Lesson Title: Learner-Centered Exploration of Arabic Culture Through Literature

Duration: 160 minutes/Two blocks

Rationale/Overview:
I decided to begin my unit on Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* with an introductory learner-center. This was a deliberate decision that revolved around several beliefs of mine attached to beginning this unit. Primarily, the novel is set in Kabul, Afghanistan, which is a country and setting that most students will be unfamiliar with. The novel depicts many in-depth instances of foreign cultural traditions involving religion, literature, art, food, social interaction etc. Instead of throwing my students into this foreign atmosphere without introducing them to these concepts, I decided that a learner-center revolving around various aspects of Arabic culture would be an excellent way to get students acquainted with themes that will be reoccurring in the text. The learner center consists of 8 different stations that each focus on different aspects of Arabic culture and themes in the novel. Students must participate in every learner center station and complete the assigned activity within two full blocks of class time. All of the activities are able to be completed in class. After students have completed all of these introductory activities, I believe that they will be mentally prepared to begin reading Hosseini’s novel.

NYS ELA Standards Addressed:
Standard Two: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.
Standard One: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
Standard Three: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

Objectives:

Content:

1. Students will be able to name the three Arabic poets: Naomi Shihab Nye, Nizar Qabbani, and Khalil Gibran and also name one poem written by each of the above individuals.

2. Students will be able to recall key aspects of the Islamic religion such as important festivals, sacred books, key figures, techniques for praying, etc.
3. Students will be able to define what calligraphy and mehndi are as Islamic art forms.

4. Students will be able to state who Mullah Nasruddin is and list the title of at least one of his fables.

5. Students will be able to describe the recreational practice of kite running.

Skills:

1. Students will be able to use a selected Arabic poem as inspiration for their own originally composed poem, where they will be able to identify key aspects of the Arabic poem that they will choose to include in their own inspired work.

2. Students will be able to find answers to a Text Quest on Islam by searching through three nonfiction texts.

3. Students will be able to illustrate their own artistic representation of calligraphy or mehndi using Arabic script and traditional henna motifs.

4. Students will be able to deduce the moral message of one of Nasruddin’s fables.

5. Students will be able to compare and contrast three nonfiction texts on Afghanistan and decide which text presents the best overview of the subject.

6. Students will be able to examine the practice of kite running/fighting and assess how it reflects Afghan culture in a well-constructed essay response.

7. Students will be able to produce a short narrative that relays a certain aspect of their culture such as religion, custom, food, etc.

Dispositions:

1. Students will be able to enjoy reading Arabic poetry and use it as inspiration in their own writing process in the future.

2. Students will be able to normalize the Islamic religion by seeing that the morals being upheld are similar to the morals upheld in all major religions.

3. Students will be able to appreciate the complexity and beauty of Arabic artwork.

4. Students will be able to value the injection of humor into Arabic moralistic fables.

5. Students will be able to see the importance of picture books as transmitters of knowledge and information.
Materials/Resources:

1. Many fiction and nonfiction books have been used in this learner center. Instead of listing them all in this section, I have attached a full bibliography of these texts at the end of this lesson write-up.

2. A copy of Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “Sewing, Knitting, Crocheting…”

3. A copy of Khalil Gibran’s poem “A Visit From Wisdom.”

4. A copy of Nizar Qabbani’s poem “A Lesson In Drawing.”

5. Text Quest work sheet (included)

6. Computers to access Google Translate

7. White card stock and thin-tipped Sharpie markers

8. Printed out visual images taken from Google of various examples of calligraphy and mehndi motifs.

9. Several Mullah Nasruddin fables

10. Afghanistan Books work sheet (included)

11. 2007 article from the NY times on kite running in Kabul with attached images (included)

Strategies:

Learner-Center activities, cross-disciplinary themes, active participation, literature circles, modeling/teacher demonstration

Teacher Activities:

Since these two lessons revolve around student-oriented learner-centers, the only direct instruction that I will be giving is an explanation of how the learner centers work. The 22 students will be broken up into 6 groups of 3 and 2 groups of 2. They will each start at a different learner-center and complete the activity before they can move on to the next learner-center.

The model that I chose to do, is the activity listed for learner-center number three. I practiced the art of calligraphy and drawing various mehndi designs which are all included on my learner-center trifold board.
I will be drifting among the learner-centers, attending to student questions and making sure students are staying on task in a timely fashion.

**Student Activities:**

Below I have broken the 8 different learner-centers into their individual assignments and attached any necessary work sheets or texts after each of the various learner centers have been detailed.

**LEARNER CENTER ONE: ARABIC POETS**

Introduction and Assignment: Arabic poetry is the earliest form of Arabic literature, dating back to the 6th century. Oral poetry dates back even further than written records. Arabic poetry consists of two main categories: rhymed and prose. Rhymed poetry is much more commonly found, especially by traditional poets. Unfortunately, when Arabic poetry is translated into English, the beauty of the rhyme is lost in translation.

In order to become introduced to Arabic poetry, I have included three poems from Naomi Shihab Nye, Nizar Qabbani, and Khalil Gibran in the accompanying packet. Read all three of the poems and then select one of the poems that you enjoyed and were inspired by the most. You will be writing your own poem, using your selected Arabic poem as inspiration and a model for both structure and theme. Depending on which poem you select, your writing task will differ. Each of the individual writing tasks are attached to the poem they are based on.

Writing task for using Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem as inspiration:

In this poem, Naomi selects an activity that many would deem rather boring and mundane but transforms it, through language, into a captivating artform. Choose a common task or chore that you might consider to be monotonous and write about it from a unique perspective or angle that makes it intriguing for a reader to engage with. Some common tasks that you might choose to write about include: doing the dishes, vacuuming, reading the paper, doing homework etc. Be sure to include technical vocabulary that gives more depth and detail to your chosen task or chore. For instance, Naomi does this when she includes words like “yarn”, “crochet”, “thimble” and “patterns” to add more detail to her task of sewing, knitting, and crocheting.
Writing task for Khalil Gibran’s poem as inspiration:

In this poem, Khalil personifies the abstract concept of wisdom and interacts with “her” as if it were a human being. Khalil includes plenty of dialogue between himself and the personified feminine being of Wisdom. Choose an abstract concept of some kind and write a poem where you create a personified character to go along with this concept. Be sure to include exchanges of dialogue in your poem, between yourself and your personified concept.

Some of the abstract concepts that you might be interested in choosing from include:

Love, Hope, Happiness, Grief, Fear, War, Chaos, Gossip/Rumor, Liberty, Jealousy, Pride, Hate, Fortune/Misfortune, Deception, Courage, Justice, Death, Morality, Peace

Writing task for Nizar Qabbani’s poem as inspiration:

In this poem, Nizar focuses on a couple of art forms (painting and poetry) and uses external examples to demonstrate what he believes these art forms mean to him, personally. In your own poem, select an art form that you feel strongly about and write a poem that tells what this art form represents and means to you. Be sure to include figurative language to relay your message rather than simply stating how you feel. If you can, try to include as much visual imagery as possible.

Some of the art forms that you might be interested in choosing from include:

Paintings, sculptures, architecture, poetry, narrative writing, drawing, music, dance, theatre, cooking, video game production etc.

LEARNER CENTER TWO: ISLAM EXPLORATION

For this activity, you will be using three nonfiction texts that all provide information on the religion of Islam. You will each be provided with a Text Quest—featuring questions pertaining to Islam. The answers to each of the questions on the Text Quest can be found in one of the three books that you will be exploring. Some of the answers may even be found in all of the books. When you find an answer, please record the page number and book where you discovered the answer. You are allowed to work together in your “traveling group” in order to uncover the questions together. Good luck exploring!

LEARNER CENTER THREE: CALLIGRAPHY PRACTICE
Arabic calligraphy is the artistic practice of handwriting. Since Muslims deny representing God with images, they resorted to using Arabic script to represent Allah. Calligraphy was the primary means for the preservation of the Quran and complete passages from the Quran are often showcased in calligraphy. Since figurative art was often considered idolatrous, calligraphy became a major form of artistic expression in Islamic cultures.

Another revered Arabic art form is mehndi. Mehndi is the application of henna as a temporary form of skin decoration. You will often see extremely complex and intricate designs on people’s arms, hands, fingers, and feet. Henna is generally applied to brides before their wedding ceremony.

For this activity, you will be combining your own artistic talents to create a mixture of calligraphy and mehndi. I have provided many visual images of both calligraphy and mehndi to guide your art. You will be able to use Google Translate to write something in Arabic using the artistic form of calligraphy. Surrounding your calligraphy, you can either recreate an example of mehndi from the images provided, or you can devise your own mehndi design. You will each be given a sheet of cardstock to create your Islamic inspired art.

LEARNER CENTER FOUR: MULLAH NASRUDDIN FABLES

Mullah Nasruddin was believed to have lived during the 13th century and was considered a wise man and popular philosopher. Nasruddin was known for his funny stories and fables. Many Nasruddin stories feature humor, of some sorts, but there is almost always a valuable moral or lesson to be learned at the end.

Nasraddin stories are commonly told in Arabic homes and are even mentioned twice in the novel we will be beginning shortly The Kite Runner.

For this activity, you will be reading a handful of Nasruddin fables and recording your simple interpretation of the “moral” or overarching “lesson” of three of them. You will then construct your own fable, choosing a lesson or moral that you wish to impart. Be sure to use elements of humor in your fable. You may refer to Nasruddin’s tales as models and also two selected Aesop’s fables.

LEARNER CENTER FIVE: AFGHANISTAN OVERVIEW

Afghanistan is a necessary Arabic country to study, as it serves as the main setting for the novel we will be beginning shortly, The Kite Runner.
For this activity, you will be using three nonfiction books on Afghanistan as resources. These three books range in difficulty and focus. Skim through each of the three books and get a general feel for each text and its presentation. After this, you will have to compare and contrast the three books in various areas and determine which one you believe gives the best representation of Afghanistan. You will be provided with a sheet that gives various categories for comparison. Carefully determine the winner for each category and describe the reasoning behind your decision.

**LEARNER CENTER SIX: KITE RUNNING**

The title of the novel that we will be beginning shortly is *The Kite Runner*. As the title indicates, the novel strongly focuses on a popular Afghan pastime: kite running and fighting. I have provided a 2007 article from the New York Times on kite running in Kabul (the capital of Afghanistan). Read the article, look at the two images attached, and respond to the following questions in essay format.

How does kite-flying reflect Afghan culture? Compare this to a sport that you believe reflects American culture, such as football or baseball. Incorporate quotes from the NYTimes article that you read. Your essay should be no more than 3 pages double spaced and no less than 1.5 pages.

**LEARNER CENTER SEVEN: CULTURE THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS**

Picture books can be a wonderful way to discuss cultural traditions, festivals, and customs. For this activity, you will be browsing and reading several picture books that reflect various aspects of Arabic culture including: specific festivals such as Ramadan, the art and tradition of rug weaving, wearing burqas, pilgrimage, etc. Pay careful attention to how these short narratives reflect culture in an artistic and poignant way.

Based on what you have observed, you will be writing your own short narrative that reflects a particular aspect of your culture. You can choose to write about a specific holiday that you love celebrating, a special type of dinner that you eagerly anticipate, a game or sport that is inherent in your culture, or a type of religious practice. Be sure to include plenty of concrete details and figurative language to help your reader clearly visualize what you are portraying. Your narrative should be no longer than a page in length.

**LEARNER CENTER EIGHT: LITERATURE CIRCLE SELECTIONS**

As a whole class, we will be reading Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner*. Hosseini’s novel features two male protagonists: Amir and Hassan. At the same time that we are reading *The Kite
Runner, you will be meeting in small groups and discussing a novel that you have chosen to read out of five given selections.

These five novels all feature female protagonists, in order to give balance to the male Arab perspective that we will be reading about in The Kite Runner. The following five novels all range in length and difficulty, and two are nonfiction accounts while three are fictional. Skim through each of the novels and decide which one you are most interested in reading. Sign up for that novel. Once the lit circles are decided, you will be meeting with your groups once a week, during class, to discuss your reading. You will be deciding how many pages to read for each group as a collective group. Good luck choosing!

ASSESSMENT:

Each of the learner-centers involves the students tangibly producing something either in the form of creative expression, analytical deduction, or identifying content. The students will be assessed on how well they followed the task and what quality of work they were able to produce in the time offered. Students’ individual assignments will be assessed on the basis of satisfactory/unsatisfactory, and will largely be based on if they completed the assignment and if they followed the instructions. Students will be assigned a grade based on their overall performance on all 8 of the learner-centers. Exemplary student work will be showcased in the classroom and possibly utilized as classroom art.

REFLECTION:

I am extremely passionate about the learner-center stations that I have constructed, as I believe they offer a well-rounded investigation of various aspects of Islamic/Arabic culture. The centers were designed with a number of different student learners in the classroom, and each center is supposed to loosely cater to the intelligences and learning styles of a vast number of students. I believe that each of the assignments are challenging enough but not overwhelming so that students will benefit from participating in the assignments but not become disheartened or overburdened. My one possible concern is that students will not stay focused on each task or complete the activities at different times and cause possible chaos in the classroom. I have thought about implementing the use of timed stations, so that each student must complete the assignments collectively and travel in the same groups from station to station. Overall, however, I believe the learner centers are thoughtful and provide students with a wide array of both fiction and nonfiction texts to become acquainted with.