

It is very common for middle school students to study the development of ancient civilizations. In particular, most students analyze the critical cultures of Ancient Mesopotamia. At the same time, young Jewish students study *Tanach*, and the development of the Jewish people. However, these two “subjects” are often seen as vastly different “subjects” that are unrelated. Mesopotamia is often studied to learn when and how civilizations evolved and to appreciate how humanity has changed over time. On the other hand, *Tanach*, and in particular *Navi*, is studied to learn moral lessons and how to connect to God through a text.

A number of years ago, a former colleague and I discussed the possibility of creating a project that would allow students to use *Tanach* as a vehicle to understand the historical transformation of the Ancient Near East and at the same time how they can be religiously inspired from Mesopotamian artifacts. Out of this discussion, the Bayit Rishon Museum was borne, but due to several “failures” the project has evolved over the last few years.

Preparing for the launch of the Bayit Rishon Museum launch took several months. Numerous concerns arose immediately:

1. What artifacts should the students research? Should I choose? They choose?
2. How will they find relevant and more importantly, developmentally appropriate articles to read to research their artifacts?
3. Lastly, and the question that most often guides my lesson planning in my heterogenous class, how will this project meet the needs of all of my students? How do I make it challenging to those that need to be enriched and at the same time, how do I support the students that need the extra guidance and direction?

Ultimately, I decided on five critical artifacts for the students to research, in order to gain a better appreciation of the Bayit Rishon Era. I scoured the Internet to find accurate articles that would be informative and understandable for my young 6th grade readers. It became quickly apparent that two of the five artifacts (the Lachish Reliefs and Sennacherib’s Annals) were more complex. Similarly, I recognized that one artifact (the House of Achiel) was more concrete (no pun intended) and would be easier for my “support” students to manage. Lastly, the remaining two artifacts (the Bullae and Hezekiah’s Tunnel) were appropriate for “grade level” students. With the help of some editing (deleting of unnecessary aspects and rewording for clarity purposes), I created a significant bank of resources with guiding questions to ensure student comprehension.

I knew that I wanted the students to “own” their artifacts and I wanted them to become experts not only about their artifacts, but about that critical time period. I considered that creating a final product that would require the students to present would be a way for them to become “experts.” I thought if they physically created replicas of their artifacts, and made a class museum about the Bayit Rishon Era, they would become knowledgeable curators. Clearly, to make their artifacts (primarily using clay) with a coherent museum style explanation, they would need to deeply know and understand their artifacts. This seemed to be a “perfect” project where I would reach my goals and be able to connect to every student. Little did I know....

At the launch of the project, the students were both excited and confused! Many students asked, “Wait, this isn’t *Navi*?” While others said, “The same *Nevuchadnezzar* that’s mentioned in my *Navi*, is the same Nebuchadnezzar that’s in our textbook?” When I told them

which artifacts we would be researching, so many students were nearly jumping up out of their seats. Some said, "Hezekiah's Tunnel! I just went there in the summer!" I explained that we were going to become experts in order to create our very own Bayit Rishon Museum. Some students asked how we were going to recreate these artifacts and I explained that we would use clay. **I noticed that some students started to slowly retreat in their seats and become more reluctant of the project, but unfortunately I disregarded their hesitancy.**

The next day, I assigned the artifacts using my understanding that "enrichment" students would get the "enrichment" artifacts, the "grade level" students would get the "grade level" artifacts, and the "support" students would get the "support" artifacts. Some of the excitement from the day before began dissipate. **One student who was enthusiastic the day before, was suddenly disappointed as he did not get the artifact he had just visited. Another student was clearly upset as he was again "in the dumb group."**

Overall, students worked through their research by reading their articles and answering their questions. After a few days, nearly everyone had completed their initial research. Some needed more guidance, while others were quite independent. The next step was to write museum display descriptions. I assumed it would be easy and obvious for the students to write these descriptions. They were now experts, they did just read several articles about their artifacts. However, so many students were confused as to how to begin their descriptions, what to include, and what was really important. **I did not realize that the students really only read the articles in order to answer the questions, and not to understand the artifacts.**

Ultimately, most students were able to write full descriptions while some had just composed a few sentences. We were now ready to create our replicas using clay. I was excited and I assumed that all the students would be thrilled to move away from reading, writing, and typical classroom activities. I partnered up students to work with other classmates who had the same artifact so they could work as a group to recreate their objects. **Once again, I ran into a similar issue, "why am I always in the dumb group?"**

While many students were engaged and thriving at recreating their artifacts, others truly struggled. Firstly, I allotted 3-4 days to work on the clay and their displays, however some finished theirs in just 15 minutes. **What were they going to do for the next 3 plus days? Secondly, some students were genuinely discouraged because they viewed themselves as "not artists", and even just attempting to work on the clay seemed torturous to them.** Lastly, as 3 or 4 students often had to work together with one piece of clay, **conflict quickly arose as to how to design the replicas.** Compromise is not easy for many middle school students and heated "discussions" ensued often with me attempting to referee.

As our Bayit Rishon Museum exhibit was about to debut, I ran into other issues. Firstly, I had never worked with this specific type of clay before and did not realize it would harden so quickly. Some students who had not completed their displays **had a very difficult time working with new "hard" clay.** Similarly, my classroom is not the best place to house 10-15 different clay pieces in development. Some parts broke, while other projects went missing. **Several students were in near tears as they would not have what they had envisioned for their museum.**

The debut finally arrived and we set up tables in our school lobby for our Bayit Rishon Museum. Students presented their artifacts to older grades and some shone as they expertly

curated the museum. **However, some students still did not really “own” their artifacts, and had trouble answering basic questions from the visitors.** Furthermore, many visitors naturally gravitated towards more “artistically/visually pleasing” projects, yet **others had less foot traffic.** Lastly, often only one student in the group would answer the questions and give reasons of importance for their artifacts. **2-3 people in each group would barely get a word out.**

Upon completion of the project, I thought about the successes and “failures” of the project. There were many in both categories.

Successes:

1. Many students viewed *Tanach* and Mesopotamian artifacts differently.
2. Many students did significant research and gained a better understanding of the Bayit Rishon Era.
3. Some students “owned” their artifacts and could coherently explain their artifacts.
4. Genuine excitement existed at the launch of the project.

“Failures”

1. The clay was a real issue. Both from a physical material perspective (brittle nature, some projects were completed too quickly, and lack of proper storage) and from fear and anxiety that it induced amongst the “non-artists”.
2. Initial excitement dissipated for some students as they did not receive their preferred choice of artifacts.
3. I needed to create more of a culture of thirst for understanding of the artifact and era and not just about completing questions.
4. I struggled with students who felt marginalized as they were forced into “the dumb group.”

The following year, I decided to tackle a number of these issues. I knew I would not be able to solve every problem perfectly. I tried to think of a solution to the clay issue, but I struggled to find a better medium. However, I secured locations to properly store the clay while in use, and as a class we discovered techniques to prevent the clay from drying too quickly. We still had issues of the clay being quite brittle and breaking prior to the museum display. One student tried to appease another student by saying, “It’s so cool how you made it look more real and ancient by breaking the artifact.”

Knowing that I would be working on this project in January and February, I began my year by creating a culture of “learning.” I rewarded students that brought current event information to my attention, made connections to other classes, and asked inquisitive questions. Similarly, I continuously pushed my students to dig deeper, not just for better grades but for genuine knowledge. For many students, the Bayit Rishon Museum fit into this process and more students than the previous year were engaged in finding out about their artifact. Similarly, I created a new section called “Paragraph Planning” that would ensure they clearly understood their artifact and knew how to write their museum display descriptions.

Similarly, I wanted to “fix” the issue of students being unhappy with their assigned artifact. To help this issue, at the launch I allowed the students to select two of the five artifacts that they would want to research and that ultimately, I would make the decision of which of the two they were to research. For 90% of the students, this worked wonderfully and they were happy with “their” choice. For the remaining students, we discussed together the possible options. We analyzed if it would be better to work on the artifact they naturally were more interested in researching, but was more challenging, or to work on another artifact that maybe was not their first choice, but would be more academically manageable. Some students elected to go with their initial choice, and they really worked hard to understand their artifact. Other students selected “my choice”, as they felt confident that this would allow them to be the most successful.

The second year was quite a success, but I still struggled with the issues of group dynamics, students still feeling like they were in “the dumb group,” and the clay as a difficult medium and a challenge for the “non-artists”.

Leading up to the third installment of the Bayit Rishon Museum, a colleague mentioned to me that Google had recently improved Google Sites, a contained platform to create basic websites. I did some preliminary research on Google Sites and realized this was a great opportunity. I realized that students could create virtual museums instead of a physical museum in our school lobby.

The virtual museum turned out to be a great success. Firstly, the fear of “not being an artist” quickly disappeared. Students were excited to web design and did not realize that this was possible for a 12 year old. Secondly, I no longer had to find space to store my artifacts or fear that they would break or go missing.

Similarly, I reconfigured my groups. Previously, I had people who had the same artifact work together. This often meant that I had homogenous groups, causing the “dumb group” issue. Now, I created groups of five consisting of one representative for each artifact, thus creating diverse heterogeneous groups. Lastly, the website allowed for both group and independent work as the students had to collaborate to create a home page, but had the freedom to design their own artifact pages.

I have learned so much from continuously working to improve this project. Firstly, I now realize that I need to always look at the emotional needs of all of the students. This includes: group dynamics, how to make the students feel successful, and allow for them to have choice in their learning. Secondly, I now know that I need to try and reach the needs of all of my students and know who my students are as learners. Lastly, I’ve realized that there is no such thing as a project that can not be improved. There are always ways to tweak, adjust, or modify an assignment.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my project and I hope that others can find meaning in my “failures” just like I have.