



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume II: Exploring the Middle East: Hands-On Approaches

Introduction

The terrorist attacks on September 11th brought the Middle East to the forefront of American consciousness. Students of all ages had questions: Why did it happen? Who did it? Why do “they” hate us? This placed teachers in the position to answer these questions, but many had few answers themselves.

These units developed from a seminar intended to address these questions. The seminar focused on contemporary politics of the Middle East. It was intended not only to help teachers understand the “high politics” of the region -- the battles between elites that have led to the establishment of borders, wars and peace, and changes in political regimes, but also to allow them to examine how these politics affected individuals’ everyday experiences. In addition to using conventional academic materials, it used contemporary feature films from the Middle East, memoirs, and novels to explore the attitudes and concerns of the people in the region. After exploring this material, teachers returned at the end of the seminar to the questions of what motivated the attacks on September 11th, and how the US could respond.

In their units, the teachers chose to focus on the question, “who are the people in the Middle East?” The first two units, those by David Howe and Angelo Pompano, explore the societies, languages, customs, religions and geography of the region. David Howe’s unit does so cross-nationally, comparing Egypt, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia, while Angelo Pompano’s unit explores diversity within a single case, Lebanon. The third unit, by Judith Zurkus, also gives teachers and students an opportunity to examine the religion, culture, lifestyle and materials in the region, although in this case with an emphasis on Islamic Art.

In writing their units, these teachers grappled successfully with the question of how to teach children about “the other.” They pay particular attention to the diversity within the Middle East and to the extent to which the lives for children in the Middle East are similar to those of their students. Recognizing the diversity in the region and giving students the capacity to see how their experiences match those of children in the Middle East help to counter the tendency to stereotype the people in the region. As Angelo Pompano writes, “By seeing the diverse Arab subcultures within the Lebanese culture, it is hoped that the students will understand that it is impossible to make generalization about Arabs just as it is impossible to make generalizations about any group.”

The units also provide fascinating hands-on learning experiences for elementary and secondary school students. Each teacher gives students the opportunity to be creative while exploring the region. David Howe provides students with the opportunity to create a game, establishing the rules of play, the style of the board, and other features of the game in addition to gathering the information on the Middle East. Angelo Pompano establishes a framework through which a team of teachers can work together, combining learning experiences that culminate in a traditional Lebanese festival. Finally, Judith Zurkus provides an intriguing way for students

to recreate Islamic art, focusing on textiles, metalwork, calligraphy and miniature paintings. In each case, the emphasis is on allowing students to explore their own creativity as well as the region.

These complementary units, which teachers may wish to combine in various ways, thus provide excellent introductions to studying society and culture in the Middle East. They give students an opportunity to be creative, gain self-esteem, and develop skills in language, history, art, music and social studies. They also allow them to learn about a region that is becoming increasingly important to students today. As the Middle East continues to be at the forefront of US politics, and students are ever more aware of this region, such introductions that allow them to understand the region through experiences that are fun, creative and informative will be increasingly important as well.

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