

Teaching Media and Culture of the Middle East to American Students

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Americans know very little about the Middle East in general despite the fact that the region is at the heart of American foreign policy. While no one doubts the importance of teaching the history, culture, and politics of the Middle East in the United States, lack of basic knowledge coupled with the strong antipathy toward Arabs and Muslims make classroom teaching about the region quite challenging. Given that the current Islamophobic discourse in mainstream media and imperialistic American foreign policy misinform students about who Middle Easterners are, the so-called “war on terror” causes educators to be uneasy about discussing the Middle East in their classrooms. A strong pro-Israel lobby and other pressure groups make it even more difficult to have an independent intellectual discussion of the Middle East because of intimidation and anti-Semitism accusations that follow discussions of the Palestinian plight or the issue of the Palestinian refugees. Ismael (2011) adds that the whole academic discipline of Middle Eastern Studies is usually under both scrutiny and attack by both conservative politicians and government officials in addition to lobbyists. He states,

In ideological terms, the field of Middle East Studies has been labeled a failure as an academic project, accused of being “infused with third-worldist biases”; and its preeminent organization, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), has been branded as inordinately Arab in its composition and ideological/intellectual “character.” Chiefly, it has been argued that the field of Middle East Studies and its scholars have “ill-served” America (e.g. Kramer, 2001), essentially implying that academia ought to act on the behalf of US strategic interests, rather than the unfettered pursuit of truth. (p. 126)

Some of these lobbies include “Campus Watch” which formed in 2002 amid the sharp rise in Islamophobia that followed 9/11. A new challenge that arose in the summer of 2012, in particular for California scholars and professors, was CA HR 35, which was passed by the California legislature on August 22, 2012 (HR 35, 2011-2012). CA HR 35 is the successful culmination of the pressure that such special interest groups exerted on academic institutions and politicians in California. A major force behind HR 35 is the AMCHA initiative, established over three years ago, which identifies itself as a non-profit organization whose mission is to combat anti-Semitism in higher education. While on their website (About AMCHA, n.d.) they claim to protect “Jewish students,” in effect what they do is intimidate and harass professors who teach, research, or sympathize with the Palestinians or speak up against the Israeli occupation. While in the past, the pressure from such groups was aimed at intimidation, libel, federal and other funding cuts, this time it crossed a new boundary into the legal system. Although HR 35 is not a law itself, it constitutes legal basis or protection for administrators to crack down on faculty’s academic freedom when they cover topics related to the Middle East in general, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. Amid such a climate of intimidation, it is important not only to be aware of the academic climate surrounding this highly politicized area topic,

but also to research outlet strategies that could facilitate one's work in the classroom.

Therefore, this essay will address the challenges and dilemmas the authors confronted when designing and teaching two courses on the Middle East at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) in Southern California. San Bernardino is the poorest county in California and therefore the university has an important role in serving the most underprivileged student populations, both in terms of economic class and race. CSUSB has the second highest African American and Hispanic [especially Hispanic] enrollments of all public universities in California and seventy percent of those who graduate are the first in their families to do so (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). Taking into account the added challenge of the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial composition of the university's student body, this essay describes the two classes developed under the grant, and identifies the challenges of teaching them and some of the pedagogical strategies and tools used to overcome these challenges.

Courses Background

In the spring of 2006, two of us (Muhtaseb, Communication Studies, and Bennett, Anthropology) team-taught a class on Muslim Women in Media and Society. Our effort focused on offering a cross-disciplinary and case study-based approach to teaching about Muslim women, a poorly understood yet critically important population, across several different regions, contexts, and sets of complex issues. In addition, team teaching was intended to exchange expertise, teaching skills and innovations, and assignments between the two faculty members. The two instructors were awarded a team-teaching grant from the Teaching Resource Center on our campus to develop and team-teach such a class. A few years later in the spring of 2009, Muhtaseb and Algan (Communication Studies), had a similar experience when we designed and team-taught a class on media and globalization in the Middle East.

The earlier course was designed to focus on five main regions and/or countries, including the Levant, North Africa, Iran, Turkey, and Southeast Asia in order to shed light on different areas in the Muslim World. Issues pertaining to Muslim women in these regions were addressed through readings and multimedia. The second course examined the contemporary culture and societies in the Middle East by focusing on global, regional and local media environments with particular attention to regional satellite TV stations and the Internet. We prepared the syllabi jointly, including reading packets that reflected our interdisciplinary approach, using articles from communication studies, anthropology, and gender studies. We also prepared a list of videos/DVDs to show in class. In addition, we managed, with very limited resources, to bring three guest speakers to the first course who lectured on women's movements in Egypt; Turkish media and gender; and women and human rights in Lebanon. The second course featured one guest lecturer who discussed the American government's treatment of Al-Jazeera.

We were careful not only to assign academic books and research that were not paternalistic and/or written with an agenda that furthered Western imperialistic goals in the region, but also to caution the students about the importance of paying attention to the origin of the sources they cited in their papers. As Knopf-Newman states in her book *The Politics of Teaching Palestine to Americans*, "misrepresenting peoples of the region has been a problem in American curriculum and textbooks on the Middle East" (2011, pp. 10-12).

Like Knopf-Newman, we have found the use of hip-hop to be pedagogically helpful when discussing the social problems of specific classes and ethnicities in the

Middle East. In our classrooms, we also shared films, news stories, blogs, and websites as secondary texts. In addition, when Muhtaseb offered the Muslim Women class in the winter of 2013, she experimented with the virtual community Second Life.

Based primarily on our experiences with these two experimental courses, we will next discuss the pedagogical challenges we faced teaching about the Middle East and will offer some reflections on our response to them.

Challenges

The first challenge facing any instructor teaching a class on the Middle East is overcoming student perceptions that have been shaped by the long, troubled political relations between the West and the region, mediated through the media. Historically Orientalism, colonialism, and imperialism have dominated the production of knowledge about the Middle East. To start with, the very term “Middle East” is a highly Orientalist and colonial descriptor, whose deconstruction in class usually causes a lot of tension. Amid the unique dimensions of this region as a topic area, the particular subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict remains the thorniest and most complicated of all other “Middle Eastern” subjects.

Knopf-Newman (2011) illustrates how Zionist discourse that is embedded in the news, textbooks, churches and cultural texts obscures the reality experienced by Palestinians. She argues for the necessity of offsetting imperialist and colonialist discourses in the classroom by teaching students both how to critique the information they receive elsewhere and to understand the history and culture that has been suppressed. “To be clear, this is not just a problem when it comes to teaching Americans about Palestine; this problem permeates any subject particularly in relation to imperialism and colonialism” (p. 9).

As Ginsberg (2011) has argued, interdisciplinary area studies in the US, including Middle East Studies, following the end of Cold War rearticulated the tenets of Cold War neo-conservatism. As a result, academic knowledge production got redirected from the sorts of socially beneficial projects and critical analyses ventured within area studies and its early interdisciplinary studies offshoots during the 1960s-70s toward largely pragmatic and utilitarian knowledges deemed more readily exploitable by and within contemporary digital industries and the military industrial complex they often serve. (p. 144) Therefore, critiques of Orientalism, Islamophobia, and neo-liberalism have functioned as crucial intellectual developments that disrupted the discourses and narratives of the Cold War era going back to the McCarthy-era fears. Discussions of Orientalism, Islamophobia and neo-liberalism continue to constitute important theoretical frameworks in the classroom today and help students deconstruct imperialist and colonialist narratives when learning about the Middle East. However, we also realize that this is a defensive pedagogical strategy which defends the Middle East against the US and the West and but does not necessarily depict the people of the Middle East as having agency. We agree with Bassam Haddad (quoted in *Introduction: Teaching...*) that we need pedagogical and research strategies designed to include broader transformations such as teaching about the Arab Spring in order “to move away from defensive modes of reaction, and towards new sorts of non-defensive scholarly and pedagogical strategies” (para. 4).

A discussion of agency in the present moment can include, for example, a critique of the phrase “Arab Spring” which itself is a Western term for the revolutions and oppositional struggles ongoing in the region and not typically how these movements are referred to there. Beyond that starting point, a plethora of engagement and commentary is

available in individual blogs, media sites like Aslan Media, as well as in graffiti, music, art and other forms of expression where popular culture is produced and contested. These sources offer an extremely dynamic and diverse view of what it means to be living in the Middle East in the 21st century. In our experience, students respond and relate to the immediacy of such sources. By weaving in very current examples of cultural transformation, we work to break down the distance and stale stereotypes our students bring to class and which a defensive pedagogical strategy inadvertently reifies.

Indeed, in our experience, “culture” and “media” can be extremely rich material to use in the classroom. In the first class, one of our most important focal points was emphasizing the diversity of Muslim Women. We insisted on treating “Muslim women’s experience/s” as multiple, fluid, and transformative. Focusing on the ongoing transformations in the region moves us away from a defensive stance. Moreover, there is a great deal of material that investigates and analyzes the messiness of change at the cultural level as it happens. Examples of Muslim women with agency such as Asma’ Mahfouz (Egypt), Tawakul Karman (Yemen), and Gigi Ibrahim (Egypt), to mention a few, have flooded social media and created an unprecedented educational historical moment that provides educators with a plethora of oppositional narratives and substance beyond what mainstream media usually offer. This helps not only in resorting to non-defensive teaching strategies and mechanisms, but also creates an enjoyable exercise that young students usually identify with.

Another main challenge in teaching classes on the Middle East is competing with or challenging media coverage of this region. A similar challenge was faced by Charnow & Bernhardsson (2003) when teaching a class on nationalism and national identity in the Middle East: “Ultimately, however, this episode underscored, even more dramatically, the perennial tension in teaching Middle Eastern history— namely how to reconcile a critical academic understanding of the past with the constant barrage of mainstream journalistic accounts” (p. 171). In a similar conclusion, Kirschner (2012) states, “teaching about the region requires working within the constraints of exploring and challenging students’ beliefs about the Middle East. Indeed, much of the task in introductory courses on the region is akin to ‘myth-busting’” (p. 754). Thus, while we sometimes succeed in pushing forward more progressive, non-defensive pedagogical tools, we are constantly being pulled back by the burden of challenging most of the cultural, political, religious, and media institutions in the United States.

Discussing contemporary media and culture can never be accomplished without touching on various current political issues due to the ongoing so-called “war on terror” between the U.S. and the Middle East. Since we have national security and military programs that recruit students, not only do we have students who are currently in training to join the army or veterans, but also many of our students have members of their family serving in the military. In fact, CSUSB is among the top 15 percent of all United States colleges to have been distinguished as a Military Friendly School for its service to the military community for the past three years in a row, according to a national survey by G.I. Jobs magazine (*CSUSB recognized*, Sept. 26, 2012). As a result, sometimes our efforts at deconstructing American interests in the region are construed as unpatriotic and we are seen as attacking American core values, which is similar to Ismael’s (2011) conclusion about our discipline in general. For example, we showed the documentary *Control Room*, which discusses Al-Jazeera’s decision to air the footage of the five American soldiers taken as prisoners of war by the Iraqi military during the first few days of the second Gulf war. One of the older students, who identified herself as belonging to

a military family, felt distressed and related negatively to the documentary. She indicated that while she was trying to cultivate the class materials and the important issues we were discussing, it was hard for her to separate herself from what it meant to belong to a military family. In other words, criticizing the war was hard for her. She said, “We are a military family. I have brothers. My husband also served in the military. Some of our relatives served in Iraq. When I saw Aljazeera (*sic*) showing American prisoners of war, it brought home negative and bad memories.”

Indeed, this last challenge coincides with another one, which is building empathy among American students toward the Middle East in general, and Muslim women in particular. In addition to lack of empathy and understanding of issues pertaining to Muslim women, the media usually present a monolithic and static image of all Muslim women as oppressed, uneducated, ignorant, etc. The packaged images of Muslim women in mainstream media, according to research, are mainly negative (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Alloula, 1987; Picherit-Duthler & Yunis, 2011; Said, 1997; Shaheen, 1994).

Like Dougherty (2003), from the very first day of class we wanted to make students aware of their own (sometimes unconscious) preconceptions and stereotypes. However, we found it to be more difficult to have students challenge unjustified actions and policies against the people in the region than having them realize and admit their preconceptions and stereotypes. Even though students understand there is a deliberate attempt in the Western media to cover issues related to the Middle East in a biased manner and cause hatred toward Muslims, they are quite apprehensive about imagining that the relations between the Western world and the Middle East could be different than they are currently. This can be attributed to their fear of and belief in official national narratives of national security, fueled with tropes such as 9/11, Al Qaeda, terrorism, fundamentalism, etc. Alessandrini (2011) makes a similar observation:

The Egyptian Revolution was exceptional in reaching a wide and generalized U.S. audience, and this and the other ongoing popular uprisings in the region have the potential to change and disrupt predominant preconceptions about the Middle East, especially among younger Americans, but the discourse around the death of Osama bin Laden is only the latest evidence that dominant narratives about the region still retain much of their power. We might call this the question of how to teach to the unconverted. So we must find a way to address the unconverted without falling back into our old defensive positions. (Introduction: Teaching, para. 1)

Alessandrini’s suggestion is to move beyond the limitations of institutionalized multiculturalism toward developing critical pedagogies, fostering closer ties between specialists on the Middle East and those belonging to a variety of other disciplines at a variety of institutions and developing initiatives in translation and language learning to make bodies of knowledge more readily available to students in the U.S. We designed our courses using interdisciplinary reading materials, movies and documentaries with English subtitles where a great number of specialists from the Middle East were featured, and inviting guest lecturers from other disciplines. In this way, we were able to make the point that we were not the only ones who were critical of the dominant narratives and the role of the Western world and media in reinforcing them. Despite their apprehension about imagining a different relationship with the Muslim world, at the end of our classes, we have always found that our students developed empathy for and greater curiosity about people in the region and displayed a strong dislike of any actions or discourses aimed at dehumanizing them.

For example, one pedagogical tool we employed in the Muslim Women class was to include interviewing female Muslim students on campus as a methodological option for the final required paper. In addition to creating empathy, this tool gave students the opportunity to listen to Muslim women's experiences first-hand instead of as mediated images through mainstream media. Students were also encouraged to interview female Muslim students both with and without hijabs. One creative student (white male) created an online survey in which he asked one open-ended question, which he posted on several online forums: *What beliefs does Western culture hold in regards to Muslim women and education?* He then interviewed two Muslim women, of whom one had lived in several countries. In the reflections and analysis section of his paper, he expressed shock at the huge schism between the perceptions of Muslim women articulated by anonymous responders and the realities/experiences of the two Muslim women he interviewed. Part of his shock came from the great number of negative comments containing smears against Muslim women, especially when the responses had nothing to do with the original question he posed.

Another pedagogical tool was a new assignment created by Muhtaseb when she taught the Muslim Women class in the winter of 2013. The assignment utilized the virtual environment of Second Life, which is an online space that imitates real life, in which participants create avatars to represent their virtual identities. What is interesting about Second Life is that people could experiment with either real, dual, or multiple identities. The assignment was adapted from Selvester (2012). For the assignment, the students were required to create a Second Life avatar of a Muslim woman wearing the hijab and to visit both virtual places specified in the assignment and other virtual places of their choice. In addition, the students were required to do several activities in Second Life while using the virtual identities of Muslim women. The objectives of the assignment were explained to students as follows: to explore a Muslim woman's identity and gender expectations of that identity; to reflect on (or maybe challenge) such expectations, linking them to the readings and/or videos we cover in class; and to experience them in a way not possible in the real world. Students were also required to reflect on their experiences as "virtual Muslim women" in three online journal entries, three online discussion board posts, and a final reflection paper (while posting at least one picture of their virtual travels). The instructor prepared a list of philosophical questions about their virtual identities to guide them in their reflections. Overall, despite difficulties in implementation for technical and learning reasons (in addition to lack of resources and support by the technical team on campus), the immersive nature of the Second Life assignment proved very effective in creating empathy towards Muslim women when students faced racism and discrimination in their perceived identities as Muslim women, even in the "virtual world". Some student experiences were similar but there were also differences; one student commented that she should have dressed more conservatively to have a more authentic experience as a Muslim woman. Several students mentioned the Oriental Gaze, which is an important theme of class readings. The following is an interesting reflection on the concept of "Orientalism" as applied to the student's virtual experience:

With all of the traveling I had done, I began to ask myself did I really decide to travel because my enjoyment of being by myself or was it because I hadn't made any friends yet? Then I thought this could be because of my hijab and if so, I would have to try to make friends to know that is the reason I didn't have friends because of my hijab. I felt as if I was experiencing Edward Said Orientalism where people view me through a "distorted lens," which the Western

world looks through at the people of the Middle East. Due to the fact I look Middle Eastern with my hijab, that was possibly the reason I didn't have any friends. My goal for my next trip became that I would take time to make friends because I didn't want people to stereotype me because of the hijab.

Another student reflected not only on Orientalism but racism as well in the following extended passage:

After leaving the Museum I clicked the map to find out where some other people were. I ended at a beach where 3 people sat talking. I decided to snap some photos because when ever I am near other users the interaction is so short and I wanted some proof to upload to Snapzilla lol (sic). The camera was not welcomed by my new friends. The attention of the 3 users was quickly shifted to me. Someone said "whos (sic) taking pictures?" I got nervous but then one of them came over to me. I was so shocked at the things that this user said to me! A man, I believe his name was "Pulsipher," asked me very stereotypical questions. Stereotypical in terms of those of "westernized oriental other" opinions. I think I was in Puerto Rico some how (sic) or another. The conversation:

Pulsipher: "Do they make you wear that thing on your head?"

Me: No, it was a choice I made when I was a child.

Pulsipher's Friend: What kind of parent lets a child make that decision?

Pulshipher: You must have soft ears.

Pulsipher's Friend: TERRORIST LADY.

Me: Why do you say I have soft ears?

Pulsipher: Because the rough sand and harsh winds dont (sic) touch them. Do you have sex?

Me: I'm not married.

I then teleported to another location because I was completely uncomfortable with that conversation. This was Afia, my avatar, not even me. [Emphasis by the student]

A third focused on the intertwined relationship between her real and virtual identities:

My experiences in the Second Life virtual world gave positive and negative insight into the life of a Muslim woman. I was surprised to find that throughout the course of this study, I had developed a type of relationship with my avatar. As I developed into the character portrayal of a Muslim woman for the outside world to see, she had become an extension of who I am in reality within a virtual world setting. Having this connection with my avatar made Second Life a success in a sense of being able to see what Muslim women go through with stereotyping and mixed types of interaction with people who are not familiar with believers of Islam.

Another important challenge when teaching the Middle East is explaining Islam and its role in shaping the traditions and culture in the region without presenting it as the sole reason for differences from the West. First of all, we have found that it can sometimes be rather difficult for students to believe that Allah is the same God that Christians

believe in and that Islam is a peaceful religion with moral teachings when the media and in society in general taught them the opposite. Because we have a considerable population of Latino (as well as Anglo and African American) students in our classes who are devout Catholics and have never been outside of the U.S. (except to Mexico and few other Latin American countries,) we faced many questions and doubts about the basic tenets of Islam. This sometimes distracted from the political and socio-economic dimensions of the issues in question, such as those of social justice.

To help Americans understand the issues related to social justice and the United States' relationship with other countries, Knopf-Newman suggests analyzing the historical roots of a particular context (p. 194), such as Palestine and other national and ethnic groups in the region. Historical grounding and contextualizing, indeed, are of the utmost importance in teaching about the Middle East in general as well as when discussing particular contemporary issues there such as media censorship, freedom of speech, human rights, and Islamic revivalism. However, unlike historians or political scientists, who can place the intricacies of historical context at the center, what we do as cultural anthropologists and media studies scholars, is teach and discuss cultural particularities, diversities, and transformations with some historical grounding. Under disciplinary and time constraints, deciding how much history is enough before focusing on culture can be challenging. However, not providing enough historical grounding can also inhibit students' understanding of contemporary cultural and media politics in the Middle East. To overcome this challenge, we often chose to spend considerable time introducing a region's/country's history and geography before starting to discuss issues pertaining to its culture and media uses or other issues like women's empowerment. We also placed many maps, fact sheets, and other materials on Blackboard for students' reference. Sadri (2007), who also used educational technologies such as WebCT, echoed the success of this strategy for providing much needed information outside the classroom. Similarly, the second half of Muhtaseb's Second Life assignment included virtual tours to virtual historical monuments in other countries such as the Afghanistan Virtual Museum. This activity provided the students with a very rich multimedia learning experience outside of the classroom, enabling them to "visit" in the virtual world countries or their representative places, where they could not travel in real life. They also explored and experimented with different cultural activities such as eating virtual foods or dancing with another avatar. As a student reflected on one aspect of Afghani culture and history as explained to her during her virtual tour:

This museum was amazing there was one thing that stuck out to me. It was this writing on the wall you may not be able to see it in the picture but it says, "Hospitality is an essential aspect of Afghan culture. No matter who you are, if you visit a home you will be given the best the family has. If you are invited for tea, which you inevitably will be, you will be offered snack, possibly pistachios or dried fruit, and tea glass will be constantly filled. When you have had enough cover the glass with your hand and say "bus" meaning enough". This is something my family follows to show hospitality no matter who you are but when you come into our home. Reading this it show no matter what your culture hospitality is universal.

Outcomes and Reflection

In spite of the challenges listed in the previous section, most students perceived both courses as highly informative and enlightening. A typical comment on the class was

as follows:

The DVD Peace & Propaganda in the Middle East was the best to explain the Arab Israeli (sic) conflict for me; I have always had friends I would discuss with them (or read on my own) this issue, but my curiosity was never satisfied as by this film.

As this class covered very controversial issues, and because there was occasionally some tension in class as a result, we agreed to have a laid-back class atmosphere to put students at ease. This worked very well and helped us approach students about whatever issues that arose during the quarter. Most most students began the class knowing almost nothing about the region, which presented a huge challenge especially when trying to cover contemporary issues that assume some knowledge of the region such as how women in the Middle East express themselves through film making or how the Internet plays a role in the everyday lives of the youth. We also had a few Arabic studies students who were quite knowledgeable, which was both a challenge and an advantage. It was a challenge because we had to cover the basics even though that may have been boring to majors in Arabic Studies or for students of Middle Eastern descent. We decided to turn this into an advantage by encouraging those who were knowledgeable about a certain country or issue in the Middle East to explain it to the rest of us. Often, we learned a lot from our students by simply converting this challenge into a peer teaching opportunity that made our students with the background in the region felt like experts and honed their presentation skills.

The first course we team-taught got a lot of attention on campus. For example, *The Coyote Chronicle*, the campus newspaper, published an article about the class on May 14, 2007, which helped us turn the course into a permanent one in the curriculum as well as cross list it across several academic programs.

Like Dougherty (2003), we aimed to “give students a sense of the lived meaning of the concepts they study and to remind them of the common humanity they share with the people they are studying” (p. 281). As a result, we have found that teaching about women’s issues in the Middle East does not necessarily reinforce American mainstream ideologies about Islam such as that it silences and oppresses women. On the contrary, through class discussion that identified similarities and differences among American and Middle Eastern women’s issues and contextualized the role of patriarchy in Middle Eastern women’s position in society, our students understood how patriarchy uses religion to dominate women and recognized a similarity to other religions. Similarly, teaching new global media technologies’ impact in the Middle East does not necessarily strengthen the common beliefs that introducing new technologies and Western media will modernize the region and that dumping technology and Hollywood movies there will teach them about democracy. On the contrary, discussing public debates around a media text shows students that the everyday lives, values and sensibilities of people in the region, such as a desire for a better future, opportunities, jobs and education, have much in common with those in the Western world and thus restore agency to the people.

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