

Confronting Islamophobia in the Classroom

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Project Overview

- A group of LSA faculty members and staff who all teach topics related to Islam, Arabs, or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or who are key contacts for students who experience Islamophobia in the classroom gathered over the course of several meals.
- We discussed the ways that Islamophobia enters our classes. Overwhelmingly this was through the topics discussed in the class as well as how students interpreted the identities of their professors.
- Rather than focusing on strategies of how to address these classroom dynamics, the group found it was necessary to have a space to come together, be a sounding board for classroom experiences, and provide mutual support.

Key Insights / New Questions

Before Islamophobia in the classroom can be addressed, the campus community needs a broad understanding of what defines Islamophobia and who is affected by it.

Islamophobia operates, in part, through conflating and homogenizing multiple ethnic and religious groups into a singular entity. Most frequently, “Muslim” is assumed to be synonymous with “Arab,” despite the fact that the majority of Muslims (both worldwide and in the U.S.) are not Arab or MENA, and despite the existence of multiple religious groups among Arabs (including Jews and Christians). Many non-Muslims are targeted by Islamophobia, including Sikhs who may receive violence and threats when non-Muslims perceive the turban to be an identifier of Islam.

Islamophobia is intersectional.

All of the group participants identify as women and found that student perceptions of them as women *and* as Muslim and/or Arab were central to how Islamophobia affected their classrooms. For instance, one participant noted that a male student felt particularly comfortable in the role of “expert” on Islam and would “correct” her during class, despite the faculty member’s actual expertise in studies of Islam.

“Whenever you teach about Islam, Arabs, or the Middle East and North Africa, you have to start at 0.”

Group members agreed that, regardless of the level of the class, the pervasiveness of either overt Islamophobia sentiment or overall ignorance of Islam and the Middle East and North Africa demands that we start at the “101” level each time. The assumptions that students bring into the classroom can otherwise alienate Muslim, MENA, and Arab students and prevent their access to education in that class. Those students’ reactions to Islamophobia, rightful as they may be, can also alienate other students if they haven’t been prepared to be challenged on their views.

Challenging universality, getting comparative.

Group members found that students who were resistant to class material believed their experiences to be universal. One strategy to challenge this was two-fold: first, helping the student understand that their experience is borne from a specific geo-political and social location and second, bringing in comparisons to Christianity and Judaism to highlight similarities, rather than differences, among the three monotheistic religions.

Resources

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others.” *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 783-790.
- Georgetown University. “The Bridge Initiative: A Research Project on Islamophobia”
<http://bridge.georgetown.edu/>
- Kazi, Nazia. “Teaching Against Islamophobia in the Age of Terror.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 63.4 (2016): B25.
- U.S. Department of Education. “Dear Colleague” Letter, December 31, 2015
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secler/151231.html>

Participants

- Evelyn Alstutany, American Culture, Director of Arab and Muslim American Studies
- Amal Fadlalla, Anthropology, Women’s Studies, DAAS
- Mai Hassan, Political Science
- Shazia Iftkhar, Communication Studies
- Charlotte Karem Albrecht, American Culture, Women’s Studies
- Aliyah Khan, DAAS, English
- Yasmin Moll, Anthropology
- Dahlia Petrus, American Culture, Arab and Muslim American Studies (staff and instructor)
- Muniba Saleem, Communication Studies

What Does Islamophobia Look Like in the Classroom?

- Statements that generalize about Muslims, Islam, the Middle East and North Africa, or Middle Easterners and North Africans
- Statements that implicitly or explicitly link Islam, Muslims, or the Middle East and North Africa with terrorism and/or violence
- Statements that implicitly or explicitly link Islam, Muslims, or the Middle East and North Africa with intolerance, anti-Semitism, sexism, and/or homophobia in an exceptional manner or as “intrinsic” aspects of “culture”
- The privileging of sources from the U.S. military, U.S. state officials, and/or experts in “security” and “terrorism” studies in teaching about Islam, Muslims, or the Middle East and North Africa
- Frameworks that position Islam, Muslims, the Middle East and North Africa, or Middle Easterners and North Africans as “opposite” to or radically different from the United States, Christianity, and/or “the West”
- Asking students who are perceived to be Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern or North African to speak on issues assumed to be specific to those identities (for instance, asking such students to speak about terrorism, to generalize about Muslim women and oppression, or to be experts on Palestine)
- Silence or lack of intervention, particularly on the part of the instructor, when such statements or actions take place