

Educating against 'Islamophobia': Creating an International Exhibit to Counter Intolerance

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Introduction

Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context, a project funded by a continuing Museums & Communities Collaboration Abroad (MCCA) grant, the American Association of Museums and the United States State Department, seeks not only to create educational material through its final output, an online exhibit that explores Muslim identities in both Atlanta and Morocco, but also to develop a range of educational practices and techniques throughout the grant and the development of the online exhibit. This project, conducted collaboratively by staff and students from the Ben M'sik Community Museum in Casablanca, Morocco, and the Museum of History and Holocaust Education, Kennesaw, Georgia, seeks to dispel stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, also known as 'Islamophobia', and promote tolerance and understanding of Islam around the globe with a particular emphasis on the local communities of both participating museums: the metro-Atlanta area and Casablanca.

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In an article written in 1980 for *The Nation* the renowned scholar Edward Said observed,

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems [sic] and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem [sic] life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression⁽¹⁾.

Although thirty-two years have passed since Said wrote this article, the essence of his argument remains strong. In the eleven years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the incendiary media narratives that portray American Muslims as a danger to national security persists. Although this intolerance against Islam has arguably become less prominent, it endures across the nation. Thus the need for material and resources that provides a greater understanding of Islam in the United States and around the world is significant.

This essay explores some of the practices implemented in this international collaborative project and studies their attempts to counter 'Islamophobia', to dispel myths and stereotypes about Islam, and to increase understanding and tolerance of Muslims.



(Above) Students from both museums have contributed significantly to the project and developed professional skills and have also made lasting friendships through the international travel component of the grant.

1. Edward Said, "Islam Through Western Eyes", *The Nation*, 26 April, 1980, accessed January 3, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/islam-through-western-eyes>.

The Local Context

In Cobb County, Georgia, where the Museum of History and Holocaust Education and its parent organisation, Kennesaw State University, are situated, public occurrences of religious and racial intolerance abounded in 2011.

A controversy in September 2011 began when a resource for teaching a two-week unit on the Middle East in Georgia middle schools provoked public prejudice and highlighted anti-Islamic feeling within certain conservative circles, including segments of the blogosphere⁽²⁾. Public anger arose when one parent complained to the Cobb County School Board and local media about an assignment in which seventh grade students were asked to write about dress codes in the Middle East. Students were asked to use a two-page “letter from Ahlima” prompt that, “included a fictional two-page letter ostensibly written by a 20-year-old Saudi Arabian woman. In it, the character writes approvingly of wearing the Islamic veil - and of her fiance’s [sic] multiple wives and the law of Sharia.”⁽³⁾ The use of this material provoked not only some conservative bloggers and journalists to accuse the Cobb County School District of, as Pamela Geller wrote, “insidious subversion”, “Islamizing public schools”, and “shilling for jihad”, but also required police involvement when “terroristic threats” and hate mail to the curriculum company inspired educators, who produced the material, was reported⁽⁴⁾. Thus, while the State of Georgia seeks to provide a fair and representative view of Middle Eastern people to seventh grade students, the fear that teaching children about the lives of Muslims in the Middle East is dangerous persists within certain sections of the population.

Instances of public fear and misconceptions of Islam in Cobb County were further demonstrated when the press release for this Museums & Communities Collaborations Abroad project, *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*, was distributed to local newspapers by the Museum of History and Holocaust Education in September 2011. In a letter to the editor of the Marietta Daily Journal entitled “KSU’s Islamic outreach grant nauseating,” Larry Hogue a resident of Marietta wrote that, “By viewing the network news, by

2. Bo Emerson, “Islamic Example in Cobb School lesson angers critics”. Atlanta Journal Constitution, September 28, 2011, accessed January 2, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/islamic-example-in-cobb-1190940.html>.

3. Emerson, “Islamic Example in Cobb School lesson angers critics”.

4. Bo Emerson, “Islamic Example in Cobb School lesson angers critics”.

reading a newspaper or simply by viewing the many Muslims among us, we are able verify that they are intolerant of us, they seek to dominate, and they seek to install archaic laws of the Dark Ages.”⁽⁵⁾ This incendiary letter was followed on the Marietta Daily Journal’s website by a range of comments, including many that supported the viewpoint of Hogue, such as, “Everything I needed to know about Islam, I learned on 09/11/01.” In contrast to these opinions others urged restraint and frustration at the demonization of Muslims in the United States, including “Embarrassed,” who wrote, “You all make me ashamed to call Marietta home. Let’s not stereotype one group, because of the actions of a few.... Show some tolerance.” The breadth of feeling, however, generated by this letter to the editor emphasized that a range of misconceptions, negative stereotyping, and intolerance of Muslims living in the American South persists within certain segments of the population in the immediate vicinity of the Museum of History and Holocaust Education.

The importance of developing resources, tools, and practices to address these issues, although only one element of this project, is crucial, and emphasises that within the local community of the Museum of History and Holocaust Education, as in the nation as a whole, the work of the project *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context* is timely.

Training the Trainers

An interesting facet of the grant has been that both museums have embraced attempts to “train the trainers.” Although an online exhibit like this could be conducted by a relatively small group of participants from both the Museum of History and Holocaust Education (henceforth MHHE) and the Ben M’sik Community Museum (henceforth BMCM), both museums have engaged students from their respective universities to conduct research, focus groups, meetings and travel that will enhance and inform the project. The intellectual engagement of a larger group of curators, as these students have become, has allowed for a broader intellectual debate about the content of the exhibit, and also has continued to provide novel insight and perspectives into some of the themes of the exhibit, especially “identity formation” and ‘Islam.’ The eleven MHHE students and the twenty-two BMCM students through their committed involve-

5. Larry Hogue, “Letter to Editor: KSU’s Islamic outreach grant nauseating”, Marietta Daily Journal, September 14, 2011, accessed January 3, 2012.

ment to the project have not only developed the curatorial skills necessary to create an online exhibit, but they have also developed a deeper understanding of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim both in the American South, and also in Morocco.

The opportunity for participants of both teams to travel to Morocco or the United States has further extended this “training the trainer” process, and the reflections of the MHHE students who travelled to Morocco in December 2011 and the BMCM students who hosted them reflect that this portion of the grant was very successful. Houda Karamallah (BMCM student) reflected on the workshops conducted at the BMCM during the December 2011 trip thus: “I’m so optimistic about the project, it is getting bigger and bigger, there are new ideas and new things for us to do as students... I’m so excited to be involved in this project.”⁽⁶⁾ The opportunity to conduct workshops face-to-face rather than via Skype as had been done in the fall of 2011 was only one successful facet of this process. The ability for both groups of students to meet, get to know and become friends with one another was a common theme emerging from the students’ reflections of the December 2011 trip. Khadija Sadouk (BMCM student) noted that, “It’s really good to talk to native speakers for my English but also to talk to you about the project from your perspective... it’s really good to talk to you, to know you and to have conversation with you.”⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, the response from the American students that travelled to Morocco was equally unequivocal as to the success of the “train the trainers” element of the project. Robyn Gagne (MHHE student) noted that, “It has really been an emotional experience coming to Morocco and meeting so many new friends. I feel like I can advocate for Morocco, for Islam and for my friends so much better now than I could ever have done before.”⁽⁸⁾ The project coordinator Julia Brock highlighted how special this element of the project and the international travel component of the grant was for all involved. When reflecting on a moment at lunch in the house of the family of a member of the BMCM team when conversation occurred in three languages (English, French and Arabic), she observed, “It was wonderful... we are lucky to have had these chances.”⁽⁹⁾

6. Robyn Gagne (MHHE student), Interview with Houda Karamallah, (December 20, 2011).

7. Robyn Gagne (MHHE student), Interview with Khadija Sadouk, (December 20, 2011).

8. Robyn Gagne, MHHE/BMCM project team blog, (January 3, 2012).

9. Richard Harker (MHHE staff), Interview with Julia Brock, (December 18, 2011).



(Above) Members of both the MHHE and BCMCM worked on the projects online exhibit in four workshops held at the Ben M'sik Community Museum during the MHHE delegations trip in December 2011.

Community Engagement

The ability to engage, serve and educate their respective communities is a central component of both museums' missions. The Ben M'sik Community Museum strives "to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region," while the Museum of History and Holocaust Education seeks "to present public events, exhibits and educational resources focused on World War II and the Holocaust in an effort to promote education and dialogue about the past and its significance today." And within its broader mission, the MHHE seeks to promote inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue to enhance its local and regional communities. However, the need for an enhanced understanding of Islam in the broader Metro Atlanta community, the Museum's immediate community, was not only implemented and recognised by the museums but was also a common theme from interviews and oral histories that students from the MHHE and BCMCM conducted between 2009 and 2011 as part of a previous American Association of Museums grant, *Creating Community Collaboration*.

Rabeea Khan, a Pakistani-born woman who was interviewed in February 2010 while studying for a degree in business at Emory University in Atlanta connected misconceptions of Islam to a lack of education: “I think that people who have wrong perceptions of Islam or the type that hold the stereotype, they’re pretty adamant about what they believe in. Maybe because they’re not educated or not as educated, I think in part. It’s probably why they have misconceptions.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Ali Abedi, however, an American-born Muslim, reflected in the same series of interviews in 2010 that the reasons for intolerance are not as simple as ‘educated’ versus ‘uneducated’: “You’re going to have educated people that are going to try to bash Islam and everything, you know, and everything it stands for. And then you’re going to have those who are going to be a little more tolerant. [It] Just depends on who you talk to. What they might affiliate their own beliefs with.”⁽¹¹⁾

The responses in the other interviews that were conducted as part of the Creating Community Collaboration grant were often similar to those of both Khan and Abedi. They often recognized the important role that education can play in directing people’s thought processes and providing information about cultural diversity, while on the other hand highlighting that education is only one factor in helping to promote tolerance and understanding.

Throughout the undertaking of *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*, a number of focus groups, both formal and informal, were conducted to offer community members a stake in the project, and to hear their input and advice. At Kennesaw State University and Agnes Scott College in Atlanta three focus groups were conducted with groups of students, most of who were not Muslim, and the disparity in understanding and knowledge of Islam was readily apparent. On a number of occasions students admitted that they simply did not know as much about Islam as they thought that they should. When asked for their perceptions of Islam, students in the Agnes Scott group replied with a wide disparity of answers including, “It is a strict religion” and it is “scary and smelly,” answers that were in sharp contrast to, “that it’s mainly misunderstood” and “it [Islam] is based on the ideals of peace.”⁽¹²⁾

10. Meghan Dieldorf (MHHE student) and Anne Sinkey (MHHE staff), Interview with Rabeeah Khan, (February 19, 2010).

11. Jay Lutz and Stephanie Green (MHHE students), Interview with Ali Abedi, (January 15, 2010).

12. Agnes Scott College, Atlanta, Survey Results (October 5, 2011).

A site visit and an informal focus group were also conducted in the fall of 2011 with two different Muslim communities in the Metro Atlanta area. A site visit was organized to the Dar-E-Abbas in Lilburn, GA by the MHHE groups Community Liaison Ali Abedi. The visit to the community center that Abedi attends was for most members of the project team a first experience of attending a Muslim place of worship. The visit allowed the MHHE students a brief chance to meet with different members of the community and discuss with them the project. One Imam who spoke in English to the group made a point of stressing the similarities between Islam and Christianity and Judaism, while also expressing a desire to counter the overwhelming discourse that he said had emerged after 9/11 that intimately connected Muslims and terrorists.

An informal focus group was conducted with a group of students, aged 12-16, at the Hamzah Islamic Center, in Alpharetta, Georgia, also in the metro-Atlanta conurbation. At this center the Kennesaw State students presented the project to the group of school students and then asked them for their responses and reactions to the project. The students, like the men and women at Dar-E-Abbas, expressed a significant desire for the 'normality' of their every day lives to be shown to visitors to the exhibit. One respondent drew on the example of "All American Muslim," a television show on the American network TLC that follows five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan, to explain that many non-Muslim Americans perceive Muslims as drastically different from themselves. She wanted our exhibit to show that being a Muslim in the American South was no different from being Christian or Jewish – and that Muslims had lives, hobbies, and friends in the same way that non-Muslims do. The desire to make this project accessible for people of all ages was important, thus the insights gained from these young people were significant. Moreover, the discussion of Islam and how it is perceived in the United States with younger people provided a broader lens from which our project team drew ideas and inspiration.



(Above) The opportunity for students from both teams to travel to the others’ country has enhanced their cross-cultural understanding and formed the strong foundations of the strong ‘train the trainer’ component of *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*.

Conclusion - Reaching an International Audience

The need to dispel misconceptions and attempt to temper intolerance in the metro-Atlanta area and Cobb County is, however, only one intended outcome of the grant. The tangible outcome of this project is an online exhibit that serves different functions, including dispelling stereotypes about Islam, and will have the ability to reach multiple local, national, and international audiences. For the American and non-Muslim audiences that choose to visit this website the exhibit can act as an educational resource that provides information, profiles of Muslims living in the American South and in Morocco, as well as links to other resources that can further help to develop understanding and conversation about Islam. Thus, the immediate impact of countering Islamophobia in the metro-Atlanta area and the American South will also reach across the United States and the rest of the globe.

Students from the Ben M’sik Community Museum also acknowledged, however, that education and by extension the educational importance of *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context* has an important role

to play in Casablanca and will help contribute to the Ben M'sik Community Museum's broader mission. On the project's private blog, a forum for students and staff from both museums to communicate with each other and engage in dialogue, Youssef Sourgo (BMCM student) argued, "Education eliminates all barriers that stand in the way of communication success, mainly intercultural communication. It also helps individuals to avoid discriminatory attitudes, either intentional or unintentional, towards the others—the people from a different culture."⁽¹³⁾ While Ismail Chaki (BMCM student) delved further into the importance of education in Morocco when he commented, "I think that Education is that filter that makes us able to understand the circumstances that we live in, and to be able to think critically and seek for the truth. The lack or the absence of education would be really catastrophic especially that I come from a country [Morocco] in which 60% of people are illiterate, so I think that education is one of the issues that should be without thinking targeted in this project."⁽¹⁴⁾

The educational scope of this project is thus multifaceted and has and will continue to allow participants, community members as well as exhibit 'visitors' from across the globe to engage in a variety of educational activities and practices that enhance an understanding of Islam in the metro-Atlanta area as well as in Casablanca. The instant accessibility of the exhibit will also greatly benefit teachers and classrooms who seek to discuss Islam and the different ways that it is practised around the world.

The diverse and distinct attempts that have been made to address instances of intolerance and Islamophobia in the metro-Atlanta area and around the world through the global nature of an 'online exhibit' in this grant reflect a determined attempt to engage diverse audiences in cross-cultural dialogue that will continue long after the grant expires.

13. Youssef Sourgo, MHHE/BMCM project blog, (November 6, 2011).

14. Ismail Chaiki, MHHE/BMCM project blog, (November 5, 2011).