

CURRICULUM CONTEXT

Level: Upper/Middle secondary

Curriculum area: The Arts

Calligraphy and Islam

This short learning sequence explores the tradition of calligraphy in the Muslim world and asks students to identify its role and purpose. Students reflect on the tradition from their own context and perspective. The learning sequence is taken from the resource *Learning from One Another: Bringing Muslim perspectives into Australian schools* by Eeqbal Hassim and Jennet Cole-Adams. This 116-page resource is published by the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS) at the University of Melbourne and is available for purchase from the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA).

In 2009, ACSA commenced work with NCEIS to design and deliver a series of professional learning workshops for school teachers on Muslim students' experiences and expectations of schooling in Australia. *Learning from One Another: Bringing Muslim perspectives into Australian schools* is a comprehensive resource for Australian schools, that expands on the concepts and strategies presented at the workshops. The project (comprising the resource and the workshops) is funded by a grant from the Myer Foundation.

Background

As the preamble to the 'Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Dec 2008)' states, 'India, China and other Asian nations are growing and their influence on the world is increasing'. As well as there being very large Muslim communities in India and China, more than 240 million Muslims live in the Southeast Asian countries neighbouring Australia. Our nearest neighbour, Indonesia, is the most populous Muslim nation in the world. All this reinforces the fact that being 'Asia literate' means being aware of Islam and Muslim cultures.

In addition, Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the Western world. Through migration and the growth in Australian-born Muslims, the number of Muslim students in our schools is continuously increasing. This has significant implications for cross-cultural awareness and sensitivities in teaching and learning. In this regard, including Muslim content and perspectives in subjects across the curriculum has advantages for both Muslim and non-Muslim students.

Muslims have contributed much to the arts, particularly in the areas of visual art, architecture, calligraphy, music and film. In visual art, Muslims developed complex, sometimes geometric patterns, in keeping with the religious belief that they should avoid visually depicting God and prophets. This belief also encouraged a focus on what Muslims believe to be God's Word, the Quran, and the development of complex calligraphy in Arabic. Each Muslim region has its own unique style of calligraphy.

Learning outcomes

Students will:

- develop an understanding of the significance of calligraphy to Muslim culture
- appreciate changes in Muslim calligraphy over time
- identify examples of calligraphy in other cultures
- explore art as a medium for expressing spirituality

References

Eeqbal Hassim and Jennet Cole-Adams, 2010. *Learning from one another: Bringing Muslim perspectives into Australian Schools*, National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, University of Melbourne.

Aerosolarabic: Urban Spiritual Art website www.aerosolarabic.com/



An Arabic calligrapher at work. Photo Eeqmal Hassim.

LEARNING SEQUENCE

1. Introduce your students to Islamic calligraphy by using the **The art of words** worksheet. Ask students to answer the questions on the worksheet or discuss them as a class. You may like to ask your students to find their own examples of Islamic calligraphy.
2. Ask your students to use their name or initials as the basis for a calligram that explores something about them. Calligrams are created when words are used to create an image, as shown on the **The art of words** student worksheet.
3. Ask your students to create a piece of art that incorporates words and has a spiritual (not necessarily religious) dimension. Students should write an account that explains their work and why they chose the approach they did.



The work of a student of Arabic calligraphy, using bamboo pens (*qalams*) and brown ink, tracing over the teacher's work in black ink. Photo Aieman Khimji.

WORKSHEET 1

The art of words

There is a rich tradition of calligraphy among Muslims the world over, particularly using Arabic script. Muslim cultures use calligraphy, or handwriting, as a form of artistic and spiritual expression, and continue to adapt the tradition to the contemporary world.

Islam does not have a strong tradition of figurative art, with some Muslims believing that the drawing of animate objects, such as people or animals, is an offence to God. A saying of Prophet Muhammad is that God will challenge anyone who has drawn or sculpted an animate object to give it a living soul in the afterlife. For this reason Muslim art emphasises calligraphy and abstract representations.



iStockphoto

Muslim calligraphy is closely associated with the Muslim holy book, the Quran (see photo above). Muslims consider calligraphy to be one of the primary ways of preserving and valuing the messages of the Quran, after the oral tradition. Today most Muslim calligraphy is still inspired by phrases from the Quran.



Calligraphy on the facade at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Photo courtesy of photos8.com

Calligraphy has had a large influence on Muslim architecture, particularly in mosques, where Muslims go for prayer. Calligraphy is often used as the basis for repetitive designs that decorate interior and exterior walls. This form of artistic expression is known as arabesque and is common across the Muslim world.

WORKSHEET 1

Figurative representations are seen in Muslim art in the form of calligrams (shown below), which use words to create pictures. Muslims often use spiritually significant words, such as Allah, to form the shapes of animals or other objects.



Image courtesy of photos8.com

Today, the Muslim tradition of calligraphy is reflected in advertising and marketing, particularly in the Arab world. It is often the inspiration for business logos, and designs can also be animated for use on websites.

Muslim calligraphy is also finding a place in popular culture. Examples can be seen in the messages and tag lines of some graffiti artists. It is also found in body art, with many tattoo designs incorporating Arabic script. Interestingly, based on a number of traditions and sayings from Prophet Muhammad, most Muslims believe that tattoos are not allowed within Islam.



The logo for Aljazeera, the Arabic news network, is in the form of a drop of water.



Section of a mural created by Mohammad Ali and a group of young Muslim artists. Photo Crooked Rib.

WORKSHEET 1

- Why is calligraphy a tradition of Islam?

- Do you consider calligraphy to be art or craft?

- In what ways has the tradition of calligraphy in the Muslim world changed over time?

- Can you think of examples where the Muslim tradition of calligraphy, particularly arabesque, has been adopted or adapted by other cultures?

- What relationship, if any, exists between religion and art?

- What other examples of visual art can you find that incorporate written language?
