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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Life History and Lived Religion

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Abstract

This project is a capstone assignment for a semester-long 11th and 12 grade World Religions class at an independent college prep school. The course is designed as an introduction to major eastern and western religions. Typically included in this study is Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism. Typically students in the class would have diverse religious backgrounds – it would not be unusual to have the first five of the faiths listed above represented, as well as students who would describe themselves as agnostic or atheist.

By the point in the curriculum that the class would commence this project, students would have a strong foundational knowledge of the major religious traditions, although research into the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of more specific denominations would likely be necessary. They would also be familiar with the language utilized by scholars of religion, and would have some minor interview experience from earlier class activities. This capstone project is designed to allow students to explore the ways individuals practice their faith, and in what ways individuals' beliefs, actions, and traditions diverge or align with the authoritative orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy of their faith.

Each student would select an adult family member or friend comfortable being interviewed about their religious upbringing and the role religion plays in their life. After collecting and evaluating the information, the students would present their observations and analysis in both written form and a brief oral presentation. By interviewing individuals and hearing about the interviews of others, the complexity of *lived religion* will be even more evident.

This project would require a wide range of skills – research skills, analytical/interpretive skills, interview/listening skills, writing skills, and presentation skills to name a few.

Central Questions

1. In what ways does the “lived religion” of the interviewee diverge and converge with the authoritative orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy, spiritual, cultural, social (perhaps economic and political) views established by the particular religious authorities?
2. What spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and political realities might influence or explain the variations or adaptations.

Procedure

1. **Building listening skills.** Since passive and active listening skills will be critical to this project, it is important to work on these skills. Students should run through several passive and active listening activities such as “Just Listen” passive listening activity and “Let’s Make a Story” active listening activity. One can find many other activities online.

Some websites for listening activities:

- <https://storycorps.org/discover/education/lesson-the-power-of-active-listening>
- <https://positivepsychology.com/communication-activities-adults-students/#classroom>
- <https://www.goodlisteningkills.org/active-listening-games-exercises-activities>

2. **Building interview skills.** Ideally, students will have some experience preparing for and conducting interviews. Regardless, students should review the steps on how to conduct a research interview.

Some websites on how to conduct research interviews:

- <https://guides.lib.vt.edu/researchmethods/interviews>
- <https://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm>

3. **Selecting topic and interviewee.** The student should select a family member or friend who is of high school graduate age or older (18+ years old) and who seems to be an active member of a religious faith or was brought up within a religious tradition. The student should be sure of the willingness and comfort of the individual to be interviewed.
4. **Additional research.** The students would be aware of the religious tradition of the interviewee and already have a working knowledge of the broader faith, but they will likely need to research the specific orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the interviewee’s particular tradition, as well as controversies of that tradition. The student should find and read contemporary religious essays or other documents produced by the authority figures as well as dissenters within this tradition.

5. **Prepare interview questions.** Each student must develop interview questions that will allow the student to address the questions being asked. They will be encouraged to approach the start of the interview by allowing the interviewee a chance to “tell their story,” then begin to focus the questions so as to explore ways interviewee’s beliefs, actions, and traditions diverge or align with the authoritative orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy of their faith and where they stand on any controversies. (Students should be sure to use interview guides as resources in this step.)
6. **Conduct the interview.** In addition to the list of questions, the student should have paper and pen ready to take notes, and jot questions and ideas down that the student may want to circle back around to later in the interview. It would be best if the interview is recorded, so that the student can refer to it later. If the interviewee objects to the recording, the student will have the added burden of taking extensive notes.
7. **Reviewing the interview.** After the interview, the student needs to review the recorded conversation and begin to evaluate what they learned. They will need to collect specifics – including quotes – in order to draw conclusions about the central questions.
8. **Writing the paper.** In a 4-6 page paper, students must explain and explore what was learned in their interview, and how what they learned addresses the central questions. They should use direct references from the interview and the research to describe the divergences and convergences, as well as controversies that occur in the interviewee’s experience. They should also try to draw some conclusions about what might influence any variations.
9. **Presentation.** Students will share a summary of what they learned in their interview as well as a summary of the conclusions they drew from it in relation to the central questions that were asked. The presentation should be three or four minutes long to allow everyone to present and still give the class time to discuss themes that run through what was learned and what was concluded.

See below for a draft of the assignment sheet to be distributed to students.

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

Life History and Lived Religion Capstone Project – World Religions

As a final project, each of you will be examining the realities of “lived religion” by interviewing someone to find out how they practice their faith. This will require a significant commitment of time both in and outside of class. The process will be broken down into clear steps, and while each of you will do your own project and interview, we will work through these steps as a class. You will need to utilize what you already know about the religions we have studied as well as the listening skills and interview skills that were introduced earlier in the semester.

You will be required to do research, conduct an interview, write a 4-6 page paper, and give a brief summary of what you learned and concluded.

Central Questions

1. In what ways does the “lived religion” of the interviewee diverge and/or converge with authoritative spiritual, cultural, social (perhaps economic or political) beliefs and practices established by religious authorities?
2. What spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and political realities might influence or explain the variations or adaptations?

Procedure

Step 1. You must select a family member or friend who is of high school graduate age or older (18+ years old) and who seems to be an active member of a religious faith or was brought up within a religious tradition. You need to make sure that the individual is willing and comfortable with being interviewed and having that interview recorded (for your research only). Whatever specific faith tradition the interviewee follows will be the focus of step two.

Step 2. You have a broad knowledge of various faiths, but you must dig deeper into the specific tradition of the interviewee. What practices, doctrines, traditions, rituals (orthodoxy and orthopraxy) define this tradition, and what, if any controversies exist within this tradition? You should find and read contemporary religious essays or other documents produced by the authority figures as well as dissenters within this tradition.

Step 3. Each of you must develop interview questions that will allow you to address the Central Questions being asked. (You should be sure to utilize the interview guides discussed earlier in the semester.) You are encouraged to approach the start of the interview by allowing the interviewee a chance to “tell their story,” then begin to focus the questions so as to explore ways interviewee’s beliefs, actions, and traditions diverge or align with the authoritative orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy of their faith and where they stand on any controversies. You are required to

have a minimum of 15 questions – obviously you may not get to them all, and the hope is that during the interview you will come up with new ones based on the direction of the conversation.

Step 4. In addition to the list of questions, You must have paper and pen ready to take notes, and jot questions and ideas down that you may want to circle back around to later in the interview. It would be best if the interview is recorded, so that you can refer to it later. If the interviewee objects to the recording, you will have the added burden of taking extensive notes.

Step 5. After the interview, you need to review the recording and to begin to evaluate what you learned. You will need to collect specifics – including quotes – in order to support your conclusions about the central questions.

Step 6. In a 4-6 page paper, You must explain and explore what was learned in your interview, and how what you learned addresses the central questions. You must use direct evidence from the interview and the research to describe the divergences, convergences, and controversies that occur in the interviewee's experience. You should also try to draw some conclusions about what influenced any controversies and variations that you saw. As always, the paper must use the Chicago Style of citations.

Step 7. You will share a summary of what you learned in your interview as well as a summary of the conclusions you drew from it in relation to the central questions that were asked. The presentation should be three or four minutes long to allow everyone to present and still give us time to discuss themes that run through what was learned and what was concluded.

Note: We will be working in class throughout the process and discussing everyone's progress in both individual meetings and group discussions.