Teaching for Religious Literacy in Public Middle Schools

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Religious Literacy

- Why should I teach about religion?
- Is it developmentally appropriate?
- How can I do so legally?
- What teaching strategies work best?
Declining Religious Literacy in the US

- **Who was Joan of Arc?**
  - Noah's wife, answered 12 percent of Americans in one poll.

- **Who said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"?**
  - Fifty-six percent of born-again Christians surveyed did not know (Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount).

- **Who are Sodom and Gomorrah?**
  - Half of U.S. high-school seniors surveyed thought they were a married couple.

- **Who wrote the four Gospels?**
  - 77% of the over-65 group answered correctly;
  - 52% of those 15-24 could.

- **Who comprises the Holy Trinity?**
  - 76% of those over 65 got it right, but dropped to
  - 47% among those aged 15 to 24.

- **How many sacraments are in the Catholic Church?**
  - 63% of the over-65 group correctly answered seven;
  - only 38% of 15- to 24-year-olds got it right.
Why Teach about Religion?

• Northern Ireland: Catholics and Protestants
• Cyprus: Muslims and Orthodox Christians
• India: Sikhs and Hindus
• Middle East: Jews and Muslims
• Iraq: Sunnis and Shias

• The United States: ?
• *Each of these contemporary examples holds religious difference at its core*
Why Teach about Religion?

“A few days after 9/11, a turbaned Indian American man was shot and killed in Arizona by a bigot who believed the man's dress marked him as a Muslim. But what killed Balbir Singh Sodhi (who was not a Muslim but a Sikh) was not so much bigotry as ignorance. The moral of his story is not just that we need more tolerance. It is that Americans - of both the religious and the secular variety - need to understand religion.” (Prothero, 2002)
Why Teach about Religion?

- **Kansas:** the Board of Education attempts to reconcile the role of evolution within its science standards.

- **Texas:** a heated debate erupts about bible electives in public schools.

- **Minnesota:** argues over life science standards, which include challenges to the theories of cell theory and the theory of evolution.

- **Pennsylvania:** one local school board requires evolution to be taught alongside intelligent design resulting in a lawsuit against the board.
Is it Developmentally Appropriate?

Adolescence is “a time when longings awaken with an intensity that many have misunderstood and dismissed as ‘hormones.’”

(Kessler, 2000)

— Where did I come from?
— Who am I becoming?
— What is my purpose in life?
— What happens when I die?
— Is there a God?
Is it Developmentally Appropriate?

Faith development research demonstrates a wide array of adolescent beliefs.

Some adolescents:

– no longer believe in a patriarchal God
– hold fast to the traditional faiths of their families
– are interested in questions of metaphysical beginnings, endings, purposes, and meanings
– yearn for a personal relationship with a God or Gods
– want to separate from parents and equate a paternalistic God with controlling adults
– refer to themselves as ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious’
Is it Legal?

Because of misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the First Amendment, too many teachers fail to understand “the subtle distinction between teaching religion (unconstitutional) and teaching about religion (essential).”

(Prothero, 2005)
Is it Legal?

“Nothing we have said here indicates that such study..., when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment”

Is it Legal?

• While state-supported schools cannot favor or discriminate against any particular religion, educators are free to teach about religion

• Educators must teach in a way that does not promote, proselytize, or practice a specific religion or religious worldview
Case Study Discussions

*In your opinion...*

- what is the essential issue at hand?
- how should the teacher have handled the situation?
- what should the teacher do next?
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Middle Grades Teachers say...
  – One needs to be very careful of anything that hints at "be a Hindu for a day" or anything that experiential--we'd never want any perception of steering kids toward a particular religion.
  – How do I make the faith ‘real’ to learners without either promoting or trivializing it?
  – How do I come up with ideas that allow students a hands-on experience of the religion without ‘cheapening’ the actual practice?
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

Think…. Pair…. Share….

What are your most effective strategies for tackling controversial subjects like religion?
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Ask, and Allow For, Meaningful Questions

Begin the study of religion by inviting students’ own questions:

  – Why do some people wear hats to pray?
  – What is a mosque?
  – Is there a God?
  – If there is, why would this God allow war?
  – Why do some people in other countries hate us?
Questions from 5/6 Graders
(Milton, Vermont)

• Exactly how many religions are there?
• Why do religions have religious books?
• Why do people pray?
• What is the difference between a Catholic and a Christian?
• Why is it that girls have to decide to embrace Islam at 9 and boys have until 15?
• Why do Muslims pray 5 times a day?
• Is the wine actually blood in Christianity?
• How many Gods are there?
• Why do Buddhists put the three jewels in their hands when they bow?
• Do you have to be a certain religion?
• How do you become part of a religion?
• Why is God portrayed as a man? Why can’t God be a woman?
• How many people are in each religion?
• Do all religions have a God?
• Why do people stereotype other religions when they are all praying for the same thing?
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Teach from the Inside-Out

  – Invite students to interact with people of various faiths.
    • is a means of hearing about religious beliefs first-hand
    • avoids generalizing about a particular tradition by learning about religion as a personal experience rather than as dogma
  – Interview people of various faiths with a common set of questions and compare and contrast their learning.
  – Discover local community resources, museums, colleges,
  – Visit mosques, convents, labyrinths, and churches.
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Attribute Beliefs Appropriately
  – “According to the Torah...”
  – “Many Hindus believe...”

• Teach the Controversy
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Teach Moral Conversation

  *The goal*: to establish a safe and invigorating space for examining controversial issues.

  *The ground rules*:
  
  1. Find the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse.
  2. View it as a barn-raising rather than a boxing match.
  3. Attribute the best, not the worst motives.
Moral Conversation

• What is the other person trying to say?
• Where is it coming from?
• Why does it matter so much to the person?
• What is this person saying to me personally?
• What do I especially like about what I hear?
• How can I affirm the person’s beliefs?
• How can I learn more about them?
• Is there any overlap between the person’s beliefs and my own?
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Promote Inner Dialogue
  – Journaling
    • Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things?
    • Why is suffering so pervasive?
    • What is my society, or life, or God asking of me?
    • Is there a master plan?
    • When do I feel most alive? (Daloz Parks)
  – Letter Writing
    • To a grandmother, to God, to a best friend, to a teacher, to a minister or rabbi
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

- Approach study with interdisciplinary lens
  - Mathematics
    - Study concepts of proportionality by tracking, via the media and web-based modeling software, reports of religious discrimination and the relative increase of racial profiling incidents since 9/11.
  - Science
    - Examine what scientific discoveries have been made in the past centuries and how different religions have reacted to these discoveries. Why? Which basic tenets did such discoveries threaten? Which did they support?
  - Social Studies
    - Hold a mock United Nations conference, with each student representing a country in the Middle East. Students arrive at a roundtable session with ideas for the future of Iraq from the religious perspective of "their" particular countries.
What Teaching Strategies Work Best?

• Approach study with interdisciplinary lens
  – Literature
    • Provide a wide array of texts. Use selections from the Qur’an, the Torah, the Bible and other sacred texts; historical fiction; memoir and poetry; wisdom tales and folktales; and/or song lyrics.
  – Dance and Movement
    • Attend and examine dance performances. Ask, what religious figures did you recognize on stage? What story is being portrayed here? What important message does this dance convey to its believers? When would this dance be performed?
  – Visual Art
    • View religious art and icons at a real or virtual museum. Ask, which religious figures did you see portrayed in art? What stories were depicted and from which religious texts did they come? What connections do you see between the time period of the artist’s work and the way the subject is portrayed? What religious symbols did you identify?
Yeah, But What About the Standards?

Examine your state or national standards:

– asking pertinent questions
– reading primary sources
– evaluating media
– interpreting information
– summarizing
– comparing and contrasting
– analyzing patterns and trends
– organizing and displaying data
– connecting past with present
– analyzing and interpreting elements of text
– grouping historical events
– demonstrating cause and effect
– identifying and debating issues
Thoughtful Classrooms

“Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility.” (Greene, 1995)
Relevant Resources
