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**Librarians Building Digital Learning Objects Supporting Cultural Understanding:  
Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad in Morocco and Tunisia**

Michael J. Miller

By receiving a Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad grant, I was able to travel to the Maghreb region in northern Africa. After exploring religious diversity in the region during the Arab Spring, I applied experiences and documentation from this seminar to develop digital learning objects in order to complete a required curriculum project. This narrative describes how my first major experience with international librarianship enabled development of digital learning objects (hereafter called the project) for cross-disciplinary use in college course work.

International and Foreign Language Education (IFLE) is an office of the U.S. Department of Education with responsibility for "... strengthen[ing] the capability and performance of American education in foreign languages and in area and international studies" (U.S. Department of Education, "OPE About"). This office administers the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad Program, which offers international cultural exchange professional development opportunities for high school and college teachers and administrators. Briefly, the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad offer targeted and intensive professional development opportunities for secondary and post-secondary faculty to enrich educational expertise. They also require that a curriculum unit be developed after participation in the seminar.

The seminar, *Religious Diversity in the Maghreb: Morocco and Tunisia*, was listed as a professional development opportunity, as partially described in the original IFLE announcement:

The Maghreb, North Africa's rim set between seas and desert, holds a present and a past that illuminate the diversity of religious traditions in western Islam. Morocco and Tunisia provide insights into the roles that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have played in a part of the world that is at the same time African, Mediterranean, Arab, and Berber. This seminar seeks to draw lessons focusing on religious tolerance among the faiths in shared environments.

The major faith of the region, Islam, will be seen in both countries through the lens of its own diversity. In Morocco, participants will travel through time to discover in Fez how Islam was implanted in the "far west" of the Islamic world. At the same time, the focus of the diversity of faith within Islam will be revealed through the exploration of the religious orders of North Africa, the *zaouias*, and their significance in contemporary Morocco.

The trajectory of my grant-related activity led from the grant application process, through orientation, into the seminar itself, and then to post-seminar development of the project, onward toward educational and professional networking activities. It should be noted that the seminar I participated in was similar in nature to that of a study abroad program which students might experience in college or even at the secondary educational level.

The project I proposed to IFLE was called, *The Way Forward: A Digital Case Study of Religions in the Maghreb*. It was framed to be a digital resource which could be consulted as a learning object by students and faculty of various colleges delving into interfaith, interethnic, and interracial dialogues in the course of their teaching and learning activities. The resulting website is a librarian-generated digital learning object. The content is composed of a multimedia compilation of writings, "talking points" tools, drawings, resource lists, photos, and audiovisual files. It explores lessons teaching religious tolerance in Muslim society, and is a rich resource for further exploration of the intercultural aspects of religious diversity. More specifically, it explores diversity *within* Islam in an effort to shed light on important differences that non-Muslims should come to understand.

I approached this grant-funded professional development opportunity as a librarian who wanted to expand my subject discipline repertoire by gaining a basic knowledge of religion and diversity topics. Having a background in the social sciences and librarianship, I believed this professional growth could inform my collection development and service program leadership activities at the academic library where I worked. I also wanted to put my additional background and training in educational technology and instructional design to good purpose. I believed I could achieve this dual goal by developing meaningful educational tools that could be shared on campus and with others across the profession.

Here is an excerpt from the project plan I submitted:

*The Way Forward: A Digital Case Study of Religions in the Maghreb* will be aligned with and augment the “Search for Common Ground” dialogue program, which is part of the “Bridging the Cultural Divide” initiative of the CERRU [Center for Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Understanding at Queens College, CUNY] ...

... It will be developed on a portable web-based platform employing open source social networking software.

It will include explorations of the lessons learned in Morocco about the historical factors that have yielded a religious tolerance in that Muslim society. It will explore diversity *within* Islam in an effort to shed light upon important differences that outsiders need now desperately to understand. It will provide examples of how various faiths survive and thrive in the midst of a majority Muslim land.

It will also present representations of the cultural landscape of both Morocco and Tunisia which will be afforded by the planned trips to educational and religious institutions throughout the course of the seminar; depictions of the explorations of mosques and fortresses of Tunisia will add stimulating visual and textual substance to this digital case study. A record of discussions that were transacted with the religious students and leaders in Rabat and Tunis will be a rich resource for exploring the intercultural aspects of religious diversity in the region.

Having met all program requirements and submitting a successful online application, I received official notification of my award the following spring, just five weeks before the June 2011 departure date. Further on-boarding “administrivia” ensued, and a detailed preliminary schedule arrived, followed shortly by a hefty reading assignment. The study group was to receive lectures from particular authors represented in the preparatory readings including Kenneth Perkins on Tunisia (Perkins, 2004), the famous Fatima Mernissi, author of *Beyond the Veil* (Mernissi, 1987) and *Dreams of Trespass* (Mernissi, 1994), and *Patience and Power* by Susan S. Davis (Davis, 1983). A full bibliography of many resources studied or referenced throughout the entirety of the seminar is included on the project website (Miller, 2012).

Planning for the seminar was pretty straightforward since I am a frequent international traveler. I obtained everything from climate-appropriate clothing to emergency contacts and learning supplies. I took extra effort to ensure I could record my experiences in preparation for developing the project. I used tablets for note-taking in lectures; pads for drawing pictures of people, places, and cultural objects; as well as a Blackberry phone with superb photo and movie capabilities to help with digital documentation. These combined well with local Internet access and social networking applications to generate ongoing reports of the group’s progress during the seminar. Further, I took a waterproof folder to keep my written materials safe, and a mesh bag for carrying all my technology peripherals.

The seminar itself, being driven by the mission of the Fulbright program, was a complete package designed to develop participants’ intercultural competencies. With an historical orientation we received from area experts, the two-week language immersion program, as well as

our home stays and cultural presentations at the language school, we had a substantial introduction to the culture and history of the Maghreb. When I submitted my program evaluation to the organizers, I recommended French language preparation as an essential addition. Because of this oversight, I was limited in my interactions with local residents. I also suggested that language learning could be more targeted to travel, and more closely aligned to seminar topics.

Grant applicants were informed they should be prepared to put their expectations aside as they pursue such an undertaking. It took me a bit of time to set aside the original program description and schedule we were given, and relax and open myself up to all the learning possibilities offered as the *real* program unfolded throughout the six weeks. Be prepared to adjust to changes in the schedule as situations dictate. After I did this, I had a wonderful learning adventure!

As mentioned above, lectures were delivered by area academic experts, artists, writers, and political leaders. Most lectures were enriching. We took excursions into the old centers (medinas) of each of the larger cities, exploring souks and mosques whenever possible. We also visited churches and synagogues. Organizers of the seminar scheduled a few free periods. Although restricted in number (probably due to the unstable political and social environment driven by the Arab Spring), these moments allowed for my most memorable independent explorations. Getting lost in the medinas twice, seeing a protest crowd chased by police, being pursued by commercially predatory merchants, and gaining independence and success in the souks all painted vivid images in my mind. [FIG 6.1 here]

One of the most challenging aspects of the seminar was my own home-stay. While the family was accommodating, supplying the requisite space and meals, the family dynamics were uneven. The father seemed to discourage my interaction with his children, interrupting a language learning exchange between me and his daughter. He often shooed his wife and daughter into the kitchen out of my presence. He also constantly watched violent television shows, which further limited interaction during my stay.

On the upside, the household mother arranged to celebrate my birthday in her sister's home, hosting one of the other seminar participants. They prepared the coveted Moroccan chicken (*dejaj*) and couscous tagine to honor me that evening. The experience was quite delightful.

I developed good discipline with my educational study and reporting activities, including keeping a daily journal. One thing I wish I'd done in preparation was develop my own list of "must-see" experiences, sites, institutions, and people before embarking. Although the program itinerary was very robust, when we were afforded time for independent exploration, I was underprepared. Further, I would recommend adopting a journalist's mindset. Be respectful, but *do not be shy!* Be prepared to try to talk with strangers every chance you get: from the other participants, to the lecturers, to inhabitants of places you visit. These personal interactions became most pivotal. Regarding journaling: make sure to be descriptive and elaborate in the entries. I found some entries were just shallow reviews of daily activities. More descriptive responses could have enriched the record of my adventure.

The Maghreb seminar took us to Rabat and Sale, Fes, Casablanca, Marrakesh, and Amezray in the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco. In Tunisia, the group travelled from Tunis in the north, with the ruins of ancient Carthage and the port city Sidi Bou Said; onward south to El Djem and the nearby ancient Roman ruins of Volubilis; to Sousse, Munastir, Mahdia; to Sfax and the islands of Kerkennah; and then, via air, to the island of Djerba. [FIG 6.2 here] During this part of the trip, we had a fantastic guide, Tunisian author and journalist Hatem Bourial, who provided great insights during our immediate, post-Arab Spring seminar.

Synthesis of my materials and implementation of the design were intense. My documentation strategies, interviewing techniques, digital design skills, and program curriculum project requirements were all important in developing the digital learning object. Extensive planning for documentation proved useful and rewarding for recording resources others cited throughout the seminar. I further resolved to expand my talents in drawing, ending up with sketches of speakers we enjoyed, as well as drawings of many artifacts we viewed in museums. [FIG 6.3 here]

I documented lectures and sites by taking copious photos, and used video to capture cultural performances we enjoyed. I picked up travel brochures, restaurant menus, guides from religious institutions, and materials provided by lecturers. I also purchased mementos to support local economies. Again, the project website hosts some of my media objects. (Miller, 2012)

So, what do we do with all of this intellectual and experiential stuff we've collected? This question nagged me throughout the length of the seminar. My compatriots were primarily faculty from various disciplines, and most of them would be able to follow the normal



curriculum project template set out by IFLE. They would develop single sessions for a course they regularly taught, augmenting it with learning goals and appropriate assignments. As a librarian, I had no such vehicle on which to tether a curriculum project. After sweating and simmering in the hot African landscape, I eventually returned to my grant narrative. Creating a cross-disciplinary, multimedia web-based learning object was where I needed to go. As the only non-course teaching participant in our group, I had to take a different approach.

After reviewing my notes, I analyzed the raw content I had collected. I was able to distill it down to three meaningful themes: Diversity within Islam, Interfaith Dialogues, and Cultural Diversity within the Maghreb. [FIG 6.4 here]

Resources initially provided to participants, plus drawings, photos, films, and lecture notes have all, to a large extent, been incorporated into the project. I developed an extensive bibliography listing books, videos, films, and websites either discussed or discovered in subsequent research. Synthesis of materials and implementation of the design was demanding, yet also a great way to review all the information gathered during the seminar. This process helped remind me of great experiences we all had shared. [FIG 6.5 here]

I observed others in our group interact more fully with local residents. Various relationships can be established during a seminar: with the family of home-stays, fellow participants, seminar leaders, and experts you might wish to invite back to your own institution. Carry and share your business card and obtain contact information from people you encounter. In the future, I will definitely engage more fully.

Project sustainability is another challenge with digital learning objects. The project is an active website and can be checked periodically for maintaining connectivity. It could be augmented with Web 2.0 news feeds of interest. More content could be added manually, if I choose to further my explorations. And finally, to make it more discoverable, it could be registered into the Creative Commons database. Of course, the files are portable, which became important as I relocated from my previous institution to a new one. Unfortunately, my new institution provides no clear means for hosting content. I will continue to explore options to keep this project alive and accessible for educational access. [FIG 6.6 here]

Post-seminar educational activities included a personal commitment to outreach in my professional communities about Fulbright and the experience afforded by this grant award. To date, I have shared my digital case study with Queens College students and faculty, and across City University of New York. Admittedly, it was difficult coordinating with individual faculty and students groups. The challenge of marketing offline or third party learning objects that can be integrated into various courses became apparent. This may be typical in contemporary academic environments, where independent projects are highly valued, and faculty is primarily interested in publicizing their own efforts. For this reason, you must aggressively apply professional networking skills in the planning stages and follow up educational efforts and partnerships to secure engagements.

I started by volunteering to lead workshops to develop digital materials for use in the academic environment. As a new library director, I will encourage library faculty to design digital learning

objects to bridge content to student experience. Further, I've offered to speak on campus about Fulbright as a study abroad opportunity for student and faculty professional development. This resulted in two faculty lectures at my previous institution.

Our travel group has held two reunions. We revel in our shared experiences, keep up with personal developments, and continue to discuss topics we explored together. Having registered as a Fulbright alumnus, I receive frequent communications related to Fulbright-sponsored professional development programs and successes of other grantees.

Lastly, I teamed with two other library colleagues who have participated in Fulbright programs, so we may exchange our unique experiences and share with library professional communities the value and benefits of participating in these programs. We presented a short panel at the 2012 State University of New York library conference (Constantinou, C., Miller, M. J., Schlesinger, K., 2012), and offered a fuller presentation at the 2012 International Federation of Library Association's satellite conference (Miller, M. J., 2012). Finally, we resolved to collaborate on this publication.

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## **CAPTIONS**

**Miller\_Fig\_6.1** Mosque in a Djerbian menzel. (Credit: Michael J. Miller)

**Miller\_Fig\_6.2** Seminar group in the Rabat medina. (Credit: Michael J. Miller)

**Miller\_Fig\_6.3** Sketches, diploma, and journal from Fulbright-Hays seminar. (Credit: Michael J. Miller)

**Miller\_Fig\_6.4** Landing webpage of the project. (Credit: Michael J. Miller)  
<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/~mmiller/MaghrebIndexB.htm>

**Miller\_Fig\_6.5** Content page of the project. (Credit: Michael J. Miller)  
[http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/~mmiller/Maghreb\\_Within.htm](http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/~mmiller/Maghreb_Within.htm)

**Miller\_Fig\_6.6** Miller in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains. (Credit: Simone Pilon) Used with permission.