



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Exploring Local Religious Diversity Through a Site Visit Jigsaw

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Abstract

This project is part of a whole-school day of field trips to promote cross-cultural understanding around religious diversity in our communities. In a middle school of approximately 150 students, students are split into 6 mixed-grade groups in order to take site visits to six different religious institutions in New York City, representing five different religious traditions. This jigsaw activity includes pre- and post-visit work, giving students the opportunity to prepare and debrief with their peers in the same site visit group and other site visit groups, so that they can share what they have learned with others.

The project unfolds over a four (or five) day period. I will outline key activities and learning goals for each day, and then include templates for: 1) thank you letters from students to the houses of worship they visit, 2) an outreach email from teachers to the houses of worship, and 3) a permission slip sent home to parents, which explains the goals of the project.

Day 1 (or 2 Days): Humanities Class Preparation for Field Trips

Summary: Humanities teachers are given guidelines for a lesson that should span 1-2 class periods (depending on the time available in their curricula) to help prepare students for their trips. These are general lessons that will work for all students, regardless of where they are going. Each Humanities class will contain some students who are slated to go on all six of the different trips, in order to promote discussion and sharing after the trips.

Framing

On Friday, we will split up into 6 mixed-grade groups for a school-wide day of field trips with the theme of religious understanding and diversity. The groups will visit six different places of religious worship in our community.

We will prepare for our trips together in our Humanities classes, and afterwards, we will share out what we learned with other students in Humanities classes.

We are doing these field trips because it is important for us to understand different cultures and religions. Religious freedom is protected in the First Amendment of the Constitution, and it is important to learn about the diverse ways that people choose to practice - or not to practice - different religions and belief systems in the spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

It should be noted that religions are highly tied into culture, that religions change over time, that not all followers of a particular religion practice or interpret their religion in the same way, and that talking about religion can touch the depths of someone's identity, so conversations should take place in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. (Note: The wording of this guidance is adapted from guidelines outlined in the American Academy of Religion's "Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Schools")

Note: We are attending these places of worship as visitors and as observers, not as participants. Students are there to learn and have conversations, not to participate in any religious practice, prayer, or observance.

Behavior Guidelines

Brainstorm with students how to behave when visiting a place of worship. (Some possible responses: Only talk quietly, and only when allowed to talk; Only go into places you have been invited to enter; Do not take photographs unless you have been given permission to and do not have your phone out or on; Do not point at people or do anything to make people feel uncomfortable; Ask questions only when invited to and do so from a viewpoint of respect and search for understanding; Do not interrupt or distract anyone who is praying; Remember that you are a guest and behave accordingly, etc.)

Note that some religious sites will have special dress codes or expectations for dress. Sometimes these will be different for boys and girls. At a synagogue, for example, a boy may be asked to wear a yarmulke on his head. At a mosque, for example, a girl may be asked to wear long pants and a long shirt and cover her hair with a scarf. Various places of worship ask visitors to remove their shoes before entering. Following a site's dress code is a sign of respect for the people there and their beliefs and traditions.

Sharing with class

Brainstorm with students what things they should look for or notice while on their visit. What should they share with the class when you meet as a Humanities class after the trip? What are some good questions that you could ask your tour guides? What are some things to keep in mind when asking questions about topics that can be sensitive or personal, like religion?

Lessons on religious freedom and diversity

These are two great lessons from *Teaching Tolerance* you can do with your students. Feel free to pick the one that works both with your group, or do both!

<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/one-nation-many-beliefs> (Note: The last part of this lesson requires access to computers or iPads)

<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/free-believe>

You will also want to go over the First Amendment, especially the Establishment Clause and the Exercise Clause, with students to frame our trips in the context of religious freedom and the Constitution.

Excerpt from First Amendment

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

Note: For teachers with more time for preparation, the following resources from Generation Global's Essentials of Dialogue program can be helpful:

<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/projects/supporting-next-generation/supporting-next-generation-essentials-dialogue-0>

Day 2: Pre-Reading During Study Hall

Depending on the student's assigned site visit, all students are given pre-readings with some basic information about the religion to read and annotate during study hall. In a school with a different format, this pre-reading could be done during Humanities classes or as homework.

Basic information about different world religions can be found here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/>

More detailed information can be found here, if teachers have more time:

<http://pluralism.org/religions/>

Day 3: Site Visits and Group Activities

On the day of the trip, before leaving for the visit, teachers meet with students in their site visit groups. Teachers go over pre-readings with students, answer any questions. One more time, go over basic ground rules for visiting places of worship respectfully

Then site visits – yay!

Students eat lunch together with their site visit groups, and then debrief in classroom with their site visit groups.

- A possible debriefing activity could be to share things students noticed: things they saw, heard, felt, etc. in one word or in a drawing and share

Students write thank-you letters to speakers/representatives from sites they visited. If time permits, read over thank-you letters and have students write second drafts if necessary.

Day 4: Share-Out in Humanities Classes (mixed groups)

During the week after the trip, all Humanities classes should take at least one class period for students to share with each other some things they noticed and learned on their site visits, since each Humanities class will include students who have gone on all of the different trips. This can take different forms for different teachers and grades, and can be something as simple as having students share their thank-you letters with their classmates before sending them to their sites or having a group discussion.

In my class last year, students were put into groups according to the sites they had visited. They worked together in their groups to create mini-exhibits to help their classmates feel what it was like to visit the sites. They were given computers and were allowed to print out pictures to help students see what the site was like, with guidance given as to appropriate websites for photos and images. They were encouraged to come up with talking points as to what struck them the most, what they learned, how it felt to visit that site, etc. Then, they came up with questions to ask the groups that had visited other sites. Finally, students engaged in gallery walks during which students visited the mini-exhibits that their classmates had prepared, with the classmates who had prepared the exhibit standing next to the visit to give more information about the experiences and to answer questions. After everyone had visited everyone else's mini-exhibit, we did a whole-class debrief of what we learned from each other.

Additional Resources

Template for Student Thank-You Letters

Date

Dear _____,

Part 1: Thank them for having you as a guest

Useful sentence starter:

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us during our class visit to....

Part 2: List some things you saw, did, and/or learned. Useful sentence starters:

Useful sentence starters:

I was particularly moved by...

I was interested to learn that...

I enjoyed...

Part 3: Explain how the trip affected you (positively) and list any respectful questions you still have.

Useful sentence starters:

One thing I will take away from this visit is...

After this visit, I now know that...

One question I still have is...

Part 4: Thank them again for having you on the trip.

Useful sentence starter:

Again, I would like to thank you for having our class as guests at...

Sincerely,

Your name

Grade

Template for Outreach Email to Religious Sites

Dear _____,

It was great talking to you on the phone earlier today. My name is _____, and I'm a teacher at _____(name of school)_____, _____(describe school)_____. Our school is planning a school-wide unit on religious and cultural diversity in our community, which will culminate in a day of field trips on _____(date)_____.

We were wondering if it would be possible to host a group of students and chaperones for a visit so that we can learn more about _____(religion)_____ and about cultural practices and celebrations. If that would be possible, please let us know and I'll be happy to work out details.

Thank you so much,

Signature

Sample Permission Slip for Parents

Dear *Parents*,

This week, students will be taking a series of field trips with the theme of religious diversity and understanding. We will visit institutions representing a variety of religions in order to observe, ask questions, and learn about different cultures and belief systems. On _____(date)_____, your child's group will be visiting the _____(name of site)_____, located at _____(address). (How we will get there, time, and chaperones.) (List any dress code notes or other notes on appropriate behavior.) Please sign below to give your child permission to attend.

Thanks!

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.