



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Engaging Lived Religion in Our Social Studies Classrooms: A Professional Learning Protocol for Public School Leaders

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Instructional Context

Our team is committed to providing our students with a comprehensive education across the liberal arts and sciences with project based learning and arts integration as areas of focus. Our school is racially, socio-economically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. We engage project based learning and arts integration to provide meaningful points of entry to state content standards. We have a strong social justice orientation and work hard to build community around our core values. I am the school's principal and instructional leader, and this curriculum project takes the form of a professional development session focused on helping teachers develop confidence around teaching lived religion.

Problem Posing

Our school prioritizes project based learning units that engage multiple learning modalities and put student voice and choice at the center of learning activities. Our goal is for students to feel engaged, empowered, and invested in their learning. We want them to be intrinsically motivated to answer questions that feel authentic to them and to integrate new content successfully. Overwhelmingly, our team is successful in developing units that realize these goals. However, when it comes to world religion, the students work almost exclusively from their social studies textbooks. This is a phenomenon observed in multiple social studies classes, across multiple grade levels. It contrasts strikingly with our usual inquiry-based instructional practices.

Hypotheses

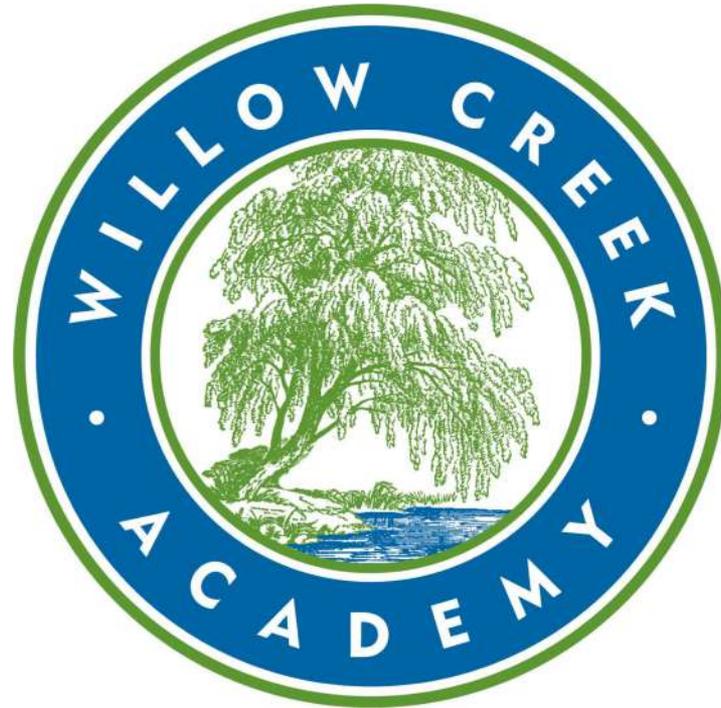
Teachers don't yet feel confident in their content knowledge around world religion. Teachers are unsure about the legal implications of teaching religion in a public school context. Teachers are worried they will unintentionally put a student on the spot or reinforce stereotypes—particularly in a school that is religiously diverse and that holds equity as a foundational value.

Goals for This Professional Development Session

- Provide teachers with a curated selection of resources to build their content knowledge around world religion.
- Explain what types of learning activities the Constitution does and does not allow in the public school context.
- Reframe our world religions curriculum to engage the lived religions of our religiously diverse neighbors in the Bay Area.
- Create the conditions for teachers to have the foundational confidence required to develop creative, multi-modal, project based lessons.
- Jigsaw a series of hypothetical scenarios to check for understanding.
- Provide a plan for follow-up Deep Dive sessions throughout the school year.

See Following Slides for Detailed Presentation

***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.***



Engaging Lived Religion In Our Social Studies Classrooms

August, 2019

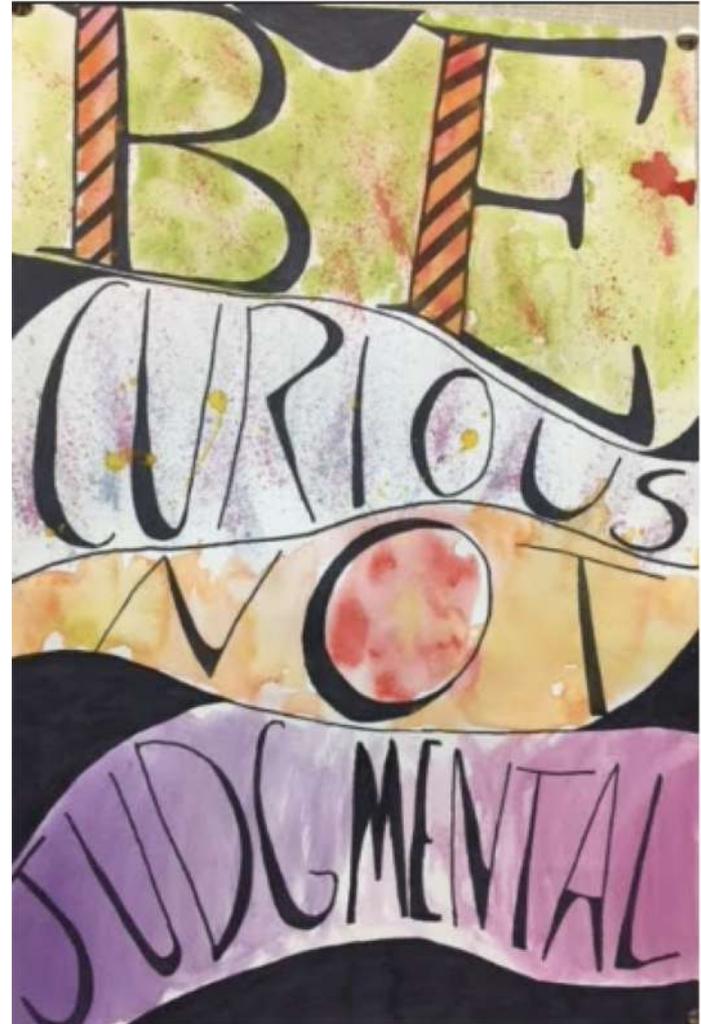


Problem Posing

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Problem Posing

One favorite interdisciplinary project unfolds as part of our 6th graders' unit on Ancient Egypt.

The students learn about Ancient Egyptian burial rituals and conclude their unit by holding a funeral—in their interpretation of Ancient Egyptian style—for the chickens they have mummified in natron and linen.

They hire professional mourners (the 5th graders) and bury the sarcophagi in pyramids they have designed and built with help from their math teacher.





Problem Posing

This interdisciplinary project is typical of the inquiry-based social studies units at our school.

It engages multiple learning modalities and puts student voice and choice at the center of learning activities.

Students feel engaged, empowered, and invested in their learning. They are intrinsically motivated to answer questions that feel authentic to them, and they are more likely both to integrate new content and to build on what they already know.





Problem Posing

However, when this same social studies class begins their unit on world religions, these engaging instructional practices are not deployed.

Instead, the students work almost exclusively from their social studies textbook.

This is a phenomenon observed in multiple social studies classes, across multiple grade levels.

It contrasts strikingly with our usual inquiry-based instructional practices.





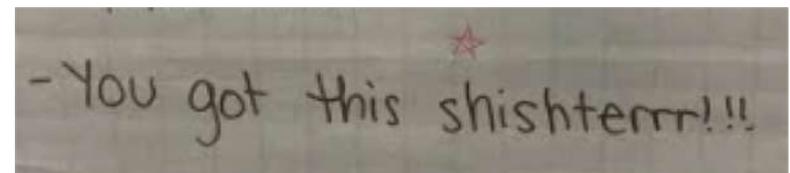
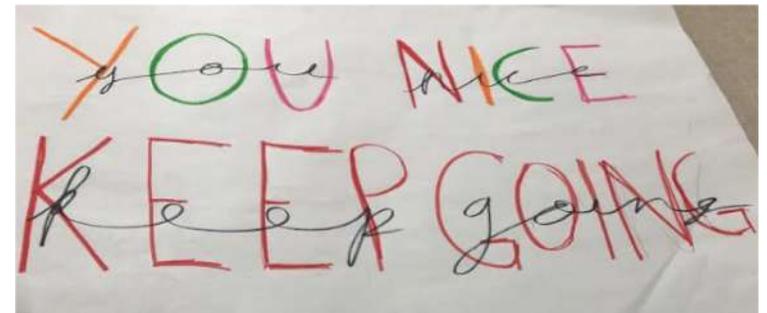
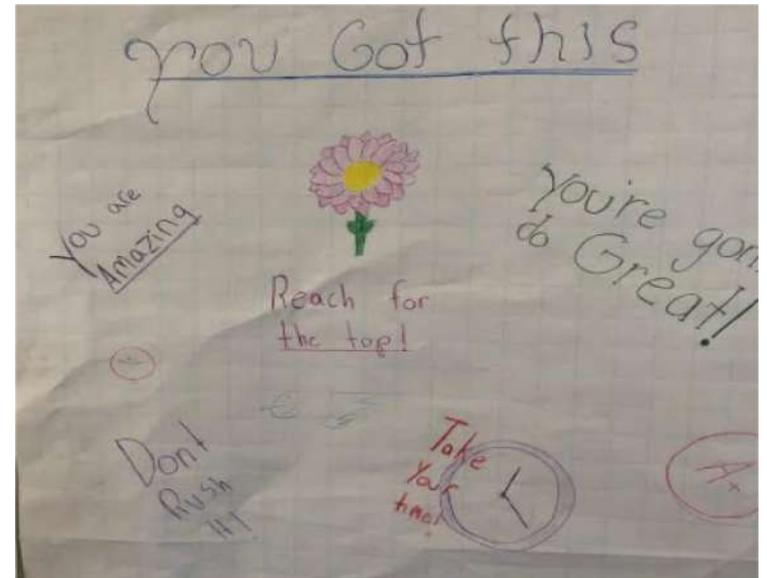
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Teachers don't yet feel confident in their content knowledge around world religion.

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Teachers are worried they will unintentionally put a student on the spot or reinforce stereotypes—particularly in a school that is religiously diverse and that holds equity as a foundational value.





Turn and talk

**Why do/should we teach religion
in our social studies classrooms?**



Taking healthy risks

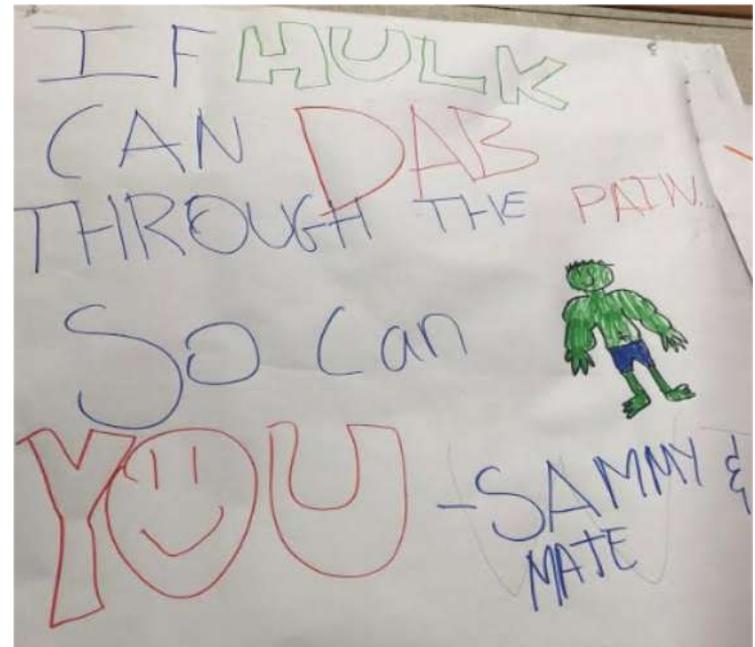
This is challenging work!

It requires us to have strong self-awareness of our own identities, privileges, and assumptions.

It asks us to move outside our comfort zones and to engage deeply with content that can be personal, politically embedded, and/or controversial.

It can feel risky.

Remember: your colleagues and your leadership are here as resources!





Goals

Goals for This Session

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Is it legal to teach about religion?

It is not only permissible to teach about religion (past and present) it is a key part of California's History Social Studies Framework.

Teachers are encouraged to engage our religiously diverse neighbors when teaching about present manifestations of religion in our community—there is no faith tradition that exists independently of the people who practice it!

HISTORY SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK

FOR CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve

- How did major religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism) and cultural systems (Confucianism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment) develop and change over time? How did they spread to multiple cultures?



What about the separation of church and state?

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . .

Best Practices:

1. Do not encourage students to accept or reject any religious practice or belief, including non-belief or atheism.
2. Do not discourage students' free expression of their own beliefs/ideas.
3. Give all traditions/faiths equal emphasis.
4. Your own personal beliefs and practices do not qualify or qualify you to teach about religion in your classroom, so long as you adhere to these best practices.
5. If in doubt, seek guidance from your colleagues and administration—we are in this together!



Do I need to be an expert on “world religions” to teach them?

Deemphasize “dates and doctrines” that decontextualize and/or oversimplify faith traditions.

Teach beyond The Grid. Not all religions fit a Eurocentric epistemological structure!

No faith tradition exists independent of the people who practice it, so feel free to engage our religiously diverse neighbors.

Guest speakers and site visits to local houses of worship are encouraged, so long as they are planned and executed with care.

THE GRID

	Founder	Dates	Doctrine	Etc.
Christianity				
Judaism				
Islam				
Hinduism				
Buddhism				



Can I really take my students on a field trip to a house of worship??

Yes! Site visits to local houses of worship can be a powerful teaching tool.

It may be helpful to visit two houses of worship with an eye to comparing and contrasting observations at each site.

Some houses of worship serve multiple functions as cultural centers that are open to the public—these organizations can be a great resource for site visits.

Remember: students may not engage in devotional activities on field trips (no “altar calls,” e.g.).





I am worried about saying the wrong thing!

Build on our work with Courageous Conversations and Cultural Competency

- Set ground rules for communication
- Create safe space using Courageous Conversations protocol

Foster dialogue rather than debate

- Explicitly teach “dialogue” and “debate” to foster understanding

Plan educational panels with lay leaders, practitioners, clergy

- Be sure to pre-teach foundational information for students and prep your speakers, and then to debrief with students after the panel
- Help students understand that panelists represent their own points of view and might disagree on controversial issues
- Panelists cannot engage in religious practice or evangelize

Engage diversity rather than manage diversity!



Resources

Recommended Resources for Constitutional Questions

First Amendment Center: Provides general information on the subject of religion and public schools.

Recommended Resources for Teaching Lived Religion

Interfaith Center: Offers many unit plans and other resources for educators.

Generation Global: Engages students around the world in meaningful dialogue.

Pluralism Project: Provides teaching resources, including content-rich case studies.



Follow up

Deep Dives 2019-20

1. Analyze/adapt lesson plan
2. Discuss “World Religion in Five Objects”
3. Explore content resources
4. Identify a content lead to apply to Religions Worlds Institute