Online Resource Creation Catalyzes Collaboration

Creating online resources to study Arab culture and civilization served as a catalyst for extended collaboration among liberal arts colleges

By **Nancy Millichap** and **Michael Toler**

Some positive responses emerged from the tragic events of September 11, 2001, including recognition of the importance of international education, especially about non-Western cultural regions of the world. Colleges and universities in particular saw dramatically increased interest in teaching and learning about Islam and the Arab world. Many research institutions already had such programs or departments, but most small, undergraduate institutions did not.

A number of leading liberal arts colleges considered possible new approaches. One early impulse was to implement Web-based courses teaching the Arabic language, but the difficulty of developing a top-quality curriculum quickly enough for near-term use made that idea impractical. Making high-quality materials available in English showed more promise for developing students' cultural awareness and understanding. These conclusions led the Center for Educational Technology at Middlebury College, on behalf of the participating colleges of the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE; see the sidebar), to undertake the creation of educational resources to promote innovative, collaborative work in Arab, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies. The initiative has two parts: an online resource on Arab culture and civilization (http://arabworld. nitle.org) and a collaborative endeavor developing from and around it called Al-Musharaka, the Arabic word for "sharing" or "collaboration."

NITLE and Collaboration

The National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE) had its beginnings in fall 2001, and Al-Musharaka was among its first national initiatives. The collaborative was not without precedent, however. Efforts among liberal arts colleges to improve their abilities to work together at the intersection of technology and teaching had led to the creation of a network of 81 leading liberal arts colleges. With support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, NITLE incorporates into a national network the regional instructional technology centers established to serve these colleges. For more information see <http://www.nitle.org>.

Goals and Use

One goal of Al-Musharaka is to increase the curricular offerings available on participating campuses. Another is to promote the perception that Arab and Islamic studies programs in particular would benefit from innovative teaching approaches, including Web-based resources and institutional collaboration. Before this project's inception, there was a notable lack of reliable, academically sound material appropriate to a college-level class. Such materials often did not exist in English, at least not in a readily accessible form.

Putting curricular materials on the Web, while simultaneously providing faculty with professional development opportunities intended to enable the resources' use in collaborative projects, would allow participating colleges to extend their offerings in Arab, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies at low cost.

At the same time, the Al-Musharaka collaborative had the potential to create an intellectual community for faculty with shared interests in these areas of study. Few liberal arts colleges, after all, have more than one specialist in Arab and Islamic studies on the faculty.

For institutions in other sectors of higher education, an alternative approach might have been to create new academic programs and hire new faculty members to teach in them. However, resource constraints at most small institutions preclude building full programs or creating new departments. Of the 81 colleges in NITLE, only a few have been able to establish even modest programs of this kind. Thus a chief benefit of collaboration is generating new courses in curricular areas otherwise not extensively studied on these campuses, despite their recently recognized importance.

Web Site Specifications

The Arab Culture and Civilization Web site (http://www.nitle.org/initiatives/almusharaka.htm) has its own content management system, developed with the site's content in mind. The site can both display the content to visitors and also allow editors to upload new content or edit existing information easily. As a content management system, the site allows editors and domain experts to work with the text and multimedia materials without special technical knowledge or programming skills. The site's technical developer can make site-wide interface or structural changes by modifying the underlying code. As the quantity of text and visual materials has grown, the structure of the site has also changed: new sections have been added and new interfaces designed.

In keeping with NITLE's commitment to open standards, the infrastructure of the site was designed to be accessible across a wide range of browsers and operating systems. The site is compliant with the World Wide Web consortium's XHTML 1.0 standard, a set of guidelines designed to ensure interoperability, and was built using open source tools and technologies. All content is stored in a MySQL relational database and served to the Web using the Apache Web server and the PHP Web scripting language. The articles shown on the site are stored as XML and encoded as UTF-8 (a variant of Unicode).

—Aaron Coburn, Developer, NITLE

Getting Started

The Arab Culture and Civilization site (see the sidebar) serves as the cornerstone of NITLE's initiative in Arab, Islamic, and Middle Eastern Studies. The initiative's first task was to pull together a team to develop the Web site. NITLE chose two staff members then affiliated with the Middlebury College School of Arabic to serve as content editors: Director Nabil Abdelfattah and Technical Assistant Michael Toler. The two worked with scholars in Arab and Islamic studies who served as consultants in specific areas of expertise. Multiple methods were employed to assess needs and to solicit content advice from faculty at different institutions. The content editors worked with new media designers, instructional technologists, and NITLE staff experts in computer-mediated collaboration. Aaron Coburn and Maciej Ceglowski served as the primary programmers for the project.

The development team's work involved a number of discrete tasks:

- Designing a framework for organization and delivery of materials online.
- Selecting or developing the most important and appropriate texts, images, and audio and video materials.
- Arranging for and producing audio and video interviews with scholars.
- Assembling into a coherent whole the diverse set of materials gathered.

The content development team decided on a thematic organizational scheme that included 10 modules: History; Ethnicity and Identity; Islam; Arab Americans; Literature and Philosophy; Popular Culture and the Performing Arts; Family and Society; Art and Architecture; The Arabic Language; and Geography, Demographics, and Resources. A unit on New Media was later added to reflect the impact of these technologies in the region. Each unit includes a range of video clips, audio files, texts, images, links, and a bibliography, with some units including additional components as appropriate (maps, timelines, and so forth).

Since its launch the site has grown to include an increasing amount of original material. With less than a year between the development team's start and the Web site's launch, however, most materials on the initial site had to be culled from existing resources. Hence, a critical task for the team was securing permissions from copyright holders to digitize their work and make it available online. In the world of uncertain attribution and dubious reliability that is the Internet, the site is unusual in the clarity and thoroughness of its approach to intellectual property concerns.

The materials included in the initial launch were chosen from among the best available resources for undergraduate students without extensive prior knowledge of the region. While the materials represent a variety of viewpoints on critical issues, all were judged by the content team to meet high standards of scholarship and reliability. The site has continued to grow with the integration of materials more appropriate for upper-division courses.

Though publicly available as an educational service since August 2002, the Arab Culture and Civilization Web site was designed to serve the needs of students and faculty at liberal arts colleges. The site receives an average of 1,000 hits per day, generated by an estimated 300 daily visitors. Research I institutions and the general public use the site most.

Al-Musharaka

Comprehensive Web-based information developed by scholars and designers, working collaboratively to represent a variety of interest areas and viewpoints, represents a new type of information resource for most faculty. To address this lack of familiarity, interested faculty from NITLE institutions have an annual opportunity to work together with the materials and to consider how to use them in creating innovative inter-institutional courses or augment them by developing additional resources. For the past four summers, the Al-Musharaka initiative has offered seminars for faculty from the colleges and universities participating in NITLE.

During a one-week period, 10 to 15 faculty meet at the Center for Educational Technology in Middlebury, Vermont, to collaborate on ways of using

the materials in classes. Some have made plans to teach courses collaboratively during the academic year and developed additional resources for the Arab Culture and Civilization Web site. While the site focuses only on the Arab world, the interests of faculty involved in the Al-Musharaka initiative have spread much wider, encompassing a variety of topics that might come under the headings of Middle East or Islamic Studies, including topics related to the study of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and even Arab and Muslim communities in the United States.

Collaborating on Courses

The first semester-length collaborative course to result from these planning efforts, "Introduction to Islam," was offered on three campuses in fall 2004. Alfons Teipen (Religion, Furman University), Belle Tuten (History, Juniata College), and Bahar Davary (Religion, Hobart and William Smith Colleges), who had participated in the Al-Musharaka seminar in 2003, taught the course. Their stu-

dents used a Microsoft Sharepoint server at Juniata for discussions of shared readings that the faculty referred to as "touch points." The students also participated in a collaborative group project: teams of five representing all three campuses were assigned to hold an online discussion and then summarize for the larger group what they had found.

Among the course evaluation results was a strong sense from students that participating in electronic discussion with those from other campuses had exposed them to viewpoints different from their own and increased their interest in the topic. Professor Teipen is producing DVDs of his course lectures to share with other NITLE institutions, and the course is being offered again in the fall of 2005 at Furman and Juniata.

Collaborative teaching projects now under way build on the experience of the Introduction to Islam course. Full-length courses or shorter collaborative teaching units approach aspects of Middle Eastern societies from an interdisci-

plinary perspective. Moreover, faculty involved in the collaborative are developing additional online resources such as pedagogical tools for teaching aspects of Islam and information on comparative, cross-cultural media literacy. News from the collaborative, as well as related topics, is posted on their blog: <http://blogs.nitle.org/almusharaka>.

Into the Future

An inter-institutional initiative like the Introduction to Islam course demands a willingness—from both the development team and users—to experiment, innovate, and take part in a developing community. It tests the hypothesis that access to high-quality materials can promote development of an inter-institutional disciplinary community.

Successfully developing and using a resource collaboratively in a specialized, newly strategic area of study depends on numerous factors. First, there must be a compelling need for the resource. Second, would-be creators must recognize that producing a high-quality, academic, online information resource is not a purely scholarly activity: it demands complementary skills from collaborating faculty and instructional and information technologists. Experience has shown, however, that full utilization of a novel information resource results only when those for whom it was designed work together on the theoretical and practical aspects of its application in teaching and learning. Finally, an organization within whose charge it clearly falls must assume responsibility for the site's ongoing maintenance and development.

Given the wide use of the site and the emergence of inter-institutional teaching based on what it offers, the results of the experiment to date demonstrate the possibility of new learning opportunities that break down disciplinary barriers and cross institutional boundaries. *e*

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