

Islam and the West: Dialog of Cultures

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Find in the media key issues of concern to Muslim communities
 - Identify key issues of the American community
 - Understand different perceptions of each others' communities
 - Define the terms “perceptions” and “dialog”
 - Explain commonalities or issues where dialog may be able to occur
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Materials

Student Handout: **How to Dialog**

Student Handout: **A Matter of Perception**

Student Handout: **Egypt’s Youngest Mother a Victim of Society**

Student Handout: **Local Educators Learn About Islam on Trip to Egypt**

Activities

1. Distribute the student handout entitled A Matter of Perception.
 - a. Explain that the class is going to review the news media for coverage of events around the world and to compare and contrast an American (Western) perspective and an Egyptian or Muslim perspective.
 - b. Explain that while we know that societies tend to cover the news in ethnocentric terms, even a fairly quick review of news sources from the U.S. (Western viewpoints) and news sources from the Middle East (Muslim viewpoints) indicate that we view the world through very different lenses.
 - c. **Note:** When our study group visited Egypt in June 2007, the top issues the Egyptians wanted to discuss were: unjust treatment of Palestinians, U.S. support for the Mubarak regime, and U.S. responsibility for bad outcomes both in Egypt and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our group members were surprised that the Iraq War was not a major topic of discussion when the Egyptians found out that our group was American. The issues that we, as Americans, were always bringing up were: violence and Islam, the role of women in Islamic societies, and place of religion in society.
 - d. **Note:** Copies of the articles referenced in Exercises 2 and 3 are included in this packet if you would prefer to conduct a paper-based rather than a computer-based lesson.
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How to Dialog

Chatham University is the sponsoring institution for The Center for the Study of Conflict (<http://www.studyconflict.org>), an organization that studies mediation and conflict transformation. Materials from the Center provide some ways to initiate a dialog about some topic or conflict. Here is some information about two ideas—perceptions and dialog—that can help us to understand how to relate to people who are different from ourselves.

Perceptions

- We see things differently because we have different points of view (POV).
- How we see things is influenced by the experiences we have had and by our beliefs.
- Sources of perceptions include: economic background, parent’s beliefs and family traditions, political understanding, religious beliefs, cultural experience.
- Perception helps us to make sense of things when we have incomplete information.
- Perception helps us to “fill in the blanks;” but, it can also limit our understanding.
- Perceptions are not “right” or “wrong,” they just are.
- Showing respect for another’s perceptions is showing respect for the person. The result: ease of communication and cooperation.

Can we include under Sources of perceptions the difference in media coverage that reinforces each group’s point of view? Can we use this information about perceptions to better understand why Americans and Egyptians have different points of view. How can this information help to make a dialog possible?

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Functions of a Dialog

- Enhance collaboration by relying on participants' knowledge
 - Prevent disputes by agreeing in advance to certain rules of discourse
 - Encourage fairness in discussion with equal time for all participants
 - Create an atmosphere of hopefulness by eliciting participants' wishes and promoting new interactions among the members
 - Rehumanize a topic or issue by discouraging depersonalized debate and inviting participants to share their life experiences
 - Encourage candidness of participants
 - Encourage receptivity by listening attentively and promoting respect
 - Spawn inquiry by encouraging participants to question but not to advocate for a position
 - Create expansiveness by using questions to stimulate reflection and conversation and by generating diverse ideas
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Differences Between Debate and Dialog**Debate**

Advocate
Persuade
Representative
Minimize differences
Commitment to a point of view
Listen to counteract
Discourse defines the problem

Dialog

Inform
Listen
Individualized
Embrace/encourage differences
Open, not attached, to the outcome
Listen to understand
Express needs that may/may not be reflected in the discourse – explore options for redefining the problem

Review the Functions of a Dialog and the Differences between Debate and Dialog. A dialog requires us to listen and try to understand another's point of view. Do you think that is possible for Americans and Egyptians? Do you have some ideas about how to start a dialog? If you were able to communicate with an Egyptian high school student, how would you start a dialog so the Egyptian student could understand the United States and so you could understand Egyptian society?

A Matter of Perspective

Exercise 1

Review the major stories from online news sources from Egypt and the Middle East. For the same date, review the major stories from online news sources from the U.S. If there is sufficient time, this activity can be repeated for a number of days. Note other differences and similarities about what news is covered and what the commentaries talk about. What is negative about the news stories? What is positive about the news stories? How could Americans and Egyptians start a dialog about their respective cultures?

Fox News

Look at the front page and then the World section. Note the top three news stories. Note The War on Terror section and the Col. Corner blogs. Note the order of the specific countries listed: Iran, Iran, and Afghanistan. Of interest also is the link to stories about Princess Diana.

CNN

Look at the front page and then the World section. Note the top three news stories. At the bottom on the World section there is an index to stories on Iran, Iraq, Darfur, and al Qaeda. Review the Middle East section.

Egyptian Gazette

Look at the front page and then the World, Region (Middle East) and Home (Egypt) sections. Note the top three news stories. Look also at the Opinion section and the Gazette Forum to see what readers are interested in. Look to see if there is anything else that is different from American news sources, for example, the listing of prayer times.

Al Jazeera

Look at the front page and the Middle East section. Note the top three news stories. Look at the most emailed stories. Scroll to the bottom and look at the prisoner in Guantanamo story. Look to see if there is anything else that is different from American news sources. For example, the time is listed as Mecca time.

Exercise 2: Egyptian Perceptions of American Society

While our Study Group was in Egypt, the Egyptian Gazette published a story about a young girl having a baby as a result of rape. On *The Egyptian Gazette* website (*The Egyptian Gazette* <http://www.egyptiangazette.net.eg>) search for the story on July 21, 2007 page 1. Read the first paragraph of the story. Why do you think the person made this reference to Western society? Read the rest of the article. If the article did not have the first paragraph, how would you react to the discussion of this crime? What does this article indicate about Egyptian perceptions of Western society?

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**Exercise 3:
American
Perceptions of
Egyptian
Society**

After the Study Group returned to the U.S., the local newspaper wrote an article about our trip. You can read the article on the Pittsburgh Tribune Review web page.

(http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_525507.html)

Look at the quotes from the faculty who went on the trip. What are they trying to say about Egyptian society and Muslim culture? What does this article indicate about American perceptions of Muslim society?

The article received comments from a group called Jihad Watch which monitors media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Jihad Watch believes that Islam advocates violence to spread its religious beliefs. The comments on the Trib article were on a page called Dhimmi Watch. Click on the link and look at the comments on the article about the Study Group tour.

(<http://www.jihadwatch.org/dhimmiwatch/archives/018020.php>)

What is a *Dhimmi*? Why is the page called Dhimmi Watch? What do the comments indicate about the writers view the Study Group tour? Are they the same as your ideas after reading the article? What does this web page indicate about American perceptions of Muslim society?

**Exercise 4:
Muslim Call for
a Dialog With
Christians**

In October 2007, over 100 Muslim scholars issued a call to Christian leaders for a Christian-Muslim dialog. The letter is titled, "A Common Word Between Us and You." The letter along with media coverage of the letter and the response to the letter are available on the web.

(<http://www.acommonword.com>)

Scroll down to the bottom on the opening page of the website and you can see that the website is maintained by an Islamic scholarly institution in Jordan. Read the Introduction to the letter and scan the FAQ page. You can also read the entire letter if you wish. The letter itself is in more flowery and theological language. You can look around the web site and see the names of the signatories, the recipients, responses to the letter, and media coverage of the event.

How do the writers of the letter try to start a Christian-Muslim dialog. What do you think the response of Christian leaders will be? Do you think this letter and its audience will be a successful way to establish a dialog between Muslims and the West?

Egypt's Youngest Mother a Victim of Society

**News article
from *The
Egyptian
Gazette*, July
21, 2007 by
Saad
Mahmoud,
Staff reporter**

The Egyptian society is increasingly becoming similar to Western societies when it comes to immorality and lack of values, an expert warned yesterday.

It is alarming the Egyptian society is increasingly suffering from a state of confusion and lack of specific criteria to govern the behavior of the people, or their actions, says Sawson Othman, a sociology professor and chairperson of the Cairo-based Family Support Association.

Professor Othman was commenting on the rape incident of a primary schoolgirl called Hind, who gave birth recently.

The case has triggered an outcry by the Government and local NGO's.

Egypt's First Lady has ordered that Hind and the baby girl be given all necessary care and assistance. In compliance with Mrs. Mubarak's instructions, Adly Hussein, the Governor of Qalubiya where Hind lives, has provided the victim's family with a new flat and a financial assistance of LE 1,000 for the baby.

The Egyptians have to end this state of confusion by reviving their traditions and social values, Othman said, adding that the Egyptians should follow the Japanese experience after the World War II.

In the post- WWII era, the Japanese people managed to overcome the confusion and lack of standards in their society, she told *The Gazette*.

Even the Egyptian religious establishment and clerics are in a state of confusion too, Othman noted. "Instead of trying to find realistic solutions to the daily problems of society, it is lamentable to see some sheikhs being occupied with trivial matters," she argued.

They should be concerned with more serious matters such as rape or problems preventing the young people from getting married, she added.

Othman also blamed the media for airing sex-related materials and films that promote violence that lure young people into committing crimes.

"Our society urgently needs an awakening to restore our standards and values to combat alien phenomena and trends," she added.

The Government, the civil society and the private sector must join hands to address the problems that have led to the presence of some 7 million unmarried men and women in the country, she demanded.

On the Hind case, a female activist has warned against marrying off the victim to the 21-year-old alleged culprit as a settlement, describing it a life-long rape for the young girl.

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Hind should be psychologically treated from the traumatic experience she had suffered, stresses Eman Bebars, chairperson of the Cairo-based Association for Advancement and Development of Women.

Hind is the victim of a criminal who should be severely punished, she said, noting that he is either a drug addict or a psychologically ill person.

Bebars believed that the solution to such problems is intensifying police presence in public areas and raising awareness among girls against rape crimes, which usually breed in the street.

Othman has also stressed the importance of addressing the problems of poverty and ignorance and lack of education in the Egyptian society in order to prevent the re-occurrence of Hind-like crimes in the future.

Local Educators Learn About Islam on Trip to Egypt

**News article
from *The
Pittsburgh
Tribune Review*,
September 3,
2007 by Bill
Zlatos**

"The idea is most Americans don't know much about Islam except what you see in the headlines, which is all violence and oppression of women," said Rebecca Denova, visiting lecturer in religious studies at the University of Pittsburgh. "The purpose of the program is we need to teach more about Islam, starting in high school and in colleges."

Denova was one of 12 teachers who went to Egypt from June 24 to July 22 as part of the Fulbright-Hays Program under the U.S. Department of Education. They eventually will hold workshops to train high school teachers about Islam, which has about 1.3 billion adherents, second behind Christianity, which has about 2 billion followers.

Others on the trip were Elaine Linn of Pitt; Christina Michelmore, Charlotte Lott and Deborah Rubin of Chatham University; Tracey-Ann Flynn of Hickory High School in Hermitage, Mercer County; Tony Gaskew of Pitt-Bradford; Fran Leap of Seton Hill University; Michale McKale of St. Francis University; Richard Saccone of St. Vincent College; Eric Tuten of Slippery Rock University; and Michael Yoder of Northside Urban Pathways Charter School, Downtown.

Leap said she came away from the trip with a deeper respect for Muslims and how fervently they practice their religion.

"To see, for instance, the young man at the Internet cafe pick up his prayer rug and quietly and unobtrusively slip out the door and attend to his midday prayer and return five (or) 10 minutes later was very inspiring," Leap said.

On the trip, the teachers saw a blend of religion, culture and politics. They visited a mosque of the mystical Sufi sect of Islam and a Coptic church at which Christians, like Muslims, leave their shoes outside.

Another highlight for participants was meeting members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the leading opposition group in Egypt to President Hosni Mubarak.

Yoder, a history and Spanish teacher, plans to use his experience to develop a class on world religions.

"We generally think of Muslims as radicals or extremists, and I would like to present a case of moderate Islam that has a deep desire to get along with Christians and Jews," he said. "Egypt is a good example of a place where Christians and Muslims have gotten along for centuries."

Tuten, an assistant professor of history at Slippery Rock, said many Muslims and Islamic scholars told him they oppose the radical view of their religion expounded by some.

"That complicates my role as a teacher in trying to help students understand that Islam is much more than the extremist interpretation that some are willing to put forward," he said.
