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Going off script in the Islamic studies classroom.

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Don't we all have moments when we want to, or perhaps feel like we should, set aside a class session plan in lieu of discussing a pressing event or development? Despite the vast array of subjects that we teach within the broader field of Islamic studies—not to mention the diversity of institutional contexts in which we teach them—this is likely one of the threads that unite our experience as educators. Given the sheer number of developments in recent memory that could justify going “off script” in the Islamic studies classroom, I thought that a post on meeting these desires without sacrificing our own course plans would be of interest to a lot of readers. And yet.

Several months (and posts later), I find myself wondering why I have been procrastinating writing this post. I think I have come to a conclusion. Do any of us think that when we go off script to talk about contemporary developments—one of the most challenging things we do as teachers—we do a sufficient job? I am going to venture a guess here and say no. That is kind of how I am feeling about this post. I do not think I can do a sufficient job because the decision to go off script on a given day to talk about something happening in the world is actually a really personal decision. Sure, I can suggest that it is always a good idea to leave a class session or two of wiggle room in your syllabus for the inevitable off script discussion. But this does not help us think about *when* to use that time.

As a subjective decision, going off script leaves us vulnerable by laying bare our own proclivities -- what we think is most important and worthy of attention. In reality, we make

these decisions all the time when we are assembling our courses. But unless we choose to discuss them, these decisions remain largely invisible to our students. Going off script makes these choices visible and this, of course, comes with some risk. Is it worth it?

I recently had an opportunity to sit down with a friend and Islamic studies colleague and the subject of going “off script” came up. During this conversation, it occurred to me that the moments in which I decide to go off script always follow a sense that “I just can’t stay quiet anymore.” It is as if events in the world have saturated my emotional capacity. This is not necessarily an ideal place from which to embark on difficult conversations in which students (in theory) view me as an authority. In fact it has led to moments in the classroom that I am still trying to think through. One such moment is what got me thinking about writing a post about going off script in the first place.

It was the fall semester and I was teaching my survey course, Traditions of Islam. Islamophobia was becoming an ever-greater presence in the nascent presidential campaign. Just outside Dallas, Ahmed Mohamed was taken from his high school in handcuffs, suspected (quite erroneously) by school officials of building and carrying a bomb to school. The picture of Ahmed as he was escorted from the principal’s office, a look of terror on his face, left me feeling like I had no choice. I had to talk about the conditions of public life for Muslim communities in the United States. I walked into class the next day and announced that I was going off script. I proceeded to play a clip of Donald Trump failing to intercede at a New Hampshire rally when an attendee asked what he would do to “get rid” of Muslims, who in the questioner’s mind pose an existential threat to the United States. I then displayed a large picture of Ahmed Mohammad, explaining that I could only look at the image of terror on his face as a parent. Then I started crying as I imagined his and his parents’ fear.

What a beginning. Somehow, I made it through that 50-minute period without completely going off the rails. As I remember it we actually had a good discussion, at least this was my impression based on student comments. Some even commended my tears. I started to feel pretty good about letting my guard down in the classroom. This semester I invited a Muslim international student (from Somaliland) from that class to present her research on Islamophobia at Grinnell in another of my courses. She talked a lot about feeling invisible on campus. She also talked about how even though one of her professors had cried in class talking about an Arab student who had been arrested, that same professor did not mention when a student from Somalia was killed by police. My heart sank. I have a good relationship with this student. I don’t think she was mad at me. But despite my best efforts I had made her feel invisible. There was no way that I could have done justice to the subject of Islamophobia in the contemporary United States in one class session, and we don’t always have the luxury of having follow up conversations. But I tried. I acknowledged the world outside the classroom because in that moment I just couldn’t stay silent any longer.

My own identity as a parent led me to go off script that day in Traditions of Islam. The fact that I identify as a man absolutely informed the way that my students responded to my tears. It is entirely possible that being non-Muslim freed me from fear that my students would perceive

my emotional response as betraying a lack of critical distance from the course subject. I see the privilege on both fronts. But our own subjectivities will always affect the moments in which we decide to go off script as well as *how* we do so. It seems to me that every now and then making it clear to our students that we struggle with the world, that we are at times overcome by the world, is essential in showing them that we are companions in trying to make sense of a world that so often defies our greatest hopes. Perhaps that is worth the risk brought on by the inevitable insufficiency of our efforts.

Of course, maybe feeling like it is worth the risk is itself a mark of privilege. How have you handled going off script in your classroom? Are there stories you would like to share? Have you felt constrained by a lack of privilege from responding to contemporary developments?

<https://wabash.center/2016/06/going-off-script-in-the-islamic-studies-classroom/>