A place for informal learning in teaching about religion: The story of an experienced non-Muslim teacher and her learning about Islam

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Article info

Article history:
Received 4 November 2010
Received in revised form 18 July 2011
Accepted 25 July 2011

Keywords:
Teaching about religion
Teacher learning
Religion
Islam
Dialog

Abstract

Teacher learning about religion has remained an under-researched topic in spite of the professional accountability placed on teachers to teach about religion in a constitutionally permissible and pedagogically sound way. Using data collected from interviews, the purpose of this study is to describe and examine how and what an experienced Non-Muslim teacher of the world’s religions learned about Islam in today’s climate of accountability and negative imagery of Islam. The findings of this study suggest that informal learning through independent reading and interaction with a local Muslim community can be a means to enculturate teachers of world religions into ways of learning about Islam.

“Learning about the world’s religions is important but difficult. Islam is very deep. It is so vast, and it has clamoring voices taking positions in it. And, there is so much to learn about it. I feel my knowledge is very small. I feel like I need to know more.”
(Mrs. Adams (pseudonym), a teacher of the world’s religions)

1. Introduction

Many teachers like Mrs. Adams regard learning about the world’s religions as necessary but challenging, and thus they are faced with a continuous need to expand their knowledge in order to teach the world’s religions in a constitutionally permissible, pedagogically sound, and culturally appropriate way (Moore, 2006a,b). The need to learn about the world’s religions is called upon in times when almost all countries across the globe have grown religiously diverse due to the rise in immigration. The growth of religious diversity in many countries impuls interactions among people of different religious affiliations that in turn invigorate differences, conflict, and animosities, especially in educational settings (Driel, 2004).

Incidents of religious tension, discomfort, and intolerance are repeatedly reported in many European countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden, to name a few (Batelaan, 2004). For example, Richardson (2004) narrated real stories about problems experienced at middle and secondary schools in the UK: stories of students engaging in verbal abuse, banter, and other hurtful actions toward British Muslim students. Similarly, Karakasoglu and Luchtenberg (2004) threw light on the psychological and emotional stresses that Muslim Turkish girls experienced in German schools where wearing headscarves and not participating in mixed physical education remain controversial issues. Likewise, in Italy, many foreign Muslim students face “a situation of double isolation: from their native country and from the society they live in due to incomplete integration” (Bertani, 2004, p.105). This feeling of isolation and alienation is also experienced by younger Muslims in almost every educational setting in the United States (Haque, 2004).

What exacerbates the complexities of these situations is the failure of school teachers to address religious differences in their classrooms due to their formal unpreparedness to talk about religious beliefs that are different from their own faiths (Batelaan, 2004). This can be explained by the absence of the topic of religion from multicultural education and teacher preparation in Europe and the United States (Driel, 2004). Paradoxically enough, some schools in Europe and the United States have included religion in their curriculum (Karakasoglu & Luchtenberg, 2004; Moore, 2007). In this general climate of religious illiteracy, a major question needs to be raised about how exemplary and experienced teachers who teach the world’s religions in schools come to learn about religions and what they learn. More specifically, the purpose of this research study is to examine the learning about Islam of an
exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher of a world’s religions class in an American public school.

In the United States, teacher learning about religion has been a relatively under-researched topic in spite of the secured place that religion has on both educational and constitutional levels. The Establishment of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution\(^1\) bans American public schools from inculcating or inhibiting a particular religion. However, the Supreme Court in the 1963 case of Abington Township v. Schempp\(^2\) stated clearly that teaching about religion is necessary, legal, and sound for establishing a complete education. This set the ground for secular teaching about religion in lieu of a sectarian teaching of religion; the latter connotes a propensity for conversion, while the former leans toward education to promote respect, tolerance, and acceptance (Whittier, 1989).

In spite of the necessity of teaching about religion, many teachers consider teaching and learning about religion, in particular Islam, an area of great challenge (Moore, 2009; Nord, 1989). Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion founded in Arabia\(^3\) in the 7th century and is based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an. Islam is predominant in northern Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, and Indonesia, and there are divisions among Muslims over theology, practices, and laws (Moore, 2009). The challenge of teaching and learning about Islam is exacerbated by a widespread disagreement among scholars over the nature and role of Islam in world history and the contemporary era (Samman, 2005). Additionally, in political and popular discourse in the United States, Islam is intrinsically linked with terrorism, violence, and extremism and is considered anti-modern and anti-Western (Moore, 2006a,b). The U.S. media also portrays Arab Muslims as “barbaric,” “cruel,” “bloodthirsty,” “anti-Christian” and “anti-Semitic” (Majaj, 1999, p.321). The representation of Islam is further complicated in the context of the current discussion of “the war on terror” and the confrontational relationship between the West and the Islamic world in the aftermath of 9/11 (Murray, 2004). As a result, these stereotypes and distortions about Islam and Muslims exacerbate the difficulty of what to include in and exclude from the topic of Islam when it is taught in schools (Wuthnow, 2005).

Using data collected from interviews, the purpose of this paper is to examine the learning about Islam of an exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher of the world’s religions in an American public high school. More specifically, the research questions were the following:

1. How did the experienced teacher come to her interest in the learning about religion?
2. What learning activities did the experienced teacher report to have engaged in during her learning about Islam?
3. What learning outcomes did the experienced teacher report to have resulted from her learning activities?

What follows is a brief review of the literature on teacher learning about religion and teaching about religion. I then lay out the findings of this study, which suggest that informal learning through interaction with the local Muslim community can be a means to enculturate teachers of the world’s religions into ways of learning and teaching about Islam.

### 2. Literature review

The review below points to teacher learning about religion that remains largely absent from teacher education programs in times when teaching about religion is increasingly infused in public school curricula in the United States.

#### 2.1. Teaching about religion in American public schools

With the dawn of the 21st century, research on religion in public education has shifted from whether religion should be incorporated in public schooling to why it should be included and how it should be integrated (White, 2009). There is a growing body of literature that argues that knowledge of religion is important for establishing a complete education (Anderson, 2004); for engaging in political conversations (Prothero, 2007); for becoming responsible citizens (Nash, 2005); for living in a world of diversity (Head, 2005); for teaching tolerance (Wuthnow, 2005); and for developing an appreciation of differences (Blumhofer, 2002). To this end, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) published guidelines to help teachers distinguish between teaching of religion as promoting a particular religious view and teaching about religion as contributing to a secular, academic study of religion. The guidelines are as follows:

- The school’s approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate religion.
- The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief (NCSS, 1994, p. 21).

As these distinctions became widely known, teaching about religion has been implemented in most state standards and school curricula, such as social studies, history, and English, through the use of age-appropriate content, textbooks, classroom activities, and pedagogies (Douglass, 2002).

#### 2.2. Teacher learning about religion

The examination of teacher learning about world’s religions is surprisingly rare in spite of its relevance to the challenges of learning and teaching about religion. The silence about teacher learning and understanding of religion implies that educators are neutral agents and religiously literate (Douglass, 2002). However, several scholars argue that pre-service as well as in-service teachers are religiously illiterate. Subedi (2006), for example, found that pre-service white female teachers lacked knowledge of religions, were resistant to new knowledge, were unaware of religious forms of discrimination within school culture, and felt less qualified to teach about religion. In a similar context, Moore (2007) found that most of her student teachers at Harvard Divinity School had little to no previous exposure to other religions, and as a result harbored problematic generalizations about religions. This is, as Moore put it, a byproduct of “widespread religious illiteracy that goes beyond the particularities of studying a specific tradition”

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\(^1\) Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (First Amendment, United States Constitution).

\(^2\) It might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization (Supreme Court).

\(^3\) Arabia is a peninsula in Southwest Asia at the junction of Asia and Africa. The area is an important part of the Middle East.
The State University of New York were hesitant to embrace the idea of teaching about religion in the public schools, for it is fraught with political and social tensions.

To break the cycle of disqualification of future teachers, a number of scholars in religion and education has highlighted different types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers need to master in order to adequately teach about religion in their disciplines (Douglass, 2001; Moore, 2007). They all agree on breadth and depth as two important dimensions of teacher knowledge. Teachers need breadth of knowledge in a variety of areas concerning the history of religion, the philosophy of religion, the sociology of religion, the intersection of psychology and religion, and research methods in religion (Ediger, 1994). In relation to depth, Moore (2007), in her book Overcoming Religious Illiteracy, identified knowledge and skills for teachers of religion: (1) knowledge of constitutional issues as well as legal constraints regarding religious studies in public education; (2) knowledge of the purpose of public education and how it defines and is defined by religion; (3) knowledge of religions in all eras, from the pre-historic to the present; (4) knowledge of the intersection of religion and dimensions of human life, such as culture, politics, economics, and society; and (5) knowledge of the various religious beliefs and practices of the larger community. Moreover, teachers need to have the skill of using appropriate methods of teaching and of selecting appropriate curricular materials to present effectively various religious traditions and beliefs (Moore, 2007). Teachers also need to develop the skill of interrogating their biased language, stereotypes, and assumptions about religions to ensure objective understanding by children of minority faiths (Nord, 1989). Beyond knowledge and skills is the matter of disposition and attitude. Teachers need to be fair, objective, emotionally mature, tolerant, and respectful of others’ faith (Kniker, 1990).

In spite of the scholarship standards of religious literacy development, very few teacher education programs have taken initiative to incorporate the study of religion in their curriculum (The American Academy of Religion Report, 2009). It might be that these standards of knowledge, skills, and dispositions are too complex, and therefore they make expertise difficult to access. Waggoner (2003), in Reading the Terrain, argues that there are major environmental factors in the PK-12 public education context and higher education system that might influence the development of religious literacy initiatives in teacher education programs. On the one hand, public schools are pre-occupied more with “survival issues” than with such issues as religious literacy in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA, 2001) era (Waggoner, 2003, p. 80). In addition, teachers, administrators, and parents are uncertain about the appropriateness of addressing religion in schools and/or fear the unpredictable outcome of such discussions.

On the other hand, several conditions in higher education have also complicated the development of religious literacy. First, college professors in an incentive-driven higher education system are discouraged from collaborating with colleagues outside their own disciplines. Second, faculty who advocate scientific knowledge may consider religion a secondary subject area while those who practice religion may find it wise not to deal with it in their academic work. Third, faculty in higher education are themselves inadequately prepared to incorporate religious literacy in teacher education. Finally, pre-service teacher preparation curricula are already overburdened due to the pressure of the NCLBA.

3. Research problem

While the review of the literature is valuable for optimizing understanding of how teaching about religion is constitutionally positioned in public education and pedagogically implemented in public schools, it is also valuable for pointing out the inconsistencies. Despite considerable rhetoric on the implementation of teaching about religion in public schools, it is still unclear in the literature how teacher learning about religion occurs. More specifically, no research has been done on how exemplary teachers who teach the world’s religions in public high schools come to learn about Islam and what they learn. This area is highly important, especially in a context where (1) religion has been infused into most state standards and curricular frameworks (Moore, 2006a,b), (2) religion is absent from teacher preparation programs (Moore, 2006a,b), and (3) the representation of Islam engrained in the collective American consciousness is negative (Gerge, 2003).

In light of religious illiteracy among teachers and the silence about teacher learning of religion, it is likely that teachers will harbor prejudices and problematic generalizations about Islam which will hinder their opportunities to understand contemporary cultural and political issues in the global world. On these bases, teachers may be uncertain and wary about what to include and exclude about Islam within school instruction. This will exacerbate challenges in teaching topics like militancy and terrorism (Berkson, 2005), in reading the Qur’an in a manner that “honors” Muslims (Swanson, 2005), or initiating a dialog with Islam.

Notwithstanding this challenge, teachers are expected to teach about religion in a constitutionally permissible, pedagogically sound, and culturally appropriate way. This professional accountability places more pressure on teachers, increases their level of uncertainty, and demands independent learning to continually extend their knowledge (Lohman & Woolf, 2001) in order to promote tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and appreciation of different religious views among all religious enclaves in the United States – Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. Thereby, there is much to learn the learning about Islam of an exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher in an American public school.

In this study, the concept of informal learning was used to maximize understanding of the nature, characteristics, and process of an experienced teacher’s learning about Islam. Typically, there are two kinds of learning: one that is formal, structured, and occurs in instructor-led programs, for example schools, universities, training programs etc... (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), and the other is informal, semi-structured, and takes place in a variety of places independent from the formal education system (Eraut, 2004). The latter can be described as self-directed, independent, and interactive (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). In the teaching profession, teachers enter pre-service teacher preparation programs to be able to teach a content subject area — English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies — and join professional development programs to improve their teaching expertise. When formal learning opportunities, however, are limited, learners are oriented to self-directed learning to expand their pedagogical content knowledge. In this study, I conceptualized experienced teachers’ learning as taking place outside formal educational settings through interaction with settings, other individuals, and tools to generate different kinds of knowledge (Lohman & Woolf, 2001).

4. Conceptual framework

Conceiving learning as a dynamic process where individuals generate knowledge through interactions with the environment they live in (Eraut, 2004), I studied learning as social activities that involve the individual, persons, and tools, and that are situated in a variety of places, for example home, workplace, community, library, and others places (Lohman & Woolf, 2001). A number of scholars argue that teacher learning can occur informally on the job.
as teachers gain more experience in the workplace (e.g. Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Learning on the job emphasizes the vital role of informal learning in education (Eraut, 2004). To fully understand informal learning it is useful to define the terms formal and informal learning. Formal learning is a process that takes place in "formal, structured, and planned settings" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1041). Informal learning, on the other hand, is a term that describes "any organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives" (Simkins, 1976, p. 7). Unlike formal learning, informal learning does not have a specified curriculum designed and taught by a designated teacher whose primary goal is assessing and certifying students' learning (Hager & Halliday, 2006). Instead, it entails engaging in independent learning activities organized by teachers (Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen, 2009). Several studies have shown that informal learning is a lifelong process that can take place in a variety of places independent from instructor-led programs, such as learning at home and work, and through daily interactions and shared relationships among members of society (e.g. Blacker, 2001; Dunn & Shriner, 1999; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Schulz & Manduzk, 2005). In the context of informal learning, teachers employ independent learning activities that can be classified into four major categories: (1) learning from experience (Blacker, 2001; Lohman & Woolf, 2001), (2) learning by working with networks and organizations in a community (Gilchrist, 2001), (3) learning by reflecting on what happens at work and collaborating with colleagues (Dunn & Shriner, 1999), and (4) learning by undertaking research (Hager & Halliday, 2006).

These informal learning activities can provide opportunities for teachers to generate new knowledge that can be used to improve teaching practices. For instance, Benander (2009) argued that experiential learning, defined as a shift from an expert teacher to a learner engaging in critical reflection on a direct, concrete learning experience, offers insights into teaching and learning. In a study of teacher expertise, six experienced teachers reported that engaging in the practice of evaluation–revision of their work with students provided unlimited opportunities to acquire new knowledge of teaching and to incorporate learned knowledge into their repertoire of teaching strategies (Dunn & Shriner, 1999). Thus, informal learning shifts the emphasis from the traditional view of teacher learning as institutional training to individual growth (Ericsson, Krampe, &Tesch-Romer, 1993). This paper addresses informal learning as it occurs through engagement in learning activities to demonstrate how and what an experienced teacher learned about Islam.

5. Methodology

5.1. Participant

In the fall of 2010, my previous advisor in the Department of Teacher Education at the College of Education referred me to an experienced non-Muslim teacher (Mrs. Adams) of a world’s religions class in one suburban Michigan high school. I learned that Mrs. Adams—who had no pre-service teacher training or professional development for teaching the world’s religions—taught about the world’s religions for twelve years, was recognized by the school’s administrators, other teachers, and parents as exemplary and committed, and worked in a bookstore in the section of religion for a long time. This piece of information kindled my interest to learn more about the teacher and her work. I contacted the teacher and managed to set a time to meet her after school. When we met, I introduced myself and described the purpose of this study in detail. With sincere willingness, the teacher agreed to participate in the study and to be interviewed about her learning experience.

5.2. The context of the study

This study was conducted in one suburban Michigan high school. I selected this school based upon its commitment to provide students with “an inspirational environment in which to be an effective member of a diverse, ever changing society” (Mission Statement, 2006). Guided by this objective, the school offered a class, The World’s Religions, which was designed to acquaint students with the major religions of the world. The World’s Religions was first introduced to the school curriculum in 1999. Since that time, it was offered each academic year to all junior and senior students. All students who showed interest in the course were asked to get a parental permission letter and gave it to the school administration before signing up for the class. Students whose parents did not permit them to take the class were not eligible to attend it.

5.3. Research method

This study is a qualitative case study. Stake (2005) defined a case study as “interest in an individual case… to optimize understanding of the case rather than to generalize beyond it… and [to] draw attention to the question of what specifically can be learned about the single case” (p. 443). Inquiring into a case can be for intrinsic or instrumental purposes. The former is undertaken because the case itself is of interest; whereas the latter is because the case itself can provide insights into an issue (Stake, 2005), can draw case-to-case generalization (Firestone, 1993), or can be structured into a theory (Stake, 2005). Studying the work of one committed, experienced non-Muslim teacher, I wanted to know closely the teacher and to focus on the insights of this teacher into what other teachers need to know and teach about Islam in order to create within classrooms a level playing field for learners, inclusive of disparate worldviews and a civic climate that gives rise to global citizenship, tolerance, and an appreciation for differences. Shulman (2004) found—after 30 years of research—that classroom teaching is “perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (p. 504); thus, he supported the use of case studies to concentrate on “the wisdom of practice” of effective teachers—teacher knowledge, pedagogies, and learning. Aligning with Shulman, I saw a pressing need to document the learning about Islam of a committed, experienced non-Muslim teacher. By drawing on the learning of an experienced teacher, I built a profile of independent learning activities that might be beneficial for other teachers in learning about Islam or might be usable in teacher preparation and professional development.

5.4. Data collection

Since the focus of this study was on the perception of an experienced world religions teacher of her learning process about the topic of Islam, interviewing was an appropriate method to provide insights into her learning experiences. The teacher was interviewed several times. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 min. The interviews focused on the following issues:

- Educational history of the teacher
- Her learning activities undertaken for learning about Islam
- Her knowledge of Islam resulting from learning

The interview protocol consisted of several open-ended questions and a number of suggestions for follow-up questions, such as “Can you give an example in relation to your process of learning?” “Can you recall a situation that elaborates on what you just said?”
“What aspects of Islam did you tend to pursue in your learning?” 
“What aspects of Islam did you tend not to pursue in your learning?” and “What did you learn as a result of this learning activity”?

5.5. Data analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. My data analysis was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, all the interviews were read, re-read, and broken down into separate chunks that described or told me something about (a) the educational history of the teacher, (b) the teacher’s learning process or activities, and (c) her learning outcomes. Each chunk was given a label according to its emerging theme, such as “talks about educational background”, “talks about reading books”, “talks about interacting with people”, or “talks about inquiry”. Then, when multiple chunks addressed a similar theme, they were clustered and given a category scheme, such as “educational history of the teacher”, “types of learning activities”, “knowledge about Islam”. In such a manner, a qualitative profile of the teacher’s learning experiences and outcomes emerged.

5.6. Situating the self

My interest in researching teacher learning about Islam is not to suggest that some religions are fundamental and basic, while others are peripheral and secondary. But, as a Muslim woman born to practicing Muslim parents and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, I am an insider on Islam and its practices. That is, I fast during the month of Ramadan, celebrate Eid, and pray and read the Qur’an occasionally. However, I do not see myself as conservative and extremist as most Muslims are seen in the eyes of the world. Rather, I look at myself as a Muslim child who grew up in a Christian—Muslim community, who attended Sunday sermons at a nearby church with our Christian neighbors, and who attended a private Evangelical school throughout my years of schooling. This upbringing has molded me into what I call myself, a moderate Muslim; but many people in the United States would see me as an exception, deviant from the stereotypical image of Muslim women as veiled, invisible, subversive, and so on.

Not wearing the hijab, I fit the image of a western woman in the eyes of Americans, to the extent that I often encounter someone saying, “But, you are different”. Mrs. Adams was not an exception. When we first met, she commented, “I expected that you would be wearing a scarf. But, you’re not really a Muslim”. I have become an emblem of a modern Muslim. This was a positive aspect for my research, because it allowed Mrs. Adams freedom and comfort to share with me her views about Islam without having to worry about how she presented Islam. But, people seeing me as a modern Muslim may not challenge or alter the basic content of the stereotypes of a Muslim woman in the larger society. Yet, this was not an issue because my motive was not to change her views but to understand her process of learning about Islam.

6. Findings and discussion

I begin with presenting Mrs. Adams’ story about herself in relation to the teaching and learning of religion. This allows for a greater understanding of the teacher’s history with any formal religious education and/or alternative teacher preparation and professional development programs to learn and teach about religions. I then look more closely at her learning process during her twelve years of teaching the world’s religions, and the resulting learning outcomes for her subject matter knowledge.

6.1. Mrs. Adams’ history with the world’s religions

I don’t have a degree in religion itself. But, I can teach it as an elective because I have a degree in sociology, and world religions would fall into the social studies department... I was led into an interest in it [religion] through the questions that come up in literature and psychology. It is just the way it had opened to me, I suppose... And, I went to religion for that for a long time. (Mrs. Adams, teacher interview)

Mrs. Adams is a white Christian teacher, in her mid-fifties, with a university degree in sociology, psychology, and literature. She started off as an English teacher at a Catholic school and taught AP English, world literature, and English literature there for ten years. Although raised in a liberal Protestant Church, she hadn’t practiced “any sort of formal religion” since college. Mrs. Adams has always been interested in all religions but never pursued formal religious studies in college. The recurring theme in Mrs. Adams’ story about her history with religion is her belief about the strong bridge between the study of religion, literature, psychology, and sociology, as evident in the quote above. Mrs. Adams stated that similar questions of life are always raised from the study of religion, literature, sociology, and psychology. She cited an example from literature to illustrate her point: “Literature is full of religious ideas. So, when one reads Shakespeare, he/she works through questions of life”. Religion is just like literature, sociology, and psychology; it is “a quest” or “another door” to unlock the meanings of life through a recurring set of questions about life that arise in all social science studies:

- “What does it [life] all mean?”
- How do we create meanings if there is not any meaning instilled in this system?
- How do we contextualize our lives?
- How do human beings deal with our predicament of being sanctioned creatures in this world?” (Mrs. Adams, teacher interview)

These questions encourage only “reflective people”, as Mrs. Adams called them, to undertake “the quest” to explore and reflect in order to fathom the intricate meanings of life. “Thinking people” engage in the study of religion, literature, philosophy, psychology, or sociology to frame their interpretations within a religious, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, or psychological perspective. This wealth of perspectives provides different answers to the same questions of life, humanity, and the creation of the world. In this respect, Mrs. Adams was guided to dig deeply into the study of religion through her formal study of literature, sociology, and psychology, which had led her to think hard about these questions of life, the human mind and behaviors, and the creation of the world.

Committed to and interested in the study of religion, Mrs. Adams endorsed a multicultural view of the study of religion. That is, she regarded the need to educate young students—“the citizens of the world”, as she called them—about others’ religions as essentially necessary to interact and understand all people, especially at times when widespread immigration has dramatically changed the religious and ethnic makeup of the United States. The importance of engaging students in religious literacy derives from her strong belief that “the more information we have, the more reasonable we are going to be; more unbiased we are going to be; and more open we are to be... it helps eliminate all kinds of future conflict and misunderstandings”.

Intertwined with her multicultural views were her strong feminist commitments. As a feminist, Mrs. Adams spoke of women’s
entitlement to human rights and equality, and she held that most women in the Islamic world and other African regional countries are disempowered, silenced, and excluded from the natural rights of mankind. This mistreatment of women, as Mrs. Adams puts it, is inseparably linked to the foundation and theology of some religions: “Some religions are doing it [treating women and men as equal] greater than others. There is gender inequality in Islam and Buddhism”. Yet, the only way for women to secure equal status with men is through education. This belief led her to earnestly wish to see women educated and placed in a station where they could advance and redeem their rights. Mrs. Adams said, “I want women all over the world to be educated. I want women all over the world not to be the handmaid of men”.

Her multicultural and feminist stances toward religious literacy encouraged her to propose teaching a world religions class in her first year at her school. Her request was first rejected because the principal was wary about the topic itself. In her second year, however, the principal looked again into her request, discussed the course content with Mrs. Adams, checked out the reading materials for the course, took it to the Board of Education, and finally approved it. Since the beginning until to 2011, Mrs. Adams taught world religions for almost twelve years.

6.2. How Mrs. Adams learned about Islam

Researcher: Have you had any pre-service teacher education or training before teaching this class?
Mrs. Adams: I took no training in religious education. I just looked for books. I read the Houston Smith book and that struck me as a very good short introduction to various things and then I began reading on my own various different books. You know, I work here, so we’ve got this big religion section. Long before I worked here (in the bookstore), I was coming to the bookstore.
Researcher: Ok, no training; and what about workshops?
Mrs. Adams: I created the curriculum. I have gone to various lectures at Michigan State University by various religious professors.
Researcher: How did you come to learn about Islam?
Mrs. Adams: It is a simple answer. I read and read and read. That is really what I did. I talked to various people at the local mosque over time. So, over the years, I had a number of contacts there. I have gone to a couple of events at Michigan State University on Islam, such as conferences and lectures. But, honestly, I read.
Researcher: What aspects do you tend to pursue in your study of Islam?
Mrs. Adams: Oh my Gosh, I feel I have read broadly, because I am interested in all of it. I have read very conservative Muslim scholars. And, I have read books on Islam by Muslim women who are critical of Islam. I have read books by Muslim women who are not critical of Islam.
Researcher: What topics are you more interested in?
Mrs. Adams: I would say that throughout the last fifteen years, it was pretty much a general thing. I am very interested in all of it. But more and more, and this would be pretty recent: here is what I would like to read: I would like to read about feminists in Islam. I would like to read about Muslim feminists. I would like to read about who they are and where they are working and how they are affecting change. But, I did not feel that way five years ago. You know what I mean. This is a pretty new thing.

This excerpt from the teacher interview demonstrates Mrs. Adams’ self-initiated learning process to develop her knowledge base for teaching about Islam. Clearly, the knowledge, skills, and attitude for optimal teaching are not always fully developed in pre-service education programs (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). This is especially true for Mrs. Adams, who hadn’t pursued a college degree in religious studies or enrolled in an alternative teacher training or a professional development program to be able to learn or teach about religion. Given the absence of formal education about religion in her life history, Mrs. Adams instead had to make quick decisions about how to learn about religion and to look for new learning strategies and opportunities that go beyond the formal classroom settings to learn about the topic of Islam. In this respect, Mrs. Adams turned to independent informal learning that occurred on and off the job. As Eraut (2004) argued, working contexts are often contexts for learning. This reaffirms the view that teacher learning is not only equivalent to formal teacher training and professional development programs but also to informal learning in the workplace (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Throughout her informal, independent learning, Mrs. Adams designed her own learning curriculum, which she thought of as goals of what and how to learn about Islam. Her learning curriculum included what topics, concepts, and content materials to pursue in the study of Islam. The construction of her curriculum was, as Putnam and Borko (2000) argued, contingent upon the learning contexts and artifacts available to her. In other words, the content and process of her learning were shaped by the learning contexts and artifacts that were most accessible and immediate to her in her workplace environment. As evident in the above quote, her learning about Islam took place in multiple sites and came from a variety of sources. The teacher reported that learning about Islam occurred in multiple learning contexts, namely the bookstore, the mosque, and the university. These places of learning unfolded an array of opportunities for learning and continuous professional growth for Mrs. Adams. To make use of these opportunities entailed Mrs. Adams’ frequent involvement in learning activities and employment of learning tools and artifacts available at those sites.

As a part-time clerk in a bookstore in the afternoon, Mrs. Adams utilized the bookstore—her workplace—as an informal context for learning where knowledge of Islam exists, and she engaged in reading activity over a substantial period of time in which a variety of books written by Moslem scholars was used to develop her knowledge base about Islam. The reading activity, which fits in with the informal learning category labeled “environmental scanning”, is defined as gathering information independently from resources outside the school (Lohman & Woolf, 2001, p. 67). Conceiving of learning as an independent activity situated in the lived world accords with the concept of informal learning (Eraut, 2004). To learn about Islam, Mrs. Adams seemed to engage independently in reading books, which can be viewed as tools produced by the members of various ethnic communities who practice Islam, and which impart knowledge and understanding of the history and the practices of Islam that is meaningful and directly connected to Muslims.

In her individual realm, the teacher gained knowledge of Islam and its practice through interaction with books written by members of several Muslim communities. The books on Islam tended to play a significant role in Mrs. Adams’ learning environment. They are not just tools to be used; but instead, they carry substantial knowledge about Islam and the religious and cultural practices of Muslims. In a sense, they serve as a means to connect a learner with the history and cultures of Muslims and to engage more directly in conversations about their cultural and religious lives.

In the interview, Mrs. Adams described briefly four books which she came upon and read in the bookstore, namely The Islamist (Husain, 2007), The Caged Virgin (Ali, 2007), Infidel (Ali, 2008), The Muslim Next Door (Ali-Karamali 2008), and the Qur’an. Mrs. Adams noted that The Islamist, written by Ed Husain, a British Muslim of Bangladeshi descent, is an account of the author’s five years as an
Islamist activist. It is a story about “how the author was raised by very moderate Muslim parents in a very pluralistic London neighborhood and was seduced by Islamic extremists in London, what he learned about them, and why he left them” (Mrs. Adams, teacher interview).

The other personal, anecdotal books read by the teacher were *The Caged Virgin* and *Infidel*, written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali Dutch Muslim woman. In *The Caged Virgin*, Ali recounted her experience of undergoing female genital mutilation, a practice of her tribal family. Mrs. Adams recognized that “Islam puts emphasis on virginity as if the physical container (i.e. the body) is some indicator of what a person’s value is”. In the other book, *Infidel*, she learned about the author’s geographical journey from Mogadishu to Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, and her desperate flight to the Netherlands to escape an arranged marriage forced by her family and a death threat from her Muslim Somali community. In addition to authors like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Ed Husain, Mrs. Adams explored books written by Muslim scholars uncritical of Islam. She read, for example, *The Muslim Next Door: The Qur’an, the Media, and that Veil Thing* by Sumbul Ali-Karamali, a South-Asian American Muslim. Mrs. Adams noted that the author presented a different picture of Islam and Muslims. Mrs. Adams realized that some of the rituals practiced in some Muslim countries, such as female genital mutation as in parts of Somalia or the separation between men and women in public places in Saudi Arabia, are cultural not religious. In other words, there is nowhere in the Qur’an where such practices are mentioned. Through reading, Mrs. Adams was thus involved in the conversation about what these Muslim communities think of Islam and how they experience and practice it within their distinct cultural realms.

It is notable that Mrs. Adams’ selection of books was guided by her interests. At the onset of her process of learning, Mrs. Adams was interested to learn about what Islam is; and so she selected textbooks, which provide a variety of broad topics about the religion of Islam. One of the textbooks that she read was *The World’s Religions* (Smith, 1991), by Huston Smith. It includes a short introduction on the basic theological concepts and teachings of Islam and a biography of the Prophet Mohammad, his miracles, and his social teachings. It was a primary source for her to draw on when learning about Islam at the beginning.

I would say that throughout the last fifteen years, it was pretty much a general thing. I am very interested in all of it. But more and more, and this would be pretty recent; I would like to read about feminism in Islam. I would like to read about Muslim feminists. I would like to read about who they are and where they are working and how they are affecting change.

However, with increased information and familiarity with Islam, the teacher began to select readings on Muslim feminists that she found more interesting to read and learn about. There is nothing wrong with Mrs. Adams’s reading about Muslim feminists. Obviously, we all choose to read books and to research topics that interest us. However, in learning about religion, to focus on topics of interest means to leave out other topics important for understanding a religion. By focusing mainly on issues of women in Islam, Mrs. Adams seemed to overlook other important topics (e.g. politics) that might further her knowledge of Islam. Nevertheless, it was through independent reading that more opportunities for learning about Islam and Muslim communities were unfolded to Mrs. Adams. She stated that “you read something and more questions follow. And, it opens other doors and you have to explore these other people and you have to read their writings and more knowledge is added”. The teacher seemed gladly to assemble some knowledge about what constitutes the practices of various ethnic Muslim communities, who Muslims are, what they do, and how they generally conduct their lives, as reading developed into a frequent learning experience.

The other learning activity which Mrs. Adams reported engaging in was talking to Muslim people at the local mosque. Her learning was extended beyond the bookstore context—her workplace—to include another informal context, which is the mosque at the local Islamic center. The Islamic center is located a few miles away from Mrs. Adams’ workplace context. It is considered another source of learning about Islam and Muslims. The mosque is not just a physical space; instead, it stands as a religious site where the practice of Islam is being produced in some form, including prayers, reading the Qur’an, almsgiving, Friday sermons, and feast celebrations. It represents a web of relations of persons, such as the Imam (i.e. a Muslim leader), Muslim lecturers, and Muslim praying in the mosque. These people from the Islamic center are a pivotal source of information to draw on to make sense of the religion and to deepen one’s knowledge of Islam. Thus, developing a set of interpersonal relations with people from the local mosque through engaging in an open dialog organizes some opportunities to learn about Islam.

In the interpersonal realm, Mrs. Adams built a web of relations with a number of knowledgeable Muslim people at the local Islamic center over a long period of time and had access to their daily practices (i.e. praying and/or reading Qur’an). In a sense, socialization entails not only relations and connections with people in a local mosque but also engagement in information flows and conversations (Heubner, 2009). For example, the teacher reported in the interview that she asked Mrs. Rola (pseudonym)—a Syrian head scarfed Muslim and a lecturer about Islam at the Islamic center—questions about issues in Islam, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca (i.e. what people do in a pilgrimage) and polygamy, during her classroom fieldtrips to the local mosque.

This teacher activity, which involved her asking and questioning people from the local mosque about aspects of Islam, can be related to the concept of inquiry which provides an opportunity to learn. Inquiry is defined by Schulz and Manduzuk (2005) as “a process of personal meaning making, as deliberate learning driven by a learner’s personal wonderings and questions, as a framework for problem solving, as a curriculum design issue, or a process of co-constructing knowledge” (p. 318). Inquiry becomes an integral source of opportunity to support and develop knowledge of Islam. Mrs. Adams regularly conducted a process of inquiry into issues and problem of her interests. In the interview, Mrs. Adams said,

I feel like my knowledge is very small yet. I feel like I need to explore every year. Really, there is so much to learn. It is so vast. I haven’t studied classic Muslim scholars who created Shariah (i.e. Islamic laws). It is a huge mission and I would like to do that. Now, where do I get guidance? You know, I have to look in the Muslim communities or at the mosque or probably someone at MSU. I will go to the Muslim Studies Center. But, yeah, that is something I need to know about. I understand some basic things about Shariah. I know it comes from the Quran and from Haithad.... but I do not know what the process was for Shariah. I do not know which individuals created it. I don’t know over how long. I do not know how much of traditional Arabian culture got picked up and included (teacher interview).

As evidenced in the above quote, Mrs. Adams’ process of inquiry started with an evaluation and examination of her own depth and breadth of content knowledge about Islam. That is, she determined what aspects of Islam she knows about and what aspects of Islam she needs to know about. During her self-reflection, she tended to focus on a single aspect of Islam that she needed to know about. Then, she explored that aspect of Islam and looked for interpretations,
answers, or information outside in the local Muslim community, either at the Islamic center or in the Islamic Studies department, to generate more knowledge and enhance her understanding of Islam. Thus, through her social interaction with members of the local Muslim community, the outside world of Islam became more visible and transparent to her.

6.3. Mrs. Adams’ learning outcomes

Researcher: What have you learned about Islam?

Mrs. Adams: Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. I learned a lot and again it was mostly from reading. And, Islam, to my knowledge, is very deep and has clamoring voices that takes different position in it. I cannot tell you how my knowledge has increased. One of the things that I think is interesting that I learned since I have started teaching this course is that I saw diversity and different voices within religions. But, I still see great beauty in all religions. There is truth in all of them. But, my bias at the beginning was that I wanted them all to look the same. I wanted them to have the same values and the same message just in different words and forms (sigh). And, I think I tried to make my students see it that way. I do not see it that way anymore. I do not think they are all the same. They certainly overlap. But now, I am more inclined to try to find different readings in each faith that come from different directions and give my students a sampling and let them decide. I am not trying anymore to dress them up and make them look prettiest anymore.

Involvement in the conversation of Muslim scholars that takes place everywhere in bookstores, mosques, Islamic studies center, and so on is a cornerstone to carry on an ongoing dialog with the Muslim world about Islamic issues, ideologies, and objectives. Through reading books of Muslim scholars and conversing with Muslims at the mosque, Mrs. Adams established a dialogue with insiders of Islam who hold contested views about Islam: one view which rejects the dichotomy between religion and culture thus calls for a birth of new Islam and Islamic culture (e.g. Hirsi Ali and Ed Husian) and the other view which separates Islam from culture (e.g. Sumbul Ali-Karamali). These authors are insiders of Islam, and their books were written in the personal, anecdotal, everyday context of growing up Muslim in Somalia, Bangladesh, and India; and thus they presented different realities of how Islam is practiced in some regions of the Islamic world.

It is through independent learning that took place in the local Muslim community that Mrs. Adams realized that “in Islam, there are different clamoring voices taking different positions” on the role of traditions, modernity, rights of women, and other issues. These contested voices reflect the extent of debate and difference within the Muslim world about what Islam is and is not. In a sense, there exists no single, monolithic Islam, no absolute interpretation of it—just as there is no single, absolute interpretation of Christianity or Judaism or any other religion. There are rather gigantic differences among the Islamic nations, each of which has a different interpretation of laws, theology, and practices.

Furthermore, Mrs. Adams indicated in the excerpt above that she used to think that all religions have the “same” values and reinforce the “same” moral messages about humanity and life. This way of seeing religions largely shaped her teaching in the classroom. Mrs. Adams stated that she used to convey to her students that all religions are similar by capitalizing on the similarities among religions. At the beginning, Mrs. Adams wanted to promote tolerance and an appreciation for differences by showing how all religions converge. Mrs. Adams stated,

I want to help them understand how common people are... to help reduce their bias; to help them acquire tolerance for other people’s views, because their own views are as faith-based as other people’s views are... I want them to see that there is beauty in them, and that they overlap a very great deal despite the particulars.

However, her way of seeing religions developed and shifted over the course of her learning experience. Engaged in reading and teaching practice over a long period of time, Mrs. Adams learned that the broad assumption that all religions look the same is superficial and realized that religions are different. This growing realization subsequently altered the way she presented and interpreted religion to students. Mrs. Adams began to exclude from her pedagogy the assumption that all religions look the same. For instance, she incorporated new readings on Islam that reflect different voices and perspectives which are critical and uncritical of Islam, to let her students decide on their own whether all religions are similar or dissimilar.

In conclusion, what Mrs. Adams learned depended on how she learned, with what means, and with whom. She brought knowledge about Islam, acquired through reading Islamic texts written by Moslem scholars across the world and interacting with Muslims at the local mosque. Through self-directed learning, she learned about the enormous diversity of the Islamic world and acknowledged that Muslims are not one homogenous group but are comprised of different ethnicities, cultures, and educational and economic backgrounds which may result in wide differences in the way Muslims see, interpret, and practice Islam.

7. Limitations and implications

This study is limited in that the examination of a single experienced teacher’s learning about Islam limits generalizability to a larger population; nevertheless, it allows case-to-case transfer (Firestone, 1993) where a teacher in one setting is likely to benefit from and consider adopting a learning activity from the teacher in this study. In addition, this study design does not establish a cause and effect relationship. Rather, it provided evidence of the independent learning activities used by the teacher to expand her knowledge about Islam.

To address the limitations, there is a great need to research the topic of teacher learning about the world’s religions, in particular Islam, in a context where religious diversity in public schools has increased, and it has presented challenges to teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach the world’s religions in public schools. Specifically, further studies are needed to investigate teachers’ learning and teaching about the world’s religions, including Islam. This can be done by studying several cases of experienced teachers who teach the world’s religions in school curricula. In addition, other methods of data collection should be used, for example surveys, classroom observations, collection of instructional materials, and book club discussion with teachers in order to construct a comprehensive understanding of teachers’ learning and teaching about religion.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, this study has implications for teachers and teacher educators. Mrs. Adams’ process of learning about Islam serves as a window to look through to see how informal learning occurs, which may be hard to see in other subject areas where formal education and training are available. There exists many ways of learning in our daily life. Some tend to be structured and predictable; and some tend to be unstructured and unpredictable—we don’t know to what it might lead. Teachers need not worry about their lack of formal training in their schools. There are moments that open up all sorts of
possibilities for teachers to learn. And, teachers need to attend to experiences and pick up these moments that are likely to connect them with the world of people’s thinking, feelings, experiences, and practices. It is thus important for teachers to acknowledge that learning can be a self-directed process that can take place anywhere—not necessarily constrained to the physical setting of schools or training programs—and they should grab any opportunities outside school boundaries to generate or enhance their knowledge.

Furthermore, teacher educators need to factor the informal element of learning into the learning to teach equation. In a sense, the equation for learning to teach should not be uniquely formalized and institutionalized but should also individualized and contextualized. What teacher educators need to teach pre-service teachers is that (1) learning is not one-dimensional but multifaceted (i.e., collaborative, interactive, and communicative), and (2) learning is an individualized activity undertaken to adapt to their interests and to cater to their immediate learning needs. One way to foster informal learning is to knit together moments of formal and informal learning in teacher education. This can be accomplished by introducing students to different ways of knowledge, including reading magazines and journals, browsing internet pages, connecting with instructions via e-mail, interacting with each other, networking with people in society, joining reading groups, leading moderated chats, organizing learning support groups, and more. These informal learning moments are often neglected in teacher education programs. Providing students with informal learning environment is vital for student teachers’ independent thinking and is essential for their self-esteem, creativity, and motivation to learn.

8. Conclusion

In this study, Mrs. Adams embarked on a path of self-learning in order to learn about Islam. Initiating and directing her own learning process, Mrs. Adams explored new avenues to educate herself about Islam and its theology, laws, and practices. Through independent reading and interaction with Muslims at the mosque, Mrs. Adams was able to build a bridge with the Muslim world and gain knowledge about who Muslims are, what they do, and how they generally conduct.

It is through the story of Mrs. Adams that self-directed learning is seen as an invaluable means to learn about anything, including the world’s religions. Through the power of independent learning, knowledge of the world is obtained at any time, in any place, through any means, and at any age. That said, why a person should wait for formal instruction to learn about the world’s religions, when he or she can choose to educate himself or herself at nearly any point in his or her life.

References

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C § 6301