 different districts in the Columbus Ohio area. The students range from “successful” to at-risk, from the wealthy districts to the free-lunch dominant schools, and are a diverse mixture of sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, and class. The students tend to skew liberal, mostly because of the nature of the program – project-based, experiential, and student-directed. One of the most unique aspects of

Mosaic is that we have a mobile campus - meaning, the students self-transport so we are free to use the entire community as our classroom. One day we might be meeting at our home base downtown, the next day we could be meeting at the Wexner Center for the Arts to study social issues in art, and the next day we could be doing a haiku workshop at a local park.

Goals

This collection of activities is, at its most basic, a variety of “anticipation guides” to kick-off the project. They are designed to enhance engagement, on a personal level, and to have the students start the project looking at religion through a personal lens. My hope is that such assignments will “hook” the students at first and then, throughout the rest of the project, we will move from the micro study to a macro study of religious groups and beliefs.

Activities

1. *My Family + Religion Autobiography* (individual lens):

As a first day activity, students will contemplate the questions: What is religion? What is spirituality? What makes something sacred? They will write down their thoughts and observations in their “monos” - notebooks we hand out at the beginning of the year for them to record ideas, reflections, questions, etc. The students themselves came up with the term “mono,” a combination of Mosaic and notebook; this term is part of the community language that is organically created throughout our times together.

For this narrative writing assignment, students will write the “autobiography” of religion, or lack thereof, in their family. Students will then reflect on how their family’s beliefs and practices impact their own lives. To accomplish this task, students will interview a parent (or caregiver) and, if possible, a grandparent, grandaunt, or someone of an older generation. Additionally, the students will do a religion-walk of their own house, looking for objects that may be considered religious, spiritual, and/or sacred. Students will discuss these objects within their narrative, as well as include pictures in-bedded in the text. Students will share highlights of their research with small groups that will be created by self-identified “degrees” of religiosity, ending up with groups including some who claim “very religious” with others who claim none and everything in between.

Following this sharing activity, there will be large group discussion that will not only examine the students’ findings, but also seeking to put them in a broader socio-political context. For example, were grandparents more religious than the current generation? Is this reflected in trends with the state, the region, and nationally?

*note: The World Religions project is the second project of the year. During the first project, the Perspectives project, students participate in workshops designed to teach and model ways of communication that are respectful and compassionate.

2. *Neighborhood Collection* (neighborhood lens):

The students in Mosaic come from every corner, cul de sac, and quarter of Columbus. Many have only hung out in their respective “bubble” – the Bexley bubble, the Grandview bubble, and the like. Therefore, this activity will serve two purposes: to first encourage the students to explore their own neighborhoods for evidence of religiosity, spirituality, and the sacred and second, through class sharing, to introduce the rest of the class to their slice of the city, thereby continuing to build community.

The class will be divided into groups by neighborhood. Those that are represented by five or more students will be broken down even further. Groups will work together to walk their respective beats and document evidence of religion, spirituality, and the sacred. Throughout their journeys, students will be directed to have conversation and debate about the objects, places, and spaces that have attracted their attention.

Following this activity, student group will come back to class and edit their documentation down to five images which will they will then present via projected slideshow to their classmates. This component will also encourage discussion re: religious spaces and the like as the groups will be “forced” to edit down to the images that “best” represent their findings.

3. *Just what is religion anyway?* (community lens):

The students will continue answering the questions, “What is religion? What is spirituality? What makes something sacred?” and then, in groups of three based on proximity of seating, they will discuss their writing. Following this mini-discussion, the student trios will go outside into the nearby community and “Humans of New York”-style ask people the same questions. One person will take a photo, the other will ask the questions, while the third will act as note-taker.

Our program is located is what is called The Discovery District of downtown Columbus because there is a college, an art school, the Columbus Museum of Art, and the Main Library all within a couple of blocks. Therefore, many people who walk the area will most likely be open to helping students.

After this adventure around Columbus, the students will return to class, look at their monos and see if they want to re-evaluate what they wrote, or if their ideas have remained the same. Following this, there will be new discussion amongst the three. To wrap up this part of the exercise, the trio will identify three main ideas and two questions that have arisen out of this activity. One person will then be chosen to report out to the whole group.

Students will continue to collect answers and photos throughout the project. At the end of the project, the students give presentation to which local religious clergy and practitioners are invited, as well as their parents. For this event, each student will choose two-or-three of their favorite photos and quotes, print and caption them, and hang them in the presentation space to provide an art show component to the day. A “Humans of Columbus” exhibition (patterned off of the [“Humans of New York” project](#).

Assessment

For activities 1 & 2, the students will self-assess. This is a common part of our school culture. For activity 3, students will be assessed based on fulfillment of requirements (page count, mechanics, organization, at least two family interviews, etc.), as well as depth of personal reflection.

Ohio State Standards

Writing Standards:

W.912.1c Communicate information on a specific topic with relevant facts.

W.912.2c Communicate facts and details on a given topic.

W.912.3a Generate written paragraphs that include narrative elements (dialogue, pacing, description); a logical sequence of events; and a conclusion (e.g., what was experienced, observed or resolved).

W.912.4a Generate a written text (paragraph or story) following the conventions of a persuasive, informative or narrative task. W.912.5a Plan, edit and revise writing with a focus on the purpose of the document.

W.912.7a Research and collect information from multiple sources to answer a question or solve a problem.

W.912.9a Gather information on a specific topic and use the information to support analysis, reflection or research.

Speaking and Listening Standards:

SL.912.1a Initiate and participate in discussions about grade-level/age-appropriate topics and text with diverse partners. · Form and express an opinion on a topic. · Respond thoughtfully to others' comments.

SL.912.5a Integrate multimedia and visual components to enhance a presentation.

Art Standards:

1PE Interpret social and cultural contexts to develop personal meaning in visual imagery.

2PE Interpret and evaluate the way a theme or meaning in an artwork expresses the social, political or cultural context.

3PE Compare and contrast universal themes and sociopolitical issues in artworks from different cultures and historical periods.

4PE Demonstrate the ability to form and defend judgments regarding the relationships between artists and culture. 5PE Envision and explain how technology can impact visual art and literacy.

6PE Apply self-direction, independence and a purposed approach when defining and solving a visual design problem.

*for my purposes, read "artworks" as artifacts

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on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.***