



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Encountering Our Muslim Neighbors, Through Service, Scholarship, and a Shared Meal

John Mark Elliot, Christ Church Episcopal School, Greenville, SC

Abstract

This curriculum outlines a week-long collaborative project between two religiously affiliated schools, an Islamic academy and an Episcopal college-preparatory school. The project was designed for juniors and seniors at the Episcopal school to learn about Islam as a “lived” religion. The project includes three primary components: 1) a shared service project, 2) a shared meal, and 3) an interview. The project will supplement prior classroom curricula that focus on Islam in the abstract (its history, beliefs, practices, interfaith tensions, etc.) in hopes of humanizing and understanding our Muslim neighbors.

Goals

- 1) to equip students with a religious literacy that moves beyond basic facts about Islam to a more robust understanding of Islam as it relates to our present lives as American and global citizens
- 2) to curb rising Islamophobia and prejudice particularly aimed at Middle Eastern practitioners of Islam
- 3) to outfit students with tools they can use to discern and critique media and cultural depictions of Islam
- 4) to encourage interfaith and intercultural inclusivity/tolerance via a shared goal: serving the greater Greenville community

Preparation Before Project Week

Students:

Students will have been introduced to Islam the week prior to “Project Week” and will have learned at least these basic concepts during that time: the historical context for the establishment and spread of Islam, the life and teachings of Muhammad, the Five Pillars of Islam, passages from the Qur’ān, popular rituals, “major” holidays, the rise of Islamism, and the diversity within Islam (Sunni, Shia, progressive, moderate, etc.)

Students will have also been prepped from the beginning of the year about the nature of the course. We are engaging in study about religion, not the study of religion. Consequently, the purpose of our site visit will be repeatedly expressed: we are engaging the Islamic academy community as observers and inquirers about Islam, not as practitioners of Islam, even if one of us happens to practice Islam.

Resources for Students:

- 1) Excerpts from Stephen Prothero’s *God is Not One* (pgs. 25-61)
- 2) Zach Anner’s endearing video introduction to Muslim-American life through a millennial lens: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=zach+anner+islam
- 3) Case study called “Islam in the News” where students consider the lived experiences of American Muslims amidst the rise of Islamic hate crimes and current political immigration policy. They discuss two diverse newspaper articles about Islam.
- 4) Short essay engaging students to think critically about Western privilege. The prompt asks students to respond to a friend who sees a group of Middle Eastern men walking down the street in traditional Muslim garb and makes a (not too obvious) statement implying Islam is a monolithic religion of violence.
- 5) PBS Documentary: “Islam: Empires of Faith”

Teachers

Teachers must complete these tasks in advance of the project:

- 1) Obtain approval of the trip from school administrators.
- 2) Contact the Islamic academy to coordinate dates, times, food costs, purpose, and set other parameters.
- 3) Acquire an appropriate number of chaperones for the trip.
- 4) Disseminate and gather permission slips from students.
- 5) Coordinate transportation (i.e. drivers, time of departure and return, etc.).

Daily Plans for Project Week

1) Monday: Preparing for Dialogue

Learning Hospitality and Prepping Interview Etiquette

1) Lead students through an exercise to determine the definition of hospitality. Ask students to get in groups of 4 or 5 and pose this question: what does hospitality look like, sound like or feel like? They have 90 seconds for everyone to respond. Then pose the question: what does the opposite of hospitality look like, sound like, or feel like? They have 90 seconds for each group member to respond. Then lead the group in an open discussion about what hospitality will look like for them at the site visit. Come up with 3 basic hospitality rules or guidelines as a class that everyone pledges to keep for the visit.

2) Interview Prep: ASKR

- Assumptions: are you making any in this question?
- Statement or question?
- Key words: is your word choice problematic?
- Rephrase: how might we ask this differently?

3) Teach students how to ask good questions by writing a “bad” question on the board. Ask students to determine why it is problematic. Ask students to rephrase the question.

4) Ask students to pair up and create a list of ten questions that meet the criteria mentioned above. Encourage them to ask questions that will illicit responses we couldn't find in our textbook. Each pair will share what they think is their “best” question, the question they think will get to the heart of Islam as a lived religion. Ask students who are not sharing to listen and determine (using ASKR) if the question is appropriate or if there is a better way to ask it.

2) Tuesday: Site Visit

Service Learning Project – Harvest Hope Food Bank (90 minutes)

Description: Students will help pack and package boxes of nonperishable food items to ship to local communities in need. Students from the Christian school will partner with a student from the Islamic school to package particular products or complete individual tasks. The teachers will pair students according to gender.

Lunch – Traditional Cuisine (40 minutes)

Description: The Islamic school will provide food for students. Students will serve themselves. Students will be tasked with sitting next to someone not from their school. This informal time will be shuffled with optional go-around questions (more light-hearted) placed on the table. The shared meal component reflects scholarship on the “contact hypothesis,” which argues that the

best way to disrupt prejudice is through social interaction. (see eg, psychologists Gordon Allport and Thomas Pettigrew and scholars of religion Robert Putnam and David Campbell)

Interview (30 minutes)

Students will have 15 minutes to interview each other. After asking permission, students are free to record the interview via a recorder or through written text.

3) Wednesday: Debrief

Socratic Seminar

Sample questions:

- 1) How did this experience match or conflict with images or conversations you've witnessed in the media?
- 2) What are a few things you learned, saw, tasted, smelled, experienced that surprised you? Or that you did not encounter in our textbook?
- 3) How is your experience of religion (day in and day out) different or similar to those of the Islamic students we befriended?
- 4) In what ways were your interests, ideas, etc. similar to your Islamic peers? In what ways did you connect with them?
- 5) Do you think it would be beneficial for all students at our school to do something similar to this project? Why or why not?

4) Thursday: Interview Project

Reflective Essay

Students will write a 250 – 300 word reflective essay about their interview. The rubric for all writing assignments in class will be used. The essay prompt will ask students to reflect on what a stranger to Islam should know in order to understand the lived religious experience of an American Muslim teenager. Guiding questions: What are the things they do to cultivate a religious life? Is there tension between breathing the air of modernity and practicing their tradition? How do they define what it means to be a Muslim? What stereotypes do they wish were dismantled about their religious community?

5) Friday: Assessment

Wrap-up

Students will engage in a shorter, more directed Socratic-like seminar where I ask students questions from the essay prompt. The goal of this time is twofold: 1) for students to see connections or common threads between the Islamic students' lived experience of religion and 2) for

students to see differences, the diversity, and the dynamism within even a single Islamic community.

Practicing Hospitality

Finally, students will write personal thank-you notes to their interviewee. Students will have a creative opportunity to draw an image they associated with their time at the Islamic center on the front of the card.

Success!

Video of students articulating the benefits of an interfaith experience:

<http://www.greenvilleonline.com/media/cinematic/video/98281406/students-from-st-josephs-catholic-school-visit-with-islamic-students/>

***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.***