

Lesson Plan: Unity in Diversity

Exploring Islam in the United States

Grades

6-12

Subjects

Civics, American History, Language Arts, Media Studies, Social Studies, Global History

Overview

In this lesson, students will examine the cultural, geographic, and linguistic diversity of the Muslim community in America, developing an understanding of its historical roots and heterogeneous nature.

Materials Needed

- *This Is Where I Need To Be*—Chapters 1, 2, 6, and 19 connect most strongly to this lesson. Other related chapters are 7, 20, 22, and 23.
- Copies of “A Timeline of Muslim Events in America” from *Change the Story* at <http://tinyurl.com/5mbyqq>
- Reproducible—“Wall of Fame: Personalities”
- Reproducible—“Wall of Fame: Research Notes”
- Reproducible—“Wall of Fame: Profile”

Activities/Procedures

1. WARM-UP/CONVERSATION STARTERS:

Share the following with your students:

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are 5 to 7 million Muslims in the United States
- They are African Americans, South Asians, Middle Easterners, Africans, Europeans, and many more
- 64 percent of Arab Americans are Christian
- The Christian Word for God in Arabic speaking nations is Allah

Divide students into two groups and ask each group to find the answers to the following questions. Provide them with a copy of *Change the Story*'s “A Timeline of Muslim Events in America”:

- a. Who were some of the first Muslim arrivals in America?
- b. Where and when was the first American mosque built? By which ethnic group?

Reconvene the class and ask students to share their responses. Then, using a world map, have students pinpoint the countries that came up in their answers to the above questions. Ask them to identify other countries of the world where Muslims in the U.S. originate.

Once the map activity is completed, if it hasn't already been identified, place a pin on the USA and remind students that many African American Muslims are able to trace their Islamic heritage to the Muslims who were brought to America as slaves from Africa.

Ask students to discuss the following questions:

- Did your findings surprise you? Why or why not?
- How do you think geographical and linguistic differences play a role in a person's religious identity?
- If Muslims in America come from such diverse backgrounds and nations, do you think there is such a thing as one monolithic Islamic culture?

Share with students that they are going to focus on gaining a better understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the Muslim community in the United States.

2. QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

As a class, read and discuss the related chapters in *This Is Where I Need To Be*, focusing on the following:

- a. Make a list of the phrases that the authors use to speak about their identities and the countries from which they originate. What stands out to you when you look at this list? How do you understand your readings in the context of the following quote from a letter Malcolm X, a black Civil Rights leader, wrote on his pilgrimage to Mecca:

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) while praying to the same God with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of the blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana. We are truly all the same—brothers.

- b. What do you notice about the names of some of those authors featured in the oral histories: Priscilla, Danielle, Adam, Fanta, Sokol, Tania? What conclusions can you draw from these names about Muslims and their cultural backgrounds?
- c. How do you understand these oral histories in the context of the following remark by Dr. Umar Abd-Allah, author of *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Story of Alexander Russell Webb*:

For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law. It...fanned a brilliant peacock's tail of unity in diversity from the heart of China to the shores of the Atlantic. ...in that regard, (Islam) has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African.

- d. Find a passage in Chapter 1 where the author reflects on her relationship with a non-Muslim member of her family. What do we learn about the author's relationship with that family member and her extended family? Can you identify with this experience in some way? Give an example.

- e. Based on these oral histories, analyze the connection between the authors' religion, cultural background, and identity. How do the three intersect? How did these oral histories make you think differently about your understanding of Muslims in America?

3. CLASS PROJECT:

On the reproducible "Wall of Fame: Personalities" you will find a list of notable historical, literary, political, and cultural figures, all of whom happen to be Muslim. Separate the names, put them all into a hat and ask each student to pick one name. Tell students that they are going to be researching and writing mini-biographies to create a "Wall of Fame" which will highlight the Muslim community's diversity and contributions to society.

Have students use the handout "Wall of Fame: Research Notes" to collect and compile their information. They can then consolidate their research, using the reproducible "Wall of Fame: Profile".

If Internet access is available, students might also write their biographies following a wikipedia format and post them on a group blog, using blogger.com or a similar blogging site. To create a character sketch on their blog, students can:

- write a short biography of the person they researched
- add quotes by or about them
- add excerpts from and/or links to articles written by or about them
- post images, art and lyrics to songs they feel express the personality of this individual

When students are finished, you might have them do oral presentations about the individuals they researched. You may also create an exhibit highlighting their work.

Afterwards, reconvene the class and evaluate their experiences with this assignment. Some reflection questions you might pose are:

- What aspect(s) of their research did they find most fascinating?
- What aspect(s) did they find most surprising?
- Would they use what they now know to dispel myths and misinformation about Muslims on an individual as well as on a collective, large-scale basis? If yes, how?

4. HOMEWORK OR LONGER-TERM ASSIGNMENTS:

- a. Have students take *Changethestory.net*'s "Millionaire Quiz" online at <http://tinyurl.com/5w5m8j>. It tests students' knowledge of Muslims on everything from demographic information to cultural and artistic contributions, and would provide an interesting launching pad for group discussions or further research.
- b. Ask students to view the PBS documentary *Prince Among Slaves* which examines the roots of Islam in America. This PBS documentary tells the story of Abdul Rahman, an African Muslim prince. In 1788, the year Abdul Rahman was sold into slavery, his father controlled a country larger than the United States at the time. Yet, once captured and sold, Rahman would struggle and toil for 40 long years. Through it all, he strove to hold onto his Muslim identity.

Following the movie, divide students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions before reconvening and sharing their findings with the rest of the class:

1. Were you previously familiar with the fact that many of the slaves brought to America were Muslim? Does this movie change any prior perceptions you had, especially about African Americans today?
 2. Were you surprised to learn that people of aristocracy were also amongst those enslaved? Why or why not?
 3. What was there about the protagonist's sense of identity that empowered him to stay hopeful and determined? Illustrate with three examples from the movie.
 4. Many slaves had to take on the names of their owners. In the context of identity, why do you feel the slave-owners practiced this?
- c. Ask students to answer/ the following questions:
- What religious food and drink restrictions do Muslims have?
 - Do you have any foods that you can't eat for health or religious reasons?
- Have students find two recipes reflecting the food prepared in any three Muslim countries or by Muslim families in the United States. You can culminate this research assignment by hosting a food festival where students bring in foods from different parts of the Muslim world, including the United States. Or, students can create a recipe book of "Muslim Foods" which shows the cultural diversity of the cuisines that are shared by members of one religion. This activity further reinforces the lesson that while the religious tenets of Islam are often one and the same, Islamic culture varies from region to region.
- d. Students find photos and provide a brief description of wedding dresses worn by Muslim brides: one bride from the Middle East and one from South Asia. Ask students to compare the common features and the differences in both wedding dresses and wedding celebrations of either region, then extend their understanding to at least one other religion of the world.
- e. Have students go online and find photos of the different mosques in the United States. Encourage them to explore whether all U.S. mosques are identical. They should note the salient features of three mosques in the U.S. or in New York City—including dominant architectural influences—and list what makes each mosque unique and which features the mosques have in common. Ask:
- How do mosque features reflect cultural or ethnic variations among the Muslim community?
 - What do they tell you about Muslims in the United States and their identity given the kinds of mosques you see built here?

Related Resources

The following materials offer more information on the Muslim community in the United States.

"A Muslim In Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb," by Dr. Umar F. Abd-Allah
 This biography (Oxford University Press, 2006) chronicles the life and times of journalist Alexander Russell Webb, contemporary of Mark Twain, and the first known Victorian American convert to Islam.

<http://www.amazon.com/Muslim-Victorian-America-Alexander-Russell/dp/0195187288>

Prince Among Slaves

This PBS documentary traces the roots of Islam in America to the slave trade, and especially

West Africa. The website also includes a teacher's guide.

<http://tinyurl.com/526knt>

Frontline: Portraits of Ordinary Muslims in America

PBS offers a look at ordinary Muslims in various parts of the world. This segment focuses on Muslims in America.

<http://tinyurl.com/5tz7bl>

A teacher's guide is also available at <http://tinyurl.com/5kyzd2>

Change the Story

Resources at this educational website include "What is Islam?" and "Islam 101" as well as a downloadable PDF quiz, "The Millionaire Quiz" and a timeline of Islam.

<http://changethestory.net/?q=content/resources-everybody>

Reporting on Religion: A Primer for Journalists

Religion Newswriters provides a thorough introduction to Islam for religion journalists. This may also be helpful in the classroom.

<http://www.rnasecure.org/guide/islam.html>

Muslims, by Paul D. Numrich

This entry from the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* examines Chicago as a microcosm of the theological, ethnic and cultural diversity of Islam

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/865.html>

U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

Based on interviews with more than 35,000 American adults, this extensive survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life details the religious makeup, religious beliefs and practices as well as social and political attitudes of the American public, including the Muslim community.

<http://religions.pewforum.org/>

"Mosque, Possibly Oldest in Bakersfield, Follows a Unique Path," by Louis Medina

The article from "The Bakersfield Californian" examines the Bakersfield Muslim Center in California, a storefront mosque with a largely African American congregation of converts to Islam.

<http://www.bakersfield.com/138/story/570294.html>

"A Crown Jewel", by Zerqa Abid

This article from *Islamic Horizons* magazine (see page 42) features the Noor Islamic Cultural Center in Central Ohio, a mosque built primarily by immigrant Muslims. Members of the congregation speak on how the mosque is a 'symbol' and an expression of their identities as Muslims in America.

<http://tinyurl.com/5j9xsu>

"The Dome and the Grid," by Jerrilynn D. Dodds

The diversity that is New York is reflected in its mosques. This article in *Aramco World Magazine* explores how architectural space has been used to create an identity for Muslims who represent such diverse cultures and languages. She explores how these buildings represent Islam as a distinct way of life and an integrated part of New York's secular landscape.

<http://tinyurl.com/635ds4>

"Don't Forget African American Muslims," by Dr. Aminah McCloud

In “Common Ground News,” Dr. Aminah McCloud argues that African American Muslims, being part of the American ethos for centuries prior to the arrival of immigrant Muslims, are best positioned to bridge gaps between Muslims and America.
<http://tinyurl.com/6pr3l9>

“*Black Slaves Brought Arabic literacy, Islamic faith to America,*” by Rachel Hamm
This article from *North Texas Daily* student newspaper reviews a talk given by Dr. Yushau Sodiq, Texas Christian University Religion Professor, that provides insights and dispels myths about African slaves.
<http://tinyurl.com/598a6l>

“*Imam W. Deen Mohammed Dies at 74, His Embrace of Traditional Islam led to Rift with Nationalists,*” by Margaret Ramirez and Manya A. Brachear
This article from *The Los Angeles Times* looks at the single most important man in the African American Muslim community, Imam W. Deen Mohammed. It explores how he established his own identity, forgoing that of his father and the Nation of Islam and illustrates how one person can serve as a catalyst to reinvent, and redirect, a whole community, in this case African American Muslims of America.
<http://tinyurl.com/6hls3g>

Assessment

Teacher evaluation of classroom participation. Teachers may wish to develop additional rubrics and measures for class projects and longer-term assignments.

National Standards

These academic standards are drawn from the *Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's "Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education: 3rd and 4th Editions."*

Grades 6-12

- Language Arts Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Language Arts Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
- Behavioral Studies Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior
- US History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States
- Civics Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society
- Civics Standard 23: Understands the impact of significant political and nonpolitical developments on the United States and other nations
- Art Connections Standard 1: Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines
- World History Standard 46: Understands long-term changes and recurring patterns in world history

Key Terms

identity, multi-cultural, cultural diversity, mosques in America, Muslims in America, American History, slavery, African American Muslims, heritage, faith, Islam