

“COMMANDER OF THE FAITHFUL: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader” as Added Value for Educators

Learning, understanding and deep understanding are not the same thing

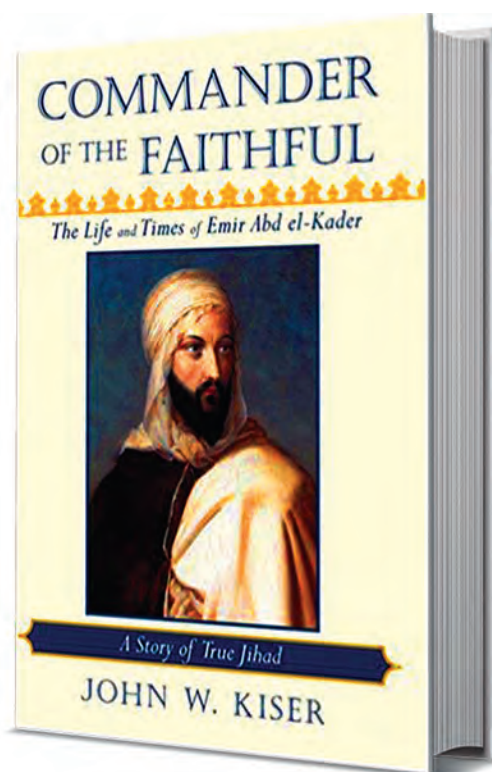
BY BONNIE JAMES

MY INTEREST IN THE ABD el-Kader Project (www.abdelkaderproject.org) focuses on the work I do in curriculum development in the U.S. and internationally. I consult with school districts, often with classroom teachers and department chairs, sometimes with principals and superintendents and, rarely, with a country's department of education. Most of my consulting is part of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero (www.pz.harvard.edu), which focuses on cognitive development, as it is nurtured by a curriculum design called Teaching for Understanding.

Although Project Zero is based on the relationship of cognitive development to the arts, its research looks at the broad spectrum of disciplines as they relate to the value of structuring academic work with the strongest possible design to promote cognitive development (i.e., intellectual growth).

I often search for materials that offer more than a limited view for academic pursuits, something that you might call “value added.” And this is what I think John Kiser's “Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader” (2008) has to offer our students.

This book has two important takeaways: The first is finding something relevant that one should know and that has a riveting appeal, as opposed to our schools' usually didactic and boring material. Maybe it's important, but its importance diminishes if nothing sustains the “hook” of understanding and remembering what has been learned. We can all give examples of curriculum that has remained part of our intellectual package. Perhaps it's “Huckleberry Finn,” geography's relationship to political



success or water's boiling point. These kinds of things create the building blocks of intellect, for people use that which is relevant and important to tease out what they don't comprehend, to connect themselves to new learning and understanding.

The second is developing a deep understanding of the “stuff” that is learned. Learning something is fine, but understanding it goes far beyond the multiple-choice questions of benchmark testing, for true understanding means using that information to inform the further concepts you may pursue. Thus teachers must seek to develop an understanding of what they teach to ensure that the time spent in academic pursuits is time well spent.

The engagingly written “Commander of the Faithful” is neither an easy read nor

beyond the understanding of solid students. What I find particularly appealing is its engagement with geography, history, the social sciences, physiology, philosophy, religion, linguistics and other disciplines, not to mention its many pathways of curriculum offered in a rich context. While searching for academic works that encourage deeper understanding, we should be looking for material that takes our students into a realm of understanding beyond what is often conventionally offered.

By combining these two takeaways, “Commander of the Faithful” offers multiple avenues for excellent curriculum as well as three compelling concepts: colonialism, culture and faith, and character.

Colonialism is a big-ticket concept for understanding the history of our various cultures as well as our world's ongoing economic colonialism. An inhabitant of French colonial Algeria, el-Kader has been dubbed the “George Washington of Algeria” — a powerful connection for American students and for students whose nations may have overseen those colonies. Written from an on-the-ground perspective, this book captivates the readers' interest and pulls them into the pathos of what it means to live under a colonial power.

Islam, like Christianity, has multiple facets. Therefore, rather than using the simple labels of “Muslim” or “Christian” lightly, Kiser explicates the tribes, sects, denominations and other nuances to tease out the mish-mash of cultures in the text, the footnotes and the chapter notes. The book's structure enables teachers to examine how writers present an excellent story, while also providing the scholarly evidence that sufficient research has been carried out to present an accurate account.

Each of us has a unique relationship to



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*The 1889 Keystone Bridge,
Elkader, Iowa*

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character development in that we are evidence of our own. “Commander of the Faithful” chronicles the life of a man shaped by his circumstances, but one who also seemed to work to understand himself and his relationship

with all parts of his surrounding environment. The book offers many examples of his character development, often informed by the decisions he made. For example, Kiser states, “Anarchy gave birth to his power and anarchy

constantly developed in him” (p. 47). What a rich sentence for launching a discussion on every word of this sentence. The following page contains an example of the emir’s emerging character: Abd el-Kader becomes “Commander of the Faithful” because he turns down the title of “sultan,” thereby exhibiting humility and perspective. Again, the concept of character is powerfully presented.

A good book, piece of scholarship or research can provide the metaphor for much of what needs to be learned in order to shape one’s academic or intellectual construct. Used thoughtfully, such material can also help students create deeper understandings of critical concepts. For most of us — and we are all students in one form or another — new challenges will arise and force us to devise new solutions or strategies. Deep engagement with a good piece of work helps us form the intellectual connections that are the basis for extended cognitive growth — and that’s what education should be all about. *ih*

Bonnie Bickel James, a consultant in educational leadership and curriculum, consults at the Project Zero Summer Institute, Harvard Graduate School of Education and WIDE World, the school’s on-line platform that specializes in professional development for educators. She also speaks at professional development seminars for WIDE both at home and abroad. James has served as lower school principal at Milton Academy, Milton, Mass.; lower school director, National Cathedral School for Girls, Washington D.C.; and history/social studies department chair at The Foote School, New Haven, Conn., where she taught for fifteen years.

(Condensed from comments by Bonnie James on the occasion of presenting the 4th annual Abdelkader essay prize awards in Elkader, Iowa)



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