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## Illustrating Thoughts & Feelings: Student-Produced Political Cartoons About Israel

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## **APA Style**

### **Introduction**

The genesis for the present study is my own experience studying and teaching about contemporary Israeli society and researching best practices in Israel education. During the 2022-2023 academic year, I began showing my Grade 12 students recent Israeli political cartoons to teach them about current events in the country. The cartoons proved valuable in introducing students to the complexities of Israeli society through the contrasting perspectives offered by the different cartoonists. Concurrent with this new and well-received way of teaching were the onset of feelings of inertia towards assigning my students yet another written project that would assess their understanding of what had been learned. Even as I readied to supply my students with the written assignment, I started thinking about what my curricular goals were and whether they could be accomplished through alternative means. Thus began a rapid and on-the-fly pivot to have my students become like the cartoonists they were studying. I rewrote the assignment, asking students to produce their own political cartoon about Israeli society that would draw upon topics we had studied in class.

The following paper presents the findings of a qualitative research study into the use of political cartoons as an arts-based assessment strategy in the teaching of Israel. In formulating a research agenda, I sought to understand whether and to what extent an arts-based assessment provided students with the impetus to formulate their own thinking about Israel. As well, I wanted to assess whether pedagogical strategies like teacher conferences and curricular approaches like teaching with cartoons played a role in facilitating students' abilities to create their own cartoons.

## Literature Review

### *Arts in Education*

Integrating arts-based learning into a curriculum provides students with opportunities to exercise their imaginations to practice creativity, and to solve complex problems in new and novel ways. As Maxine Greene (2001) has suggested, engaging students in arts-based learning allows them “to enter a created world, an invented world, . . . to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-granted realities of everyday” (p. 82). Learning in this way allows students to “challenge the taken-for-granted ... break with confinement, look from an increasing number of vantage points – realizing that the world is always incomplete” (Greene, 2001, p. 84). This incompleteness can lead students to understand that “the construction is never complete” (Greene, 2001, p. 130) and that they, too, have a role in moving society further toward completeness. Greene’s understanding is that the arts, as a vehicle for creative thinking, provide students with the impetus to begin envisioning alternative realities and to see the world in ways that do not always mirror the present. Creating can untap new ways of thinking about the world and seeing solutions to present problems.

One of the unique features of the arts is their ability to facilitate a creative and imaginative process wherein the artist is able to express their own understanding of a given topic. As Elliot Eisner (2004) has noted, “the arts, if they are about anything, are about the creation of a personal vision” (p. 44). To Eisner, the opportunity to present a personal vision necessitates a reimagining of the world and its constituted realities and to see in society something other than the current predicaments. Eisner suggests that what is gained by way of

the imaginative exploration “is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning” (p. 3). The arts, therefore, are not only about sharing a vision but, through the creative expression, being reflexively shaped by that vision too.

### ***Political Cartoons in Education***

Political cartoons are representations of societal phenomena and are guided by social and ideological intent. They are a creative medium where cartoonists explore different themes and meanings that represent group interests alongside the cartoonist’s own interests. They are produced to “inform the public about contemporary or topical issues and to discuss contentious socio-political issues” (Felicia, 2021, p. 269). As multimodal texts, political cartoons combine visual and verbal modes of communication to present social or political critique (Wawra, 2018, p.77). As a corollary of having a limited amount of space in which to operate, - often a single panel - political cartoonists make use of various devices such as metaphor, humor, and satire. The successful political cartoonist is thus able to communicate sophisticated visual rhetoric in a limited space.

Political cartoons’ brevity and function as stand-alone texts has made them ripe for inclusion in classes of varied subject matter and learner age. They can be used as set induction pieces to begin a lesson, be the primary focus of a lesson, or be used as an evaluation tool (Kleeman, 2006). For visual learners, they can be particularly empowering because they accommodate their preferred learning style (van Wyk, 2011, p. 125). Political cartoons are effective at engaging students in discussions about contemporary political issues (Kleeman,

2006, p. 146) and can also be used to foster peer-to-peer conversation and collaboration (van Wyk, 2011, p. 123). They are texts students enjoy looking at and this leads students to be more motivated in the classroom (van Wyk, 2011, p. 122), and they can foster critical thinking skills (Dougherty, 2002, p. 264). Cartoons can also be used to show different ideological and political approaches to an issue (Hammett & Mather, 2011, p. 104) and for helping students formulate their own responses to contemporary societal challenges (Toldeo, Yangco, & Espinosa, 2014, p. 46).

Concurrent with these merits is an acknowledgment that simply showing a student a cartoon and expecting them to immediately grasp its intent is unreasonable. This is because the interplay between visual and verbal prompts, the use of metaphors, the requirement to understand the context, the required knowledge of the intertextual references, the required knowledge of relevant cultural symbols, and the ability to piece together the disparate components into a coherent whole all make parsing a cartoon difficult (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010, p. 199-205). Educators therefore need to help students learn how to read cartoons and ensure that the cartoons' level of difficulty does not exceed the learners' abilities (Dougherty, 2002, p. 260).

### ***Student-Produced Cartoons***

The present study is focused on student-produced cartoons and studies have demonstrated that their inclusion offers students academic and social benefits. Research by John H. Bickford III has shown that cartoon-creation “elicits engagement, high levels of criticality, creative expressivity, and healthy analytical discussions” (Bickford, 2011, p. 57).

Producing cartoons has also been shown to increase students' motivation and, because students are more motivated, they also understand and recall content better (Rule and Auge, 2005, p. 556). Students are also more willing to depict less comfortable and more socially taboo topics in a visual format than in written or oral communication (Mutonyi and Kendrick, 2011). Writing about student-produced cartoons about AIDS in Uganda, Harriet Mutonyi and Maureen E. Kendrick (2011) observed: "cartoon representations served a unique dual role in that they allowed students to both maintain and transcend cultural barriers" (p. 245). This is because the students' work reflected the knowledge students have gleaned throughout their lifetimes about AIDS but also allowed for students to demonstrate their own thoughts and feelings about the syndrome.

### ***Arts in Israel Education***

The last decade has seen a proliferation in publications about Israel education in formal and experiential settings.<sup>i</sup> There have, however, been very few studies authored about the use of creative and visual arts in Israel education. A qualitative study by Matt Reingold (2021) examined how a group of high school students interpreted strips from Israeli cartoonist Shay Charka's series *Over the Line*. Charka's cartoons are heavily rooted in Israeli political and religious contexts, with Charka's autobiographical series frequently delving into the salience of both topics. In addition to replicating the above-mentioned educational outcomes like enjoyable learning and meaningful discussions, the study's results showed that Charka's transparent identity as a right-wing Orthodox Jew enabled students to better understand Israelis of his demographic, and that his cartoons humanized his community for the students.

There have been two studies that have examined student-produced creative products in Israel education. Ofra Backenroth and Alex Sinclair (2015) conducted a practitioner study on how preservice teachers used moviemaking as a tool for expressing their understanding of complex aspects in Israeli society while remaining emotionally connected to their pro-Israel identity. The authors concluded that moviemaking – and by extension the entire creative process – provides opportunity for “learners to really attack the issue . . . in a way that is very personally meaningful, and that . . . actually intensifies [the relationship with Israel]” (p. 79). The second example comes from a study Reingold (2020) authored about a group of high school seniors who produced artwork in response to poems, videos, and prose produced by Israelis. The students’ work demonstrated that they did not “see themselves as outsiders but as diasporic Zionists invested in building an Israel that they feel an even stronger connection toward” (p. 461). The two studies demonstrate that arts-based products provide students with opportunities for meaningful self-reflection in relation to Israel. They both, however, rely exclusively on student products to construe meaning and arrive at conclusions. This therefore means that student reflections on the process of learning through the arts is absent along with any opportunity for meaningful follow up on the students’ work. The present study begins to fill in this gap by examining students’ creative work but also spending time with the students themselves and hearing their reflections on their work and their experiences creating it. Doing so allows for a deeper understanding of the students themselves alongside being able to understand their creative and artistic process.

## **Method**

Tarbut High is a large community Jewish High School in a major Canadian metropolitan city. The school's mission statement identifies the school as supportive of Israel and as seeking to inculcate positive identification between students and Israel. The school hires teachers from Israel to stimulate dialogue about Israel amongst students and to create meaningful Israel programming. As well, Grade 11 students are required to study the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for one semester, and many choose to enroll in a Grade 12 elective on contemporary Israeli Society.

### **Data Collection**

During the 2022-2023 school year, the author taught a cohort of 22 students in a section of the contemporary Israeli Society course. In addition to a set curriculum that introduces students to Israel's politics and culture, students also study current events to understand what is happening in Israel in the present. Current events are taught by reading news articles and watching videos, and the author also presented students with political cartoons by illustrators that spanned Israel's political and religious spectra. Cartoons thus became a feature of classroom learning, with students frequently discussing and debating artists' intentions and their interpretations of different artistic works. At approximately the mid-point of the year, students were tasked with producing their own political cartoon based on the following instructions:

Produce one creative and thoughtful political cartoon that responds to at least one of the following questions:

- What does it mean to be Israeli? What should it be?



- What is Israeli identity? What should Israeli identity be?
- Who should be counted as belonging to Israeli society and who shouldn't?

Your political cartoon should be informed by at least one (but ideally more) of the texts and topics we have studied this year.

Your cartoon should include images/visuals and text that clearly express your answer to the question. Remember that in a political cartoon, everything is purposeful and intentional and is designed to make an impact on the reader! This means that you, too, should use signs and symbols (general and/or Israeli), people and metaphors in order to demonstrate your thinking about the texts.

You are also to compose a personal reflection statement of at least two double-spaced pages. This is your chance to share with me why you made what you made, what inspired you and how you arrived at your reading based on the texts, videos, and topics we have studied.

In addition to the students' cartoons and written statements which were collected, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 students after the cartoons were graded and returned.<sup>ii</sup> The primary purpose of the interview questions was to understand whether new understandings of Israel emerged because of creating a cartoon about Israeli society. To that end, direct questions about what students produced and whether they formed new associations with the country were asked. As an arts-based assessment, questions were also asked to try to ascertain student familiarity and comfort with producing creative works, whether the assignment proved to be difficult and what strategies were used to overcome any difficulties. Lastly, students were asked whether the assignment should be used in future years.

## Data Analysis

The data was considered using what Robert S. Weiss (1995) called issue-focused analysis. This is an approach that emphasizes the importance of the issue at hand as opposed to the individual interviewees. Doing so places the students' perspectives in dialogue with each other to generate a more comprehensive understanding of student-produced political cartoons in Israel education. While individual interviewee profiles are not generated, issue-focused analysis still does use individual perspectives to serve as examples that are demonstrative of broader trends in the data that was collected and analyzed.

Data was coded and analyzed using grounded theory methodology with the goal of arriving at new theories that demonstrate the merits of using arts-based assessments in Israel education. As a research method, grounded theory is an "approach to qualitative data collection and analysis, ultimately generating a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon being studied" (Olshansky, 2014, p. 1). The interviews were transcribed and then, along with the students' written submissions, were coded using open coding to identify "distinct units of meaning" (Goulding, 2002, p. 74). I then used focused coding to generate descriptive categories and higher order categories (Liska Belgrave & Seide, 2019) that explain the educational merits of introducing arts-based assessments in Israel education.

## Findings

Four primary findings emerged from the different sets of data. First, producing a cartoon facilitated new thinking about Israel. Second, frequent exposure to cartoons in class made

producing a cartoon easier. Third, the opportunity to express ideas verbally and in writing helped students become more confident in expressing their creativity. Fourth, despite finding the assignment challenging, students saw tremendous value in its inclusion in the course.

### ***Cartooning facilitated new lines of thinking about Israel***

#### *Thinking Metaphorically*

Much like the cartoons that students viewed in class throughout the year, students' creative products revealed that they also thought metaphorically in order to convey how they understood Israeli society. Zane,<sup>iii</sup> a student who aspires to play professional baseball, used the sport as the basis for his exploration of how *Mizrahim*, Judeo-Arabs, struggled to integrate and adjust to Israeli society. In his cartoon, a player named Mizrahi has just been called up to bat. Even before the first pitch has been thrown, the umpire – illustrated to look like Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu – has called the player out. Zane's visual metaphor uses sport as the medium for conveying his commentary on the unjustness of *Mizrahi* mistreatment in Israeli society. Here, Netanyahu's inclusion metonymically symbolizes the Israeli government, with the prime minister serving as the most recognizable Israeli leader that Zane knows.

A second example where visual metaphors were used to convey understanding of Israeli society was offered by Marley. In her digitally-produced cartoon, Marley illustrated two cookie cutters in the shapes of ultra-Orthodox men replete with ritual fringes and top hats. The cookie cutters are made of metal and are not malleable. Nestled inside each of the cookie cutters is an individual, a Black Ethiopian Israeli inside one and a *Mizrahi* man inside the other. Neither figure comfortably occupies the space afforded by the cookie cutter, with the woman having to

bend her knees to fit into the shape and the man needing to awkwardly position his arms. Unsurprisingly, both are illustrated with unhappy facial expressions (Figure 1). In her written statement, she explained: “I seek to depict pressures to conform by showing how society at large imposes the values and cultural practices of mainstream Ashkenazi Judaism on all Israelis, regardless of their traditions. Instead of feeling welcomed, people from these communities feel like they do not belong because they don’t conform to the flavour of Judaism that permeates conventional Israeli identity”. Unlike Zane’s visual metaphor which draws upon his interest in baseball, Marley’s is drawn from her imagination and the ways that she has come to think of Israeli society as a space designed for Orthodox men wherein everyone else must contort themselves in order to fit in, even if it leaves them uncomfortable and unable to be their true selves.



Figure 1. Cookie cutter cartoon by Marley.

*Making personal connections to Israel*

Students frequently made personal connections between their own interests and Israeli society and subsequently illustrated those interests into their commentaries on Israeli society. Students in this category were inspired by values they cared deeply about and brought them to bear on how they understood Israel. Much like Marley whose illustration depicted Ethiopians struggling to fit into Israeli hegemonies, Jessica was also troubled by racism and exclusion in Israeli society. Dissimilarly, however, was that Jessica was explicitly inspired by her own experiences combatting discrimination in Canadian society. Jessica chose to illustrate groups of people trying to enter Israel through two passport control gates. One of the security gates is labelled “Jew” and individuals of many different colors seamlessly passing through. A second gate is labelled “Non-Jew” and here, four individuals shaded fully in black are prevented from passing through the gate (Figure 2). In her interview, Jessica explained that the impetus for her cartoon was a video that was screened in class featuring Ethiopian Jews reflecting on how they felt rejected by other Jewish Israelis because of their different Jewish practices (Vice News, 2020). She said that the Ethiopian experience was the one she “felt most passionate about because [she’s] cared about racism [her] whole life”. Learning that racism existed in Israel didn’t lead Jessica to reject Israel, but it did make her “wish that people could see things differently and that [she] could create change somehow”.

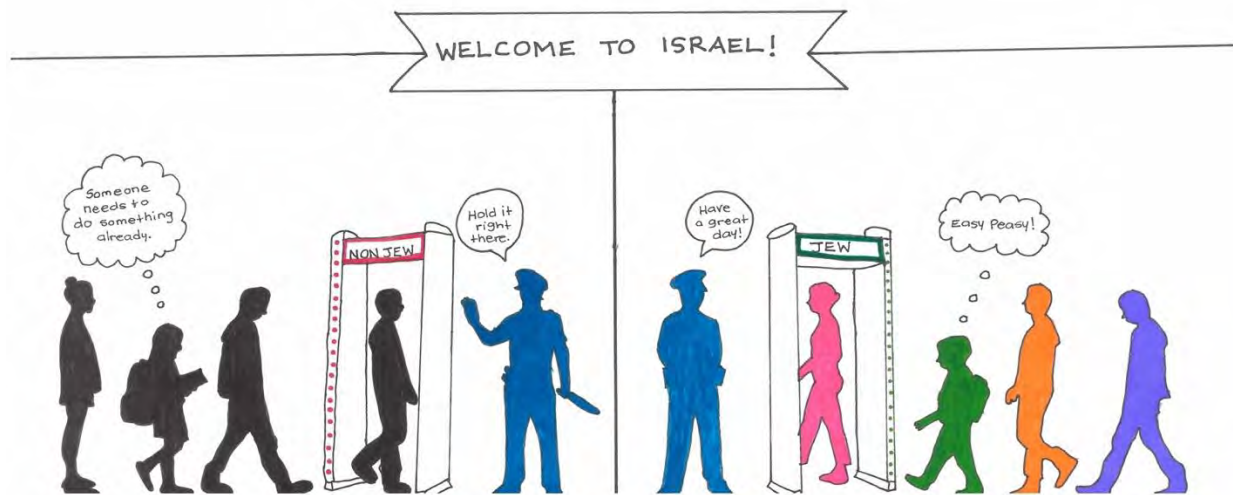


Figure 2. Border control for Jews and non-Jews by Jessica.

A significantly more personal cartoon was produced by Megan. For her cartoon, Megan drew upon her own experiences of feeling excluded from the Jewish community because her father is a convert and because of her light blond hair and bright blue eyes. In her digital image, Megan illustrated three different figures, one a Black Ethiopian male, one an ultra-Orthodox Jewish male, and one a blond-haired female, with the word "Jew" atop each (Figure 3). When I asked her whether the third figure was self-referential, Megan replied in the affirmative:

The last person was supposed to represent someone like me, someone who's a diaspora Jew and not necessarily the typical look of a Jew and not necessarily someone you think of when you think of a Jew. I'm... well, at least my family isn't very religious and we don't practice Judaism as much as other people do. I feel... I don't know, I don't have the look of a Jew. I wrote Jew on top of all the people just to show that no matter what they look like, no matter where they come from, the color the skin, the language they speak, how they celebrate Judaism, they're all Jewish. They're all a part of one religion. I'm not

from Israel, I only visited Israel once, and I practice Judaism in a different way than most people, but I'm still a Jew, and I still want to be recognized as one.

For both Megan and Jessica, cartooning afforded them the opportunity to bring themselves and their own experiences into their learning about Israel which made their studies meaningful and relevant.

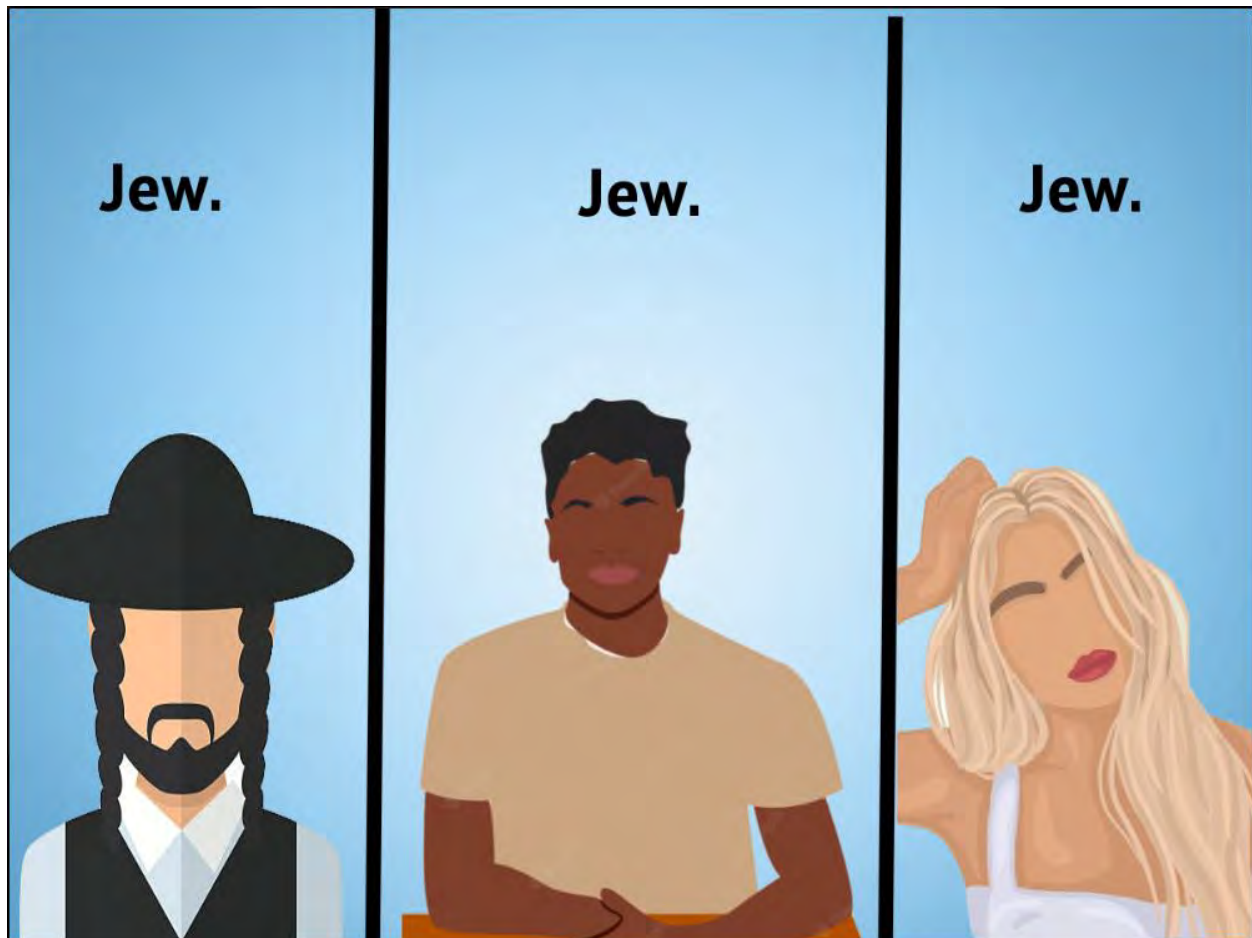


Figure 3. Three different Jews by Megan.

### *Envisioning a different Israel*

Both Megan's and Jessica's cartoons about their disappointment and frustration with marginalization towards religious and ethnic communities expressed a desire for the current



situation to be changed in the future. Counted amongst the cartoons submitted were also examples that went one step further than just hopes by actually envisioning what a future Israel would look like if discrimination was excised. Dylan's cartoon contains three components. In the bottom corner is a female cartoon character who is standing with her hands clasped together. A thought bubble is illustrated emerging from the character and it contains a collection of photographs of different types of Jews – religious, secular, Ashkenazi, Ethiopian, and *Mizrahi*. Beneath the thought bubble is Theodor Herzl's famous phrase: "if you will it, it is no dream". By invoking Herzl's statement, Dylan reappropriates it by shifting it from its original reference to the founding of the state of Israel to the founding of a state that is inclusive of all of its Jewish citizens. When she was asked for the inspiration behind her cartoon, Dylan reflected on the integration challenges faced by *Mizrahim* and Ethiopians, alongside a desire "to show [her] ideal Israel". Dylan's work is demonstrative of how the arts enabled a problem-solving approach to contemporary Israeli problems.

### ***Learning through the Arts Facilitated Being Assessed Through the Arts***

Amongst the learners interviewed, there were certainly students who were excited about the prospect of a creative assignment but there was also a cohort of 7 learners whose interviews revealed that they were apprehensive about the assignment when it was distributed. Despite their reservations, the students in this group concluded that creating a cartoon was a positive learning experience. The common factor that all seven shared was that learning through the arts by way of frequent lessons featuring cartoons enabled them to feel more confident in producing a cartoon of their own.

The students who were nervous shared that they felt that they were neither creative enough nor artistically competent enough to produce a cartoon of their own. Dylan put it most succinctly: “Nervous. I’m not so good with the creative things”. Kate explained: “I was not excited about it because I’m not creative and I don’t like thinking of things like that and doing artwork”. Despite their fears, these students found the experience to be not as bad as they had anticipated and, for some, it was even enjoyable. For example, Dylan shared that getting to “match a picture with my thoughts was a cool way to show your own opinion instead of just writing a paper” and that “there’s a value in doing creative things”. Despite his original concerns of not being able to express himself visually, Benji concluded that he “thought it was fun” to make a cartoon.

A common thread that ran through the responses of the seven students who were wary of the assignment was the value they found in seeing the work of other cartoonists. As Robbie remarked: “I think I wouldn’t’ve been able to do the assignment without having looked at and talked about examples in class” Across the interviews, students made explicit links between the formative learning and the summative assessment, with the exposure to cartoons serving as a valuable preparatory tool for their own creative expression. The value was, however, felt in different ways by different learners. For instance, Blair appreciated seeing and discussing the layers of detail and symbolism that cartoonists embed in their works because this helped her do likewise in her own cartoon. Conversely, Matan noted that the classroom learning helped him better understand the conventions of political cartoons, including how to use text sparingly in order to enhance a cartoon’s impact.

Counted amongst the interviewees were also students who were very excited to be able to make a cartoon. Both Penny and Megan yoked their interest in creative expression to the difficulties they experience on more traditional summative assessments like tests and essays. Megan explained that the assignment was “a good chance to show my creativity and demonstrate what I’ve learned in the course,” while Penny said that she was “excited for it because I am not as good at tests so I like creative projects where I can actually express what I know”. Others shared that they were excited at the opportunity to try to replicate the types of cartoons that they have been looking at in class. In response to what his reaction was to being assigned the project, Zane explained: “I was excited because it’s been like three or four times where we’ve been looking at other cartoons. Every time I thought about how the cartoonists were able to come up with such creative ideas. And when I realized that I can do the same thing, it was exciting because I wanted to make something really creative”.

### ***Concretizing Ideas Helps Unlock Creativity***

Approximately one week before the students’ political cartoons were due, they were given class time for conferencing with their teacher. This time was allocated to provide students the opportunity to discuss their ideas, ask questions, clarify expectations, and receive support. For some students, especially amongst students who were nervous about having to make their own cartoon, conferencing was an essential part of the process because it helped them sift through their ideas and generate a more actionable plan. Blair shared: “I was very lost with my ideas. They were separate ideas and conferencing helped solidify my plan rather than just sitting there with my thoughts, trying a million different things”. Similarly, Dylan explained “I had the idea of

what I wanted to make in my head, but I didn't really know how to convey that in a picture". The opportunity to talk through their ideas was crucial to helping Blair and Dylan be able to put their ideas on to paper and actually create something.

Conferencing also proved useful even for students who were excited about the prospect of making a cartoon and who had a plan in mind. For these students, the opportunity to discuss their ideas with their teacher and their peers provided them with new lines of inquiry and additional ways to express their ideas. Both Jessica and Hunter discussed their ideas with their teacher but they also discussed their ideas with each other. In their respective interviews, they each referred to the other's help in enhancing their final product. As a student who is deeply concerned with social justice issues in the world, Jessica wanted her cartoon to reflect her new awareness that racism exists in Israeli society towards members of the country's Ethiopian population. Discussing her ideas with Hunter validated her plan and offered her "reassurance to know that it was a topic worth doing". Conversely, Hunter appreciated the perspectives offered by his teacher, Jessica, and even his parents because when you are "thinking about something yourself, you're always going to miss something ... when you think of something in your head, you usually think it's going to be all good but you need a second or third opinion to make it even better".

The benefits of concretizing their thinking in the conferences was also evident in the students' responses to whether it was necessary to submit a written statement alongside their cartoon. No interviewee complained about having to write an accompanying text or suggested that it was unnecessary. Instead, the students spoke positively about having to put their ideas down on paper because it afforded them the opportunity to try to ensure their teacher would

be able to understand their cartoon. At its most basic, writing down ideas helped mitigate concerns that their artwork would not be understood. Echoing her previously mentioned concerns of being able to successfully convey her ideas creatively, Dylan stated: "Sometimes you can't always get the message across in a picture. Personally, I wasn't confident in my artistic abilities, so it gave me an opportunity to explain my train of thought and why I did what I did". But for others, writing ideas down allowed for them to show their teacher that they tried to replicate the complex layering that they saw in professional cartoons but were not sure if their teacher would be able to identify all the subtle artistic choices that were made. Hunter explained: "I think when you have the artist write something, you can see all the points they're trying to make and the thought process behind it. I don't think you can do this assignment without it". Zane, who tied his cartoon in with his love of baseball, shared: "there's a part that you need to interpret, and sometimes it can just go right over your head and it could be a really important part in the cartoon that I hid a little bit. And if I didn't write out my ideas, it could have been ignored".

Students also shared that the act of writing necessitated that they be purposeful in their creativity. Kate, a student who often wanted to score high grades while using as minimal effort as possible, felt that the written statement held her accountable to her own work and ensured that she did not just assemble a collection of disparate and disconnected images and call it a cartoon. She said: "You can make anything you want but you have to be able to explain it and you can't just put something on a piece of paper." Jessica felt that having to write her ideas down forced her to be more thoughtful and purposeful in what she chose to include in her work. She relayed: "Writing the statement taught me about what I was doing and the

importance of symbolism and how it related to the topic". The students' perspectives on the pre-assessment strategy of conferencing and also the requirement to compose a written statement revealed that these assignment components were imperative to the students' ability to successfully complete their political cartoons.

### ***Arts-Based Assessments were Valuable to Learners***

Students were quick to identify that the assignment was not simple or easy to complete. It was, in fact, difficult for some. For Fiona, having to share her opinion about a topic through a creative medium was particularly challenging. Others, like Marley, felt wary of commenting on a topic that does not personally affect her. Most common, however, were variations of what Hunter explained: "the hardest parts were actually finding an idea and then making it happen". Despite these concerns, students consistently affirmed the value of the assessment as an integral part of classroom learning and one that should be assigned again in subsequent years.

While some students' explanations tied making a cartoon back to the classroom experience of seeing professional cartoons, others like Blair and Megan spoke of the value of being able to be assessed through the arts. This is because the arts afforded them the chance to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that allowed them to make use of the class curriculum alongside their own lived experiences. For Megan in particular, the opportunity to create a cartoon was a powerful experience. As noted above, she drew upon her experiences of being rejected for not looking Jewish and illustrated three different figures, including herself, with the word "Jew" atop each. She explained: "Making a cartoon allows students to use their creativity and use personal experiences to actually make their assignment more meaningful, rather than

just writing an essay that you don't really care about, or that you aren't interested in doing. This is something that people...well, at least me, I actually cared about." What Megan is offering here is a powerful statement about the value of arts-based learning as a tool that enabled her to have a personally meaningful experience in Israel education.

A secondary benefit of being assessed through the arts was that it allowed students who prefer creative assignments to demonstrate their competency because the assessment played to their strengths. Jessica identified the benefit thusly: "it gives kids who have a hard time writing and expressing themselves through words a chance to have their moment and be able to use their artistic and creative abilities to create something that's really powerful. And I think that makes this a very valuable project".

## **Discussion**

The data paints a robust portrait of a community of learners who – despite some apprehension – came to see great value in making their own political cartoon. Producing a political cartoon did not, however, come naturally. The students' responses clearly indicate that the time spent studying cartoons in class played a significant role in shaping how students approached their own cartoon. Furthermore, allocating time to discuss ideas was also not ancillary to their perceived successes. When considered together, the students' responses to the questions about in-class learning and in-class conferencing show the value of teachers' investing time in pre-assessment strategies. For students unfamiliar with the visual aesthetics of political cartoons or uncertain about how to transform their ideas into something tangible, seeing examples of others' work and talking through the creative process was seminal to the

experience. Equally important to the learners – even though it added more work – was the opportunity to present their ideas in a composed statement. Drawing upon their own experiences in class with unpacking some of the hidden layers of cartoons, students felt it important that they do the same with their own work, sharing with their teacher their intentions and thought processes.

What emerged most clearly from the students work and interviews was how the political cartoons played an important role in affording them the opportunity to think deeply and meaningfully about contemporary Israeli society and their own relationship with the state. Cartoons like Megan's and Dylan's were certainly personal and rooted in their own experiences but the personal experiences were intertwined with their understandings of the complexities in Israeli society. As both indicated, the latitude to think creatively afforded them the opportunity to engage with issues that matter to them and to express their ideas in a way that could not have been accomplished in prose.

Megan's cartoon is an expression of response to her own discrimination and her inclusion of herself in the cartoon links together her experiences alongside those faced by contemporary Israelis. In their analysis of Ugandan students' AIDS cartoons, Mutonyi and Kendrick determined that cartooning facilitated the opportunity to express ideas about taboo topics. Similarly, Megan was able to share her ideas visually and even allowed her classmates to see her work during a lesson where the cartoons were shared, but she chose to temper her work by explaining that her presence in the strip was there to just show an additional example of who can be considered a Jew. The opportunities afforded by the arts-based assignment



therefore allowed for Megan to mine her own anxieties and doubts and to reveal them in a safe-enough space with her teacher and also with herself.

Dylan was both the most reticent to having to complete a creative assignment but also the lone student to articulate a fully-formed vision for Israel's future. Her work reflects Greene's (2001) contention that the arts help students become partners in fashioning a world that is better than the incomplete one that currently exists. In her cartoon, Dylan transcends commenting on a problem and instead creatively thinks about solutions to them. In this sense, Dylan's cartoon demonstrates a dual layer of creativity: there is the creativity of producing a cartoon but also the creativity needed to envision alternative realities to the ones that currently exist. As Dylan herself acknowledged, thinking creatively is a type of thinking that is foreign to her but being required to do so freed her to think in new directions and to see Israel in an alternative light.

Learners like Zane and Marley who did not draw upon lived experiences were also able to demonstrate sophisticated thinking about Israeli society in their respective baseball and cookie cutter cartoons. This was accomplished through thinking metaphorically. Metaphor is not just the linkage of two disparate items through comparison. Instead, it is a mode of communication that draws upon a deep understanding of a topic and an ability to abstract it to its core or essential components. When we make metaphor, we open ourselves up to others to show how we think, relate, and understand a topic because the metaphor itself is personal. The use of metaphor in political cartoons allows for complex ideas to be communicated in a limited amount of space through the affective domain of the visual. In some cases, like Zane's, words were used to help convey meaning, but in Marley's case, the cartoon relied solely on the

reader's ability to conjoin the disparate visual signifiers into a cohesive statement. As a mode of communication that operates in the realms of the affective and the emotional, Marley and Zane are, just like Jessica and Megan also drawing upon their personal feelings towards Israeli society, albeit in a wholly different way through their use of visual metaphors.

## **Conclusion**

The students whose voices and artwork have shaped this study are unique; they brought their own experiences to bear on how they understand, think, and relate to Israel. But they are also not unique because all students, like all people, are able to demonstrate creative inquiry when positioned for success. The outcomes that have been demonstrated here are eminently replicable but it is imperative to bear in mind that they were not produced just because students were asked to make a cartoon. Instead, pre-planning and prose requirements played important roles in facilitating a meaningful and educational experience. To that end, educators must be purposeful and thoughtful about how the arts are used in their classrooms. Like any other subject, teaching in and through the arts requires an understanding of the medium and the pedagogical content knowledge of how to do it effectively (Shulman, 1986). As well, research in arts-based learning has demonstrated that it is most effective when it is a regular part of the classroom routine and so it cannot be just a one-off experience (Upitis, 2011). While the cartoon that was studied for this paper was the lone creative assessment in the course, arts-based learning was a regular part of the class dynamic, such that the learners saw it as an essential component to their own creative successes.

The results here show that cartooning is serious work. When done effectively, it engages with the hearts and minds of the learners. The minimal use of words in cartoons does not negate the sophisticated emotions and thoughts that are brought to bear on a subject. In as politically charged an environment as an Israel education classroom can be, sometimes the words are hard to come by. The opportunity to think metaphorically, creatively, and personally allows students to embrace these other forms of communication which are certainly no less important and, in some cases, even more important. For where words fail, a purposefully powerful image can resonate all the more so.

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<sup>i</sup> See Davis and Alexander (2023) for an overview and analysis of the recent literature.

<sup>ii</sup> I opted to wait to interview students until after assignments were returned to try to mitigate against students framing their responses in order to try to curry favour for positive grades.

<sup>iii</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.