

Expanding Horizons through Muslim and Multi-faith Online Curriculum

Background

Founded in 1993, Islamic Networks Group (ING) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to counter prejudice and discrimination against American Muslims by teaching about their traditions and contributions in the context of America's history and cultural diversity, while building relations between American Muslims and other groups.

ING achieves its mission through education and community engagement. ING focuses on educational outreach in both public and private schools through two of its programs. The Islamic Speakers Bureau consists of speakers from the Islamic faith who supplement existing curriculum and cultural diversity programming relating to Islam and Muslims in public institutions. The Interfaith Speakers Bureau program consists of speakers from the Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu traditions who speak together on panels to increase religious and cultural literacy and mutual respect in a way that reflects religious pluralism.

While ING's speakers program has been successfully implemented for over twenty years, with affiliated bureaus conducting similar programs in various vicinities across the country, there are parts of the country where educators do not have access to ING's programs. The need for greater outreach efforts to educate about Muslims and their faith is apparent from recent polls which show rising anti-Muslim sentiment among Americans. According to a 2014 Zogby Associates poll, the percentage of Americans viewing Muslims *favorably* has declined from 35% in 2010 to 27% in 2014.² In fact, Arabs and Muslims have the *highest unfavorable and the lowest favorable* ratings of any religious or ethnic group¹. These perceptions permeate every aspect of society, and can create a sense of shame and inferiority in Muslim youth. According to a 2014 Pew poll which rated the "warmth" or "coldness" Americans felt toward various religious groups on a scale from 1 to 100, Muslims rated most negatively of all religious groups in the survey with an average rating of 40.²

In light of the growing need for educational materials about Islam and Muslims, both in response to growing anti-Muslim bias and perceptions as well as to the growth of the American Muslim community, ING has developed online curricula for educators in

¹ Arab American Institute, *American Attitudes Toward Arabs and Muslims*, July 29, 2014. Executive Summary. <http://www.aaiusa.org/american-attitudes-toward-arabs-and-muslims-2014>

² Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life, *How Americans Feel About Religious Groups*, July 16, 2014, 1. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>

middle and high schools, as well as colleges and universities. This curricula provides teachers in remote areas of the United States access to authentic and accurate information about Islam and Muslims. The online curricula is also a useful resource for full time Islamic schools or weekend schools who want to provide their Muslim students with knowledge and about their own faith, history and contributions. Muslim students, even in Islamic schools, can benefit both academically and emotionally from learning more about the history and achievements of Muslims.

ING's Curricula

ING's online curriculum includes four of its most popular digital presentations related to teaching about Muslims and their faith: *Getting to Know American Muslims and Their Faith*, *A History of Muslims in America*, *Muslim Contributions to Civilization*, and *Muslim Women beyond the Stereotypes*. ING also provides two multifaith curricula about *Shared Values* and *Living the Faith*, which address these topics as they relate to five major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. ING's most recent addition to its offerings is a new series titled "Muslim Heroes." The first curriculum featured is the story of a 19th-century Algerian freedom fighter and interfaith activist titled *Abd el-Kader, a Muslim Hero for our Time*.

These curricula were designed to supplement content standards in social studies and world history and address many of the themes created by the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. Many of these themes are also addressed in state social studies content standards of leading states, California, Texas, and New York.

Each curriculum includes the digital presentation, as well as lessons which accompany the presentation. Every lesson includes notes that describe the slides in the presentation. In addition to the presentation notes, each lesson also includes discussion and questions and other activities. Additionally, the lessons include links to dozens of film or film clips produced by popular Muslim academicians, musicians, comedians, and others addressing various topics that bring the subject to life and provide a multi-faceted perspective. Some of the films included are widely known, such as Unity Productions Foundation's *Muhammad, Legacy of a Prophet* and *Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, and the PBS special *Islam, Empire of Faith*, while others are less know works by individual producers. The film titles and links are followed by discussion questions that help students reflect on different aspects of the films as they relate to the topic being addressed. In our increasingly digital world, including film in classroom learning helps bring subjects to life in a way that engages students at various levels.

The lessons conclude with further references and suggested resources for educators. These curricula were designed to be used either jointly or independently, depending on the time available and the desired focus.

The curricula are available free-of-charge for downloading by educators at <https://www.ing.org/7-12>. After registering one's name, contact information, and place of employment users will be approved for access to all the curricula.

Curricula Overview

Composed of five individual lesson plans, *Getting to Know American Muslims and their Faith* provides a basic overview of what it means to be an American Muslim. Lesson One covers basic terminology and the demographics of Muslims in the world. Lesson Two provides current demographics on American Muslims, a brief history of Muslims in the U.S., and information on notable American Muslims today. Lesson Three explains the six major beliefs and five pillars of Islam. Lesson Four provides an explanation of common misconceptions related to gender equity and extremism, and Lesson Five concludes with a discussion of commonalities between Islam and other faiths. This curriculum is suitable for middle and high schools and is generally taught in 7th grade Social Studies or high school level World History classes.

The curriculum *A History of Muslims in America* consists of eight lesson plans which cover the various periods and groups that make up this history. This curriculum challenges the common trope that Muslims are not true Americans or part of American history. The first lesson begins with a look at some of the sayings of the founding fathers relating to religious freedom in general and Muslims in particular. Lesson Two examines the historical possibility of pre-Columbian Muslim exploration. Lesson Three describes the significant percentage of Muslims among slaves and highlights some of their stories. Lesson Four looks at the African-America rediscovery of Islam, while Lesson Five highlights Latino and White American Muslims. Lesson Six points out some examples of Muslim influence on American culture in areas such as cuisine, music, and architecture. Lesson Seven describes the various waves of Muslim immigration, and Lesson Eight concludes with examples of notable American Muslims today. This curriculum is suitable for middle and high schools and is generally taught in American History classes.

The *Muslim Contributions to Civilization* curriculum is composed of six lesson plans which highlight different aspects of Muslim achievements, particularly, but not exclusively, in the so-called "Golden Age" of Islam. This curriculum challenges the common narrative that Islam and Muslims are backwards and have contributed little to

civilization. The first lesson introduces the topic, while the second lesson looks at contributions to home and daily life. Lesson Three describes contributions to architecture, the arts, and recreation. Chapter Four focuses on the development of libraries, colleges, and mathematics, while Chapter Five summarizes contributions in the field of medicine. The curriculum concludes with a look at various contributions in the humanities and sciences. This curriculum is suitable for middle and high schools and is generally taught in 7th grade Social Studies or high school level World History classes.

The *Muslim Women beyond the Stereotypes* curriculum is made up of six lesson plans which address the role and rights of Muslim women as well as their status today. begins with a look at common stereotypes about Muslim women and their sources. The goal of this curriculum is to both explain these stereotypes by examining textual sources and provide a more nuanced look at the reality of Muslim women's lives today. Lesson Two examines the role of women in the Qur'an and Prophetic sayings, while Lesson Three describes some of the rights of Muslim women as conveyed by these religious texts. Lesson Four explains the topics of gender relations and modest dress for Muslims. Lesson Five discusses women in the Qur'an and in Islamic history, while Lesson Six looks at contemporary Muslim women and highlights leaders, reformers, and other notable women. The final lesson examines challenging issues, including divorce, polygamy, domestic violence, honor killings, and other topics suitable for high school students only. The lesson concludes with a discussion of prominent Muslim women's rights organizations. This curriculum is suitable for high school classes only.

ING's multi-faith curriculum about *Shared Values* discusses such common values of the five major world faiths as mercy and compassion, kindness to parents, concern and care for the needy, honesty in word and deed, the sanctity of life, and justice and peace. The second multi-faith curriculum, *Living the Faith*, examines how the five world religions are practiced at home, at school and in the workplace, and in the community. The curriculum also describes communal worship and festivals in each faith tradition. These curricula are both suitable for high school level.

ING's most recent curriculum focuses on the life and legacy of Emir Abd el-Kader, a 19th century Algerian freedom fighter. The first lesson looks at his early life and education, much of which centered on religion. The second lesson focuses on French conquest of Algeria and Abd el-Kader's new role as "Commander of the Faithful" fighting against and eventually surrendering to them. Lesson Three describes his exile in France where he spends the next five years struggling to gain his freedom. His eventual success and move to Syria is documented in Lesson Four, as his is new role as a defender of other faiths when he saves the lives of thousands of Christians in

Damascus during a massacre and riot in 1860. He is celebrated internationally for his actions. Chapter Five looks at the lessons and legacy of the many different parts of his life and character. The curriculum is a powerful narrative and example of a recent Muslim hero whose ethical character and actions contrast with those of extremist groups like ISIS.

ING's curricula provide diverse and interactive, digital resources for teaching about Muslims and their faith, history and contributions. Teachers can choose to teach an entire curriculum or only on the lessons or parts of lessons that they want to focus on. I

What Educators Are Saying about ING's Curricula

"This new set of curricula from ING provides teachers with a useful set of tools to use in their classrooms when teaching about Islamic history and the global contributions of Muslims. The presentations and supplemental films will enable students to see Muslims in a new light." – Reza Aslan, professor, UC Riverside, author of *No God But God*.

"The curriculum for *Getting to Know American Muslims and their Faith* covers important points that many Americans are not aware of in relationship to Islam. I commend you on the resources you chose and the PowerPoint you produced. I liked the way you drew connections between Islam and other faiths. Well done!" Marcella Fox, Carondelet High School, Concord, CA.

"I can't wait to be able to use these new curriculums in my classroom, they are extremely well-written and organized. They can be used immediately as a "stand alone" unit or can be added to by the teacher. The inclusion of an ING speaker will only enhance the curriculum." – Judy Smith Most Holy Trinity School San Jose, CA.