



# Using Object Boxes to Teach about Middle Eastern Antiquity

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*Students need to enter the interconnected global community with an understanding of how different cultures perceive the world, how the cultures and societies of today evolved from those of the past, and how all peoples impact the development of future societies. Unfortunately, time constraints or lack of resources in schools cause many social studies topics that address our present and past global society to be omitted from the elementary curriculum. Such inattention contributes to student misunderstandings and the continuation of negative stereotypes about world cultures that differ from our own.*

Cultures that seem most prone to negative stereotyping in recent years can be found in the Middle East. People of three religions dominate the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Most Americans are familiar with Christianity and Judaism, but a general

ignorance of Islamic culture on the part of Americans is reflected in the media and often in instruction concerning this region of the world. "Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity. Knowledge of religious differences and the role of religion in the contemporary world can help promote understanding and alleviate prejudice."<sup>1</sup> Middle East countries have a pivotal role in global economies and politics, necessitating a deep understanding of the cultures and viewpoints of these world citizens. After all, "the goal of social studies is to develop responsible citizens who understand their interdependence with others and can make reasoned and informed decisions for the good of a diverse public."<sup>2</sup>

Table 1

**Descriptions of Object Boxes and Corresponding Thematic Strands**

<b>Standard: Thematic Strand</b>	<b>Object Box Topic</b>	<b>Description of Object Box Contents and Activity</b>
<b>CULTURE</b>	Traditional Middle Eastern Clothing	Students match pictures of authentic Middle Eastern clothing to descriptions of the items. Students then examine the actual articles of clothing, noting color, fabric texture and weight, and the differences between men's and women's clothing.
<b>CULTURE</b>	Beliefs of Islam	Students match each of the Five Pillars of Islam (plastic pillars can be purchased where wedding cake supplies are sold) with the verse from the Quran that supports each Pillar, examine authentic prayer beads and prayer rugs with corresponding descriptions, and take a "tour" of a mosque through a puzzle book.
<b>PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS</b>	People of the Middle East	Students sort photographs of Middle East people according to whether they are farmers, city dwellers, or Bedouins (nomadic peoples). Then, they choose objects representing characteristics seen in the photographs for each group such as housing (tent, mud brick house, apartment building), animals (camel, burro, oxen, cow, goat, sheep, cat), clothing (western clothing, hijab), and transportation (camel, cart, car, bus, truck). Finally, they compare and contrast these groups with people within their own culture, referring to the different characteristics of dwellings, clothing, transportation, family structure (extended versus nuclear), and economic lifestyle.
<b>PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS</b>	Regions of the Middle East	The three major environmental regions of the Middle East are shown as heading cards: continental subtropical climate, tropical desert climate, and tropical steppe climate. Students sort photographs, word cards with defining characteristics, objects representing typical floral and fauna of the areas (e.g., acacia, tamarind, olive, grape, date palm, sheep, goat, Arabian horse, scorpion, hawk, locust, cobra, hyena, Oryx), and small maps with highlighted areas under the correct region headings.
<b>TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE</b>	Changing Empires and Nations	Students make a timeline of changing boundaries of the Middle East by arranging maps from most ancient to most recent and matching descriptions and associated objects (clay tablet with cuneiform writing, miniature replica of a mosque, example of Ottoman armor, modern day currency from Middle Eastern countries). Included are: Ancient Mesopotamia, the Muslim Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, and modern nations.
<b>TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE</b>	Achievements of the Muslim Caliphate	Students read about the literary achievements of the Muslim Caliphate. They match miniature replicas of ancient Arabian musical instruments with their names and modern counterparts, match images or objects depicting scientific and mathematic achievements with descriptions, and match images or items representing medical advances in Ancient Arabia with descriptions.
<b>GLOBAL CONNECTIONS</b>	Trade in Ancient Times and Today	Students locate Middle Eastern cities on a magnetic map of the ancient Middle East. They match the cities with the objects (with magnetic strips attached) traded by the inhabitants. Then students can use pictures and miniatures of modern goods with a modern magnetic map to show the products imported to and exported from the Middle East today.
<b>GLOBAL CONNECTIONS</b>	Interdependence and the Middle East	Items commonly imported to the Middle East are represented in this box by small objects and are used as headings for sorting. Students participate in a "scavenger hunt" through photographs of the Middle East to identify products that may come from other countries, sorting the photographs under these objects as they are noticed. Students discuss how life for people in the Middle East would be different without those products and activities.

**At the Beginning**

Instruction on the Middle Eastern may begin with a focus on Islam itself as a culture and religion and progress to a discussion of the history, lifestyles, and trade related to all peoples of the region. The topic should be approached objectively, excluding politics, prejudices, and comparisons to other cultures and religions from the initial presentation of material.<sup>3</sup> A progression from the basic teachings of Islam to details of Muslim life and history can provide a comprehensive teaching of the culture while eliminating negative stereotypes or misconceptions that students may harbor.

The sixth grade social studies curriculum used in the upstate New York school at which these lessons were conducted only briefly addressed the Middle East. Additionally, very few students had any understanding of the Islamic culture and its importance in both the ancient and modern world. This situation is not unique. One educator writes that the issue has been less about how to teach about Islam and Muslims after 9/11 and more about whether or not the topic is appropriate for classroom inclusion at all.<sup>4</sup> A position statement by National Council for the Social Studies,<sup>5</sup> however, observes, "Omitting study about religions gives students the impression that religions

Table 2  
**Ancient Cities, Traded Goods, and Corresponding Object Box Items/Pictures**

Ancient City	Traded Good	Object Box Item/Picture
Egypt	Gold	Pyrite (fool's gold) or gold colored chain
	Slaves	Hieroglyphics depicting Ancient Egyptian slave trade made in polymer clay (from craft store) or simple doll dressed as slave
Medina	Spices	Cloves, paprika, pepper in small containers or glued to cardboard
	Tin	Aluminum foil or piece of roofing tin with edges rolled
Muscat	Grain	Rice grains in small container or glued to piece of cardboard
	Coral	Pink coral stone or other coral
Damascus	Salt	Table salt in small packet/shaker or chunks of rock salt glued to cardboard.
	Jewelry	Modern jewelry in Middle Eastern style or photo
Antioch	Livestock	Plastic toy goat
	Textiles	Square of cotton muslin cloth

have not been, and are not now, part of the human experience.... If the public schools are to provide students with a comprehensive education in the social studies, academic study about religions should be part of the curriculum.”

Aside from the need to change misconceptions and negative stereotypes about the Middle East and Islamic culture, there also exists a need to better engage students in the social studies curriculum. The “disconnect” in social studies education is apparent to critics who see that children across the country are not learning what they need to learn. A common solution is curriculum reform, but this rarely includes reformed methods of teaching social studies.<sup>6</sup> Lessons based solely on reading from a text do not adequately engage students, thereby continuing a lack of understanding, interest, and application of social studies concepts. One method that can be employed at all educational levels and may be particularly effective in social studies is the inclusion of hands-on materials and student-centered learning activities. In this article, we explore the use of object boxes to teach about Middle East culture.

### Object Boxes

Manipulatives and hands-on activities are commonly used in science and mathematics to boost student involvement and understanding of concepts. Several studies show that students who use manipulative materials have higher achievement scores and more positive attitudes towards learning.<sup>7</sup> Realia are being used more frequently in social studies, language arts, and language learning because these objects are context-embedded.<sup>8</sup> One way to incorporate objects in teaching is to design a center or small group activity that uses a box, word or description cards, and directions—an object box.

Object boxes, sets of objects and related cards, were first developed by Montessori. She observed that students learn by actively interacting with their environments. “In order to develop his mind, a child must have objects in his environment which he can hear and see. Since he must develop himself through his movements, through

the work of his hands, he has need of objects for his work that can provide motivation for his activity.”<sup>9</sup> Students investigate object boxes by making a layout of the materials inside. Often students match cards bearing descriptions to objects, or sort the objects according to classification heading cards.

The materials we highlight here are object boxes focusing on different aspects of Middle East culture that our sixth graders explored. In the remainder of this article, we will present evidence for the efficacy of these lessons, describe the materials and their use in the classroom, and discuss how these activities support social studies standards.

### Classroom Instruction on the Middle East

Eight object boxes were developed,<sup>10</sup> corresponding to NCSS themes **CULTURE; PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS; TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE;** and **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS.** Each thematic strand was divided into two subtopics, each addressed by an object box. Brief descriptions of the eight object boxes and their corresponding thematic strands are shown in Table 1.

The object boxes used in the study were created using authentic items from the Middle East, photographs taken in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, images from an Internet search, and objects representing things such as trade items from ancient times. Many of the materials were made using items commonly found in craft or department stores.

### Teaching Interdependence

Interdependence is a major component of the **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS** thematic strand, as outlined by NCSS. By studying interdependence, students develop an understanding of how cultural and historical differences between nations affect the way our worldwide society reacts to global events and changes. Students enrich their comprehension of how interdependence with other nations affects their lives. These connections help students become more engaged with social studies learning.

The “Trade in Ancient Times and Today” object box is a good example of teaching interdependence with hands on activities. This box uses two different maps of the Middle East along with items and pictures to show how the Middle East and the rest of the world has been affected by trade, an important part of interdependence, in the past and in modern times.


For the ancient trade component of this box, a map of the Middle East was drawn showing only the outline of the continents, the location of the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, major ancient urban centers, and the land trade routes that connected them. This map was then glued to a metal cookie sheet. To begin, students located the major Middle Eastern cities on the magnetic map and the major trade routes through the region. They then labeled the cities with the magnetized location cards, which also indicated the goods traded from each city. Lastly, students matched the trade objects/pictures with cities and discussed how trade affected life throughout the Middle East in ancient times. Table 2 indicates the ancient cities, the items traded, and the objects or pictures used to represent those items in the box.

The modern trade component of this object box can be taught using a political map of the Middle East showing the boundaries of the modern day nations. Two sets of arrows were drawn on the map: red arrows pointing out of the Middle East represent exports; blue arrows pointing toward the Middle East represent imports. There are two sets of small objects with magnets corresponding to imports and exports. Students discuss the objects with group members and use their knowledge of the Middle East to place the items next to import arrows or export arrows. A key inside the box provides correct answers for student self-checking. Students then discuss how trade benefits the Middle East and other regions of the world today.

### More Ideas for Student Involvement

Another way to engage students is to involve them in the development of teaching materials. In the “Beliefs of Islam” object box, there is a puzzle book that allows students to take a “tour” of a mosque to learn about the different architectural aspects that can be found in mosques around the world, as well as their significance to Islamic people. The pages are nested inside each other, alternating opening from the center to the left and right with opening to the top and bottom. A larger book can be made in a similar fashion with photographs of mosques taken from an Internet search. Features of mosques that should be addressed include: inner open air courtyard for meditation, minbar (tower), ablution fountain for ritual cleaning before prayer, and a mirhab, a niche that points worshippers in the direction of Mecca. Students may incorporate Islamic art into their work by researching images in books or on the Internet and adding mosaics or unique architectural features.

The Middle East and Islam are often difficult topics to approach in a classroom at any instructional level, but if researched and presented properly, educators can include these important concepts in the social studies curriculum. Help students understand the lessons’ purpose of understanding a culture that may be vastly different from their own, alleviating misconceptions that students may harbor. The use of hands-on activities assists in such learning by bringing

concepts to a concrete level and focusing student attention through manipulation of objects. Your students, like ours, will find motivation and increased learning through social studies object boxes.<sup>11</sup> 

### Notes

1. NCSS Position Statement, *Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum*, 1984; revised 1998; [www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion/](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion/).
2. Evangelina B. Jones, Valerie O. Pang, and James L. Rodriguez, “Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom: Culture Matters,” *Theory Into Practice* 40 (2001): 35-41.
3. Ahmed Essa, “On Teaching about Islam,” *Social Studies Review* 42 (2002): 24-26.
4. Christopher Rose, “Despite Controversies, the K-12 Classroom is the Place for Multicultural Education,” *Social Studies Review* 42 (2002): 8.
5. NCSS Position Statement, *Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum*, 1984; revised 1998; [www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion/](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion/).
6. Stephen J. Thornton, “The Persistent Problem of Method in Social Studies Teaching,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego (1998): ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 427 987.
7. Lynda R. Frederick and Edward L. Shaw, Jr., “Effects of Science Manipulatives on Achievement, Attitudes, and Journal Writing of Elementary Science Students,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Point Clear, AL, November 17-19, 1999): ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 436 410; Allen Ruby, “Hands-on Science and Student Achievement,” Dissertation, RAND Graduate School, Santa Monica, CA. (2001): ERIC No. ED 455 122; Harold Wenglinzky, “How Teaching Matters: Bringing the Classroom Back into Discussions of Teacher Quality,” Educational Testing Service (2000): ERIC No. ED 447 128; Ronald V. Morris, “The Use of Artifacts to Teach Ancient History in the Elementary Classroom,” *Social Studies Review* 42 (2002): 70-74.
8. Audrey C. Rule and Manuel Barrera, III, “Using Objects to Teach Vocabulary Words with Multiple Meanings,” *Montessori Life* 15 (2003): 14-17; Laurel T. Ulrich, “Objects in the Classroom,” *Magazine of History* 17 (2003): 57-59.
9. Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (Translated by M. J. Costelloe, New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 82.
10. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
11. The authors thank Gurdeep Skolnik and Muhammad Ali Rob Sharif for reviewing the manuscript for accuracy.

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