

## **Is Australia a harmonious knowledge economy? Are we good neighbours and responsible citizens?**

**LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER BRINGING MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES INTO AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS, by Eeqbal Hassim and Jennet Cole-Adams, National Centre for Excellence for Islamic Studies, Melbourne, 2010, \$44 plus \$8 postage from the Australian Curriculum Studies Association**

What kind of society do we want in Australia and what should it look like? Partly, this question has already been answered by the indigenous cultures and languages of this continent, and by the history of migration and settlement that has occurred in recent centuries. Partly it has also been answered by our constitution which guarantees freedom of religious association, and by our government's policy that defines English as the national language of this country. Recent waves of migration are adding new and different cultural values to Australia which, if we are open to learning about them, will indelibly enrich all our lives and bring as yet unimagined creativity and prosperity.

Gone are the days of English as the mono-imperial and economically dominant global language. Chinese, Arabic and Spanish have replaced the number of English internet sites, and gone is the tyranny of distance, thanks to vastly faster and improved Information and Communication Technology. The balance of western economic might is also shifting. So, how relevant is this resource?

This teaching resource is a well researched, well prepared and well thought-through set of lessons and workshops aimed to promote intercultural understanding in a contemporary world. The activities are geared to increase knowledge of what is still relatively unknown in most Australian classrooms. These classrooms have been historically characterised by an Anglo-Saxon and Christian-centric cultural approach dominated by English as the language of instruction.

Historically, Islam originated in the Middle East and from there spread over many parts of Africa and deep into many parts of Asia. The Diaspora of Muslims numbers some 30 to 50 million in all continents today. As Kevin Rudd said in 2008, Australia's future also depends on our ability to engage constructively and effectively with the countries of the Asia Pacific. Achieving Asia literacy requires increasing the cohort of students who can study an Asian language, combined with embedding studies of Asia as a core element in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, English and the Arts for all students.

Did you know that Australian secondary schools currently spend the least amount of time learning languages other than English of all advanced industrial OECD member nations?

Australian classrooms have also witnessed a decline in numbers of students who study Indonesian in the first decade of this century. Indonesia is our most populous nearest nation with huge numbers of Muslim followers. According to a 2009 demographic study, Islam has 1.57 billion adherents, making up 23% of the world population. Remaining ignorant of Islam is a threat to Australia, as without relentless promotion of intercultural understanding and knowledge of other cultures, languages and religions our future will remain imperilled.

Instead of relying on sensationalist and terrorist focussed media perceptions of what is often loosely, even erroneously, described as Muslim in character, resources such as Learning from one another goes a very long way to develop a more variegated, sensitive, respectful and most of all informed understanding of Islam and Muslims in Australia.

This resource falls into three parts: how to introduce Muslim perspectives into all eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum makes up half the book's 108 pages.

Carefully grouped by age and by learning area, the cited references are recent, readily available and suggest first hand ideas on how to get students to think outside the envelope of their immediate experiences. With rich illustrations of Islamic contributions to science and mathematics, there are activities to learn about such things as Afghan camels in Australia, or the historical significance of the Crusades as seen through Muslim eyes.

This resource is not a value-add to Australian classrooms: it is an essential tool with which to address the requirements of a 21st century curriculum that is characterised by an increasingly global understanding not just of climate and environmental issues, but also and especially, of rich and diverse belief systems including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, and Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country.

The geographic significance of Mecca is complemented with an impressive display of Islamic art, architecture and the calligraphy of the holy script. Even the Islamic approach to sex and physical education and Sharia finance are explained. What I liked best about this part was the cross-curricular perspectives which alerted to topics of prejudice, 9/11, the role of the media, and understanding the Multi-faith Classroom in a Secular Society.

How to achieve positive outcomes for Muslim students in Australian classrooms forms the second part. This explores central questions of identity, citizenship, role models, peer pressure and the role of parents and communities. Facilitating religious customs and practice in Australian schools concludes this part.

The final part aims to impart an appreciation of the diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices. This includes a description of Muslims in Australia and an excellent list of misconceptions and stereotypical misunderstandings of Muslims. A useful glossary and list of key Muslim organisations in Australia concludes this valuable, recent and most of all, highly topical teaching resource.

If you believe in the two questions that titled this review, then no school, primary or secondary, denominational or secular, can be without a copy. In the rush to publish textbooks that meet the Australian Curriculum requirements in 2011, this resource succeeds in explaining Islam as a world religion and cultural power in 108 pages and for a mere 44 cents a page. Can you beat that?

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