

## The Cultural Universals Museum

**Jodi Freedman**



*What does a society need to be successful and sustainable over time?"* This is the essential question that guides my sixth grade interdisciplinary, project-based learning, "The Cultural Universals Museum."

For the last 15 years, I have spearheaded this project, evolving it from a template by an educational company, Interact. It began at Brandeis Day School in Marin County, CA, as a collaborative effort between the History, English, Science, Math, Art, Music, Technology, and Judaic Studies teachers. I will continue this project at the Gideon Hausner school in Palo Alto, CA, where I will begin teaching in the fall of 2016. Both schools are composed of students from diverse Jewish backgrounds and are open and accepting communities. Fostering shared values is supported by both institutions.

### **Making School Seem More Like Real Life**

For me, a classroom teacher of 20-plus years, project-based learning is something I have always done, regardless of whether or not it was in vogue. It makes school seem more like real life. Students need to be able to ask critical questions and link what they already know to what they are learning. Many students thrive in a hands-on learning environment, where the goal is not to re-state the reading, but to actively engage in material and questions over an extended period of time. Project-based learning does not have to be cross-curricular, but I think it reinforces concepts and language substantially if it is done in this manner.

As a sixth grade History and English teacher, and former Judaic Studies teacher, I view the project as a perfect catalyst to learning about cultures and ancient civilizations. It has students asking what values hold cultures together and help them thrive. Yet the project also addresses activities that emphasize intra/interpersonal capabilities, building trust and communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, collaboration, understanding the importance of teamwork, and recognizing and valuing an individual's own abilities. It also helps students see connections across subjects, which can be challenging in the middle school systems, unless teachers consciously recognize the value of this kind of learning.

Each year, depending on the teachers involved, "The Cultural Universals Museum" project changes and deepens. The students are assigned real

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## THE JEWISH EDUCATOR

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locations on a map, which they will be studying later in the year. And with relatively no prior knowledge of the complex cultures that live there, they are asked to create a successful and sustainable civilization, as if they were the first people to inhabit the area.

In science classes, they learn about the living geography of the area, including the weather, bodies of water, and local plants and animals. In math class, they study alternative number systems, such as base 5 or base 16. In art class, they create artifacts from their culture out of clay. In music classes, they are asked to create and sing a national anthem, devotional song or lullaby that reflects the values of their culture. In history classes, they are told of all the elements that make up a successful society, including values, government, food and water sources, shelter, arts and recreation, a language, rules, and leadership. In English classes, they read creation myths from around the world and write a creation myth for their culture that reflects its beliefs and values. And, in Judaic Studies, they look more deeply at the creation story told in *Genesis* and work to understand the Jewish and universal values that are embedded in the story.

I tell my students, “Your culture must be strong, have heart, and be smart.” In a Jewish context, I would say it as, “*Kavod, Gemilut Hasadim, and Rahamim.*”

### Crossing Disciplines

There are multiple tie-ins to Jewish education contained in the project. It creates connections between what is being taught in secular classes and Judaic Studies. It brings teachers together, across disciplines, to help develop the idea that cultures share common values.

A six-week endeavor, the project is how the sixth grade teams open the school year. Not all classes are involved in all six weeks. And it requires much communication between teachers and much support from administration.

The Cultural Universals Museum culminates in an assembly where student in grades 3-8 are invited to walk through the museum. Parents of sixth graders also are invited.

Sixth graders are divided into several different roles for the presentation.

Docent : Welcomes each group and explains the project. They also guide groups viewing each culture.

Culture person: Two or three students represent their culture and explain the artifacts, maps, and creation stories of their culture. They also sing a song from their culture.

Technology person: A PowerPoint or HyperStudio presentation also is made, showcasing the innovative and original technology of the culture.

This project-based unit sets the stage for a great year, where students continually refer back to the essential question, “*What does a society need to be successful and sustainable over time?*” As students go on to study ancient cultures in History and the Earth in Science, they already are looking for the common elements that are necessary for success. This tie-in can be reinforced in Judaic Studies with the learning of *Midot* (values).

Project-based learning is a hot topic in the current world of education. It will always remain at the forefront in my classroom. ♦