

EAO professional development reflection from Dr. Sandra Bird (COTA representative)

This year I felt a bit removed from the July 4th celebrations, largely in response to what the Republican candidate for the American Presidency, Donald Trump, spouts as being “American” ideals. I experience a nasty hangover from his speech last month - ironically delivered within the Moorish aesthetics of Atlanta’s Fox Theatre on June 15, 2016. There Trump emphasized three things: 1) building a wall between Mexico and the US, 2) preventing Muslims from entering the US and 3) protecting gun rights. His campaign verbiage encourages misplaced fear of Muslims, and presses the social illness of Islamophobia into the hearts of a people who at one point were part of an immigrant legacy of these United States. I wanted to shout at my radio, “Look around you Trump, and see the glorious flowering of western rational wisdom, passed on from the Greeks onto our common societies through Islamic cultures - gracefully alluded to within the very walls of the theatre in which you are speaking. You deride those sacred democratic principles by singling out Muslims, Mexicans, and other minorities as enemies to *your American ideals*.” This series of political points make me also question humanity at this moment in time. I must remind myself that there are still some very good people on this planet, but most of us are guilty of turning a blind eye to our responsibilities to those who also inhabit our planet.

“When refugees escape barrel bombs and torture, and migrants cross deserts and seas seeking a better life, we cannot simply look the other way. We certainly can't label as possible terrorists vulnerable people who are fleeing terrorists. We can insist that the process is orderly. We can insist that our security is preserved. Borders mean something. But in moments like this, we are called upon to see ourselves in others, because we were all once strangers. If you weren't a stranger, your grandparents were strangers. Your great-grandparents were strangers. They didn't all have their papers ready. They fumbled with language, faced discrimination, had cultural norms that didn't fit. At some point, somewhere, your family was an outsider. So the mothers, the fathers, the children we see today—they're us. We can't forsake them.” (President Barak Obama (June 30, 2016) speaking at the Canadian Parliament)

According to an NPR report (June 15, 2016), President Obama seeks to take in 10,000 Syrians by October 26, 2016. So far that plan is not doing so well. By June 15th, only 2800 refugees have entered the United States. Over 26,000 refugees have migrated to Canada over a four-month period. Our process is very slow, involving more security checks than anyone else. Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and the EU have taken in the lion's share of refugees. According to campaign promises, Hilary Clinton says she will increase the US migration to 65,000.

In May 2016, several faculty from KSU participated in a faculty development program at the European Academy of Otzenhausen, Germany. The program included many lectures from experts on EU matters from European universities and institutions, with particular attention to migration and refugees that have been pouring into Europe through the long trek from their homeland and across the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey into Greece, or through the dangerous Atlantic channel between Libya and Italy. Our workshop also involved a tour of the marbled complex that included a large assembly room - “This is the room where we save Europe” said its director with tongue in cheek. There are also small meeting rooms with translation booths for multilingual discussions/lectures, dormitories for workshop participants, kitchens and dining rooms, rooms for social events, an arboretum and walking paths, and exhibition space for over 400 original artworks from around the world on every single wall (there have been 120 exhibitions at the complex since 1972). The mural at the main entrance of the complex, features finely calligraphed lettering of the word “welcome” in many different languages.

In conjunction with our visits of European sites, we had presentations and conversations about the nature of the EU, and this helped to bring home the reality of what the “Migration crisis” meant to most Europeans. The threat that European identity would change caused great concern for some Europeans. Right wing parties in the EU (Le Penn in France) and America (Trump in the US) are capitalizing on this fear. They are gaining influence. Germans initially responded positively to the German Chancellor's culture of “welcome” to the refugees, but this indeed has become the final coup for Britain to vote out of the EU in the summer of 2016. Turkey, a country aspiring to be a full-fledged member of the EU, has accepted over 3,000,000 Syrian refugees. The situation has now

grown into a huge economic burden. Carrying so many refugees forced a populist turn in Turkey away from the refugees due to a lack of resources. Other social problems have increased – child labor is practiced at an level as many refugee children must work to help provide for their families, abandoning hope to be educated and therefore unable to find a way out of poverty. A visiting researcher at the border camps related that 90% of the people are in poverty. Other scholars shared interesting views on global perceptions of these Syrian refugees (“They have to stay and fight! Russians only have empathy for people who try to protect their home and die there”). Many EU countries believe that Germany is compromising Christian values by taking in the migrant problem. Germany had to twist France’s arm to participate in the refugee program – their self-proclaimed title “Land of Asylum” is only applicable on paper. The EU has looked to the US, but we are falling short on our stated goals.

Samuel Huntington’s book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) has been a very popular book in some circles, but it is also very wrong according to informed historical specialists. Much of our current western civilizations are based on Greek notions of democracy and Judeo-Christian values; however, this book does not take into account the flourish of cultural exchange proper to the axial age of humankind. The Middle East is an important cradle of humanity! Most of the “clash” literature and populist talk is written and directed to those who do not know any better. Education, even at the parochial stage, should include information about Middle Eastern cultures, and in doing so the threat of a “clash” would be immediately debunked. Andalusia, in the Medieval era of Western history, provides many examples of how these societies are fully connected to European and then American development. To accept this reality of history requires compassion, respect, understanding and a willingness to practice empathy with the other - if not just for the sake of humanity, then for our own ancestry that may have or will have to undergo such dramatic crises in the future.

My experiences with the EAO workshops have inspired me to be more proactive in attacking global social problems, and to work against Islamophobia seems to be the right channel for me at present. Since coming back to the states I have been working diligently on a DGA SIG practicum project, “From Mecca To America: Cross-cultural Exchange in the Art Classroom” (meeting with SIG grant officers, helping Dr. Mona Mohamed Ibrahim Hussein of Alexandria University to obtain her J-1 Exchange Visitor visa, seeking clearance of the project through the KSU Institutional Review Board and the Cobb County Accountability, Research and Grants Office, helping Dr. Hussein to obtain a social security number, ordering supplies through the DGA office, etc.) all of which have presented a multitude of obstacles because our faculty exchange involves a woman with a Muslim name. For example, Dr. Hussein had to wait three weeks for her social security card through the Marietta Social Security Office “because her name was too long”.

My ARED 4410: Intercultural Curriculum students are now being co-taught by Dr. Hussein and myself, but first I asked the art education students to take a brief pretest to discern a baseline for our study. Five likert scaled questions tapped into my students’ attitudes concerning Muslims. For the most part, those who actually knew Muslims were positive toward Muslims and those who did not know any Muslims had fairly negative opinions regarding Muslims. Not long after the pretest, all of the young ladies in the class “fell in love” with Dr. Hussein due to her kind and compassionate nature, evidenced as she explained the metal projects that we would be making, based on aesthetic designs at Mecca (and their contexts). Slowly and surely, these negative opinions are giving way to understanding. And if I can ever get the Cobb County Accountability, Research and Grants Office to let me get my foot in the door with this funded project (yes, another major obstacle) then I hope to take this project to Sprayberry High in early November through my art education students’ modification of Hussein’s lessons. There will be an exhibit of all the emerging works from this project in the KSU Wilson Gallery in June-July 2017.

On August 15th I joined a faculty-working group devoted to providing better education of our campus and community to challenge stereotypes about Muslims. After discussing the nature of the problem (a. complex rhetoric of othering, b. dysfunctional broader political discourse impacts local institutions and groups, c. lack of awareness of root causes for problems like violence, poverty, geopolitics, and conflicts, d. lack of contemplation of shared humanity, e. lack of compassion and empathy, f. lack of awareness of shared inheritance(s) such as art, architecture, technology, etcetera, g. curricular needs/limits/weaknesses, etc.) we discussed various strategies for accomplishing this

broader task of changing our social climate. I joined the faculty focus group assigned to work with and help support student groups and community groups (Tom Pynn and I will act as co-organizers; Zuhair El-Itr, Khalil Elayan, Nuru Akinyemi, and Mona Hussein will also act as members).

At about the same time I was called by a past Muslim employee of KSU to attend to an email that was passing through all the representatives of KSU student organizations, except the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Supposedly generated from the KSU Atheist United group, it challenged all groups to write various leaders to complain about the MSA taking over an interfaith prayer room for themselves. The "rogue" email has since been dismissed as originating from off campus. The Dean of Student Affairs' office has sent out a statement to those who received the email, and they have also sent out press releases. It seems they were also proactive in sending the individuals listed at the end of the email a clear message about the truth of the situation. Being recently asked by the MSA to serve as a secondary faculty sponsor, I attended the September 15th KSU Inter-Faith Community Meeting. There I mentioned that the MSA students feel vulnerable, especially the women who through their hijab clearly express to the community their religious orientation and thus can be targeted as victims of harassment. The Student Life Director shared the new protocol for the "Quiet, reflection room" and even spoke about the future plans to create such a room (if needed) on the Marietta campus.

All of this activity is part of a growing sense of responsibility within myself to protect Muslims on our campus and beyond. My hope is to eventually fuse all of this into the writing project emerging from the Mecca to America research project going on in my classroom. I totally buy into the idea that our classrooms do not stop at the classroom walls, and reaching to appropriate venues for sharing strategies of breaking Islamophobic patterns in America will be more and more important as the European "Immigration Crisis" crosses the Atlantic Ocean.