



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Exploring Lived Religion with Guest Speakers

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Abstract

This curriculum project will help teachers integrate faith-based guest speakers from a variety of backgrounds (clergy members, scholars, lay leaders, students) into a secular public school classroom, in a way that honors the spirit of the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution and fosters respect for global and local religious diversity.

It will provide an explanatory handout for speakers, students, and parents about the benefits of teaching the concepts of “lived religion” in the classroom, while highlighting some the constitutional concerns. In addition, there will be some general guidelines for guest speakers, along with some suggestions for student activities designed to help engagement with the speakers that is respectful and appropriate.

The project and accompanying handout was initially developed for use in an 11th and 12th grade “World Religions and Cultures” elective course in a public high school.

Prerequisites to Inviting Faith-Based Speakers

It is imperative for teachers to familiarize themselves with all school/district policies, guidelines, and restrictions for invited guest speakers into your class. Some schools may require background checks, parental permission, or state identification for entry into the building. It is important to start by obtaining proper permission; notifying parents, administration, and/or other stakeholders; and communicating any school/district policies to the guest speakers.

Before a faith-based guest speaker is brought into class to share his or her religious beliefs, values, or experiences, students should have a basic understanding of the history and core doctrines of the speaker’s tradition.

Process of Inviting Faith-Based Speakers

Before a faith-based guest speaker comes into the classroom, students and teachers should work together to establish climate of respect and safety for discussions of religious diversity. The Introductory training module for the [Tony Blair Faith Foundation’s Face to Faith program](#) is an excellent resource for doing so. In particular, the Face to Faith Principles of RESPECT, the ASKeR model for posing respectful questions, the “Okay or Offensive” handout, and the activity asking

students “What does respect look, sound, and feel like?” are all highly recommended. Teachers may need sign up with Face to Faith to use these activities/handouts. See the website linked just above for more details.

A handout like the one included below, “Exploring Lived Religion in a Public School Classroom: Guidelines for Guest Speakers and Students,” should be distributed to and discussed with students, parents, and guest speakers. Be sure to leave time for processing and discussion, so any questions or concerns can be explored well in advance. ([A editable copy of the handout below is available in this Google Doc – feel free to modify as necessary for your own course.](#))

Both students and guest speakers should be clear about the focus of the dialogue. It is especially important to give speakers a clear focus, with a list of suggested questions and themes. Students can also be guided with a few essential questions. If there are any controversial topics for students and guest speakers to *avoid*, these limits should be communicated explicitly in advance. If there’s going to be a free exchange, Q & A, or conversation among guest speakers and students, it is best to have students prepare those questions ahead of time. If possible, those questions should be given to the guest speaker in advance, so they can prepare responses, ask for clarification if necessary, or let you know of questions they are not comfortable with.

After the guest speaker leaves, there should be some type of debriefing conversation with students, along with time to process and absorb any new understandings of “lived religion.” This may be done in a variety of ways depending on time allotted. Some methods to consider are: class discussions (centered on essential questions), small group discussions, individual journaling, or a formal written reflection.

A thank you note to the guest speaker from the students is a respectful and appropriate way to acknowledge their appreciation for the speaker’s time, energy, and insights.

Learning Standards for Programs with Guest Speakers

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

National Historical Thinking Standards

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation: Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered, new voices heard, and new interpretations broached.

Exploring Lived Religion in a Public School Classroom: Guidelines for Guest Speakers and Students

In this course, the emphasis is placed on students gaining a sense of religious awareness and religious literacy. After studying the histories and core doctrines of various religions, guest speakers will be invited into the classroom to help students gain a richer understanding of everyday religious practice and experience, or “lived religion.” These guest speakers may visit the classroom in person or online. They may offer a formal presentation, participate in a panel discussion, be the subject of a student-led interview, or be invited into the classroom for another purpose determined by the teacher. Since sharing one’s religious or cultural background can be a very intimate, personal experience, there are some guidelines and boundaries that need to be established for speakers and their audience.

In order to understand the constitutional and pedagogic guidelines for the study of religion in a public school, please take the time to review this handout. If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to ask for clarification.

What does the development of religious *awareness* include? An understanding of:

- Core doctrines/beliefs
- Founder(s)
- Spread/Expansion
- Texts
- Rituals/Holidays
- Lived Religion

What is involved in the study of “Lived Religion”?

- Going beyond stereotypes
- Going beyond the “text,” or off the “grid” of core doctrines, beliefs and practices, since religion is not static and is constantly evolving
- Understanding complexity and internal diversity within organized religion
- Finding commonalities between religions
- Learning about *real* life, *present day* practices/beliefs
- Hearing inside understandings, getting inside hearts/minds of people with religion traditions

What does religious literacy (“an ability to discern and analyze the intersections of religion w/social, political and cultural life”) look like in a public school?

- Does not press for *acceptance* of any religion
- Focuses on the *study* not practice of religion
- Promotes “respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.”

Adopted from the [American Academy of Religion’s Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States](#).

Is teaching about religion in public schools constitutional?

- Yes! In the 1963 case of [Abington v. Schempp](#), the Supreme Court banned devotional Bible study in public schools, but ruled (citing both the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the 1st Amendment) that:
 - “Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”
 - The government may not establish a “religion of secularism” by opposing or showing hostility to religion.
 - And in Justice Brennan’s concurring opinion: “The holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history. Indeed, whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion. To what extent, and at what points in the curriculum, religious materials should be cited are matters which the courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation's public schools.”
- Over the past few decades a “New Consensus” educational framework has developed regarding the study of religion in public schools, which holds:
 - The Supreme Court has made clear that the study of religion in public schools is constitutional.
 - The study of religion is tremendously important if students are to be educated about our history and culture.
 - Public schools must teach about religion objectively or neutrally; their purpose must be to educate students about a variety of religious traditions, not to indoctrinate them into any particular tradition

Adapted from [Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum](#) (ASCD and First Amendment Center, 1998), pp. 36-7.

For relevant Supreme Court Rulings, see also: www.firstamendmentschools.org.

What approaches are used to study religion in American public schools?

- Respect for all religious facts as experiential “phenomena,” rather than as items that are intrinsically true or false
- Synthesizing these facts through the comparative analysis of patterns
- Identifying what it is about religious facts that makes them religious or sacred
- Analyzing sociologically how religion impacts people and society
- Understanding religious expression in terms of their contexts without personal judgment

What topics and approaches are *not appropriate* for faith-based guest speakers in public school classrooms?

- ***Students cannot be coerced into any religious practice, prayer, or activity.***

Lee v. Weisman (1992): “at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise.”

Thus, do not ask for student volunteers to join in any type of religious exercise.

- ***Preaching, proselytizing, and recruitment are not allowed in public school classrooms.***

Everson v. Board of Education (1947): “Neither can [the government] force nor influence a person to . . . to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.”

Thus, do not extend any invitation, in writing or verbally, for students to join in your religious practices or adapt your religious beliefs.

- ***Promoting one religion over another is not allowed, even in an academic discussion.***

Avoid comparisons to other religions and stick to your personal experiences within the topic you are addressing.

Lynch v. Donnelly (1984): “Endorsement sends a message to non-adherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community. . . . What is crucial is that the government practices not have the effect of communicating a message of government endorsement or disapproval of religion.”

- ***In an effort to reflect the internal diversity of all religions, do not speak on behalf of all members of your faith community or tradition.***

Avoid statements such as “Hindus believe...” Focus instead on what *you believe*. In a “lived religions” model, the answer to many questions about religious practice or belief is “it depends who you ask.”

Thus, please use “I” language to reflect on your personal perspectives and experiences. Use phrases like “In my experience...” and “I believe...” instead of generalizing to the entire spectrum of any given religion.

What is the proper behavior for students when addressing guest speakers?

- Students should introduce themselves to guest speakers, especially when asking a question.
- Students should thank guest speakers, expressing their appreciation both verbally and in writing.
- Students should respect the religious beliefs, traditions, and experiences of all guest speakers.
- Permission should be asked to take pictures and/or ask very personal questions. (ie, “Is it okay if I ask you a question about...”)

What types of questions are appropriate for students to ask guest speakers?

- Students should ask general, open ended questions instead of pointed/arguable questions that may make the speaker feel uncomfortable.
- Students should avoid questions with implied *statements* or embedded *assumptions*. (ie. “Isn’t it true that Islam is a sexist tradition?” or “Don’t Hindus worship idols?”)
- Students should ask one clear, concise question at a time, as opposed to a string of interrelated questions. If possible, questions should be discussed in advance and reworded if necessary.
- Students should listen to all guest speakers’ presentations carefully, and frame their questions appropriately. Avoid asking questions that have already been answered.
- If a student needs additional clarification on a particular topic, they should frame the question without judgment or critique of a speaker’s presentation. (ie, “I’m not sure I understand. Can you explain that another way?”)
- If a speaker seems to get uncomfortable about any particular topic, allow them safe space to shift to a new topic.
- Even if a speaker gives permission for students to “ask me anything,” questions must still be framed in an appropriate and respectful manner, and answers must stay within the bounds of the 1st Amendment.

May students opt out of a conversation if they don’t feel comfortable with the guest speaker or topic?

- Yes. Though this is an elective course, if a student or his/her parents/guardians do not want to be present when a guest speaker is invited into the classroom, they may be excused, as long as they give the teacher advance notice in writing. They may be presented with a different assignment at that time. If a student becomes uncomfortable during the course of the guest speaker’s discussion, they may quietly and discreetly be excused at any time by signaling the teacher.

What if a guest speaker or student says or does something inappropriate?

- Through the use of these guidelines, every effort will be made possible to prevent this from happening. Guest speakers and students will receive these guidelines, have the opportunity to discuss them in advance and agree to abide by them before dialogue begins. However in the event that something inappropriate does occur, please look to the teacher to respond with all of his/her training and expertise.