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A CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR EDUCATING CONSERVATORS OF ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPTS

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Abstract

To meet the pressing need for more training for conservators in developing countries dealing with Islamic manuscripts, a curriculum design was prepared. This details the skills and information needed and organizes instruction into modules that can be taught as a total program or semi-independently with adaptation to many different circumstances in different settings. The modules are augmented by specified objectives, possible instructional activities and assessment strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic manuscripts, estimated to number in the millions, are spread out across the world, with the bulk still remaining in Islamic countries. They constitute a vital cultural heritage both in terms of intellectual content and the information that can be gleaned from their physical structures and materials about the social, artistic and technological milieus in which they were made. The work of cataloguing and digitizing these collections and of making the results available to researchers remains mostly still to be done. In the meantime, however, destruction of manuscripts by insects, war, natural disasters and poor handling and use continues apace.

The conservator has a key role in opposing these depredations. Yet in the developing world, the work of manuscript conservation and preservation is sometimes carried out by individuals who lack the necessary information, skills and practice to be effective at their jobs. This can directly jeopardize the survival of entire collections. Even on the level of individual manuscripts, this can lead to inappropriate decisions being taken during treatment that, however well-intentioned, can harm the manuscript and eradicate the information it carries about its makers and history.

In many places, those responsible for the care of these collections have limited or no access to relevant conservation education. Although trainings do take place in some countries, they are organized in an *ad hoc* fashion, often addressing only preventive conservation measures and simple repair methods, such as reported by (Ketzer, 1991) and (Biddle, 2012). Of these previous and ongoing education efforts in the Islamic world, very little is ever published about how such trainings are organized, what the specific contents are, or how they could be applied to other settings - see for example reports about trainings in Timbuktu, Mali (Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, 2015), in Erbil, Iraq (University of Delaware College of Arts & Sciences, 2010) and in Najaf, Iraq (Unesco Office for Iraq, 2013). In the general description of a more comprehensive educational program carried out in Mauritania (Giacomello 2009), the topics of instruction and teaching hours are specified but no mention is made of educational objectives, activities to support the trainings or methods of assessment.

Nor is education outside of the Islamic world necessarily a relevant option. As can be seen in the program descriptions on the websites of some representative universities offering conservation education, such as Camberwell College of Arts, Northumbria University, University of Delaware and New York University, the emphasis is on printed books, archival material and art on paper. So, for the few conservators-in-training from the Islamic world who can attend formal conservation education programs in developed countries, virtually nothing is taught there about the special structures and problems of Islamic manuscripts. At best, students in these programs may get some training in the conservation of

Western manuscripts. This can cause a serious unanticipated problem in that the application of some of the methodologies and approaches used on Western manuscripts to those coming from the Islamic tradition can be harmful rather than beneficial. But even more to the point, most conservators in developing countries, even if they can meet restrictive visa requirements, have neither the time nor the financial means to attend established conservation programs in Europe or the United States.

The general absence of sufficient educational opportunities in conservation in the developing world was addressed by Brown (2014). For Islamic manuscript conservation in particular, as there are no relevant programs available in Islamic countries, the need exists, therefore, for a curriculum design which is general enough to be widely applicable yet contains enough detail to be comprehensive. In simplistic terms, the problem is one of logistics: the necessary information and knowledge is not reaching the people who need it. The authors of this paper, who have all focused on the conservation of Islamic manuscripts in their own work and have extensive experience as educators, were inspired therefore to create a different educational model, published at www.hepworthscheper.com/curriculum-design-for-conservators-of-islamic-manuscripts. This project was partially funded by the International Islamic University Malaysia, which is establishing itself as a regional leader in conservation initiatives, with additional support provided by the Islamic Manuscript Association.

METHODOLOGY- SETTING THE GOALS

The underlying concept of this new model is to get information to those who need it rather than futilely expecting people with the need for it to come to the sources of information. Two factors had to be directly addressed. First, what basic set of skills, experiences and information would a functioning Islamic manuscript conservator need to have? Since conservation is a profession in which new discoveries are constantly being made and new methods tried, it would be impossible as well as impracticable to try to impart every concept and every technique. Rather, a solid foundation has to be created on which the conservator can build his or her professional career. And second, how could this fundamental education be packaged and delivered effectively? Clearly the practical constraints of time and cost had to be considered, but also widely varying needs between different individuals and different institutions. For example, conservators in a collection with a large holding of parchment leaves would benefit from more extensive training on the complex issues of parchment treatment, whereas conservators in paper-based collections would have a different focus in their training. One group of conservators might have access to scientific analytical equipment with which they would need to be familiar. Another group might have a stronger background in chemistry or greater proficiency in English which would

allow them to go more deeply into the published literature in certain areas. In other words, given the number of variables that would depend on the situation where instruction occurs, the curriculum model had to be flexible and adaptable in design.

This model begins with the compilation of a comprehensive list of the skills, competencies and concepts that a practicing Islamic manuscript conservator would need to use. This includes an understanding of the manuscripts themselves - stylistic developments, materials and methods of manufacture, art-historical context - and an understanding of the conservation issues involved - condition assessment, conservation materials and their properties, preservation requirements, and treatment methodologies. This list is the foundation on which a program could be based.

CREATING THE PROGRAM'S FRAMEWORK

Envisioning this program, the list of skills, competencies and concepts had to be sorted both by subject, those which could be naturally grouped together, and by hierarchies of importance, those of greater importance and more general applicability receiving greater attention and emphasis. A decision also had to be made about the time available for instruction. The time had to be enough so that a solid foundation of knowledge could be built, but realistic in terms of the constraints students would be likely to face.

One significant advantage in having a conservation program directed specifically towards Islamic manuscript conservation is that many general topics could be referenced only through this specific focus, which would condense instructional time. Still, the authors felt that a two-year program is the minimum for imparting the basic knowledge a starting conservator would need. The first year would be directed towards acquisition of theoretical information and learning basic practical techniques. Activities would be closely guided in this year so that student mastery of the techniques could be monitored but also because this might be the period in which they would need to be weaned from inappropriate techniques they had been practicing before.

The first year is divided into seven modules, each four weeks in length. Each module builds sequentially on the ones preceding it. Starting from Ethics and Documentation, the program then moves on, in order, to Paper, Binding Materials and Adhesives, Codicological Aspects of Islamic Manuscripts, Preservation, and two units of Conservation Techniques and Materials. Each module is then broken down into a hierarchical outline in which the key concepts are enumerated.

The curriculum model imposes no restrictions as to the instructional style the teacher will use to impart theoretical concepts. Lectures, individual and/or small-group activities, discovery-based learning or any combination of these or other approaches can be used, as appropriate or as preferred. However, in every

module, theoretical learning is always reinforced by practical work so that the students can develop and use their hand skills. Suggestions are made in each module for activities that students can undertake to apply the theoretical knowledge they have acquired. This also provides the means to assess whether the concepts have been sufficiently mastered since desired student outcomes are specified and matched to each assessment activity.

The second year is divided into five units. In each of these, the students undertake a specific project which draws on all of the theoretical knowledge they learned in the first year and necessitates their choosing and applying a variety of treatment methods. These projects include treatments of textblocks and bindings, and a project on preservation/exhibition of manuscripts.

The curriculum model is further augmented with a discussion of the type of problems that could be anticipated during implementation and the expectations that would apply to participating students and institutions. Additionally, an extensive bibliography is supplied, and the articles have been scanned so that they can be made available to students in pdf format in locations where research libraries may be weak or nonexistent. Finally, the equipment and supplies needed to apply the curriculum in a laboratory setting are supplied, along with the prices at the time the model was written. These prices will generally go up as time passes, but they still give at least a rough idea of the costs involved in supplying the materiel with which the curriculum can be implemented.

RESULTS AND PROJECT INNOVATIONS

This is the first published attempt to think about what an Islamic manuscript conservator does and, therefore, to specify what this individual needs to know to be able to work effectively. Regardless of whether the particular program being suggested is used or not, the list of competencies, skills and concepts needed by an Islamic manuscript conservator can be a resource for any future efforts to develop conservation education.

The program does not advocate a cookbook approach to conservation education. Modules are ordered in a way that made sense to the authors, but concepts can be moved and given different emphasis according to the experiences and opinions of an instructor. Similarly, the authors have intentionally resisted trying to make a one-size-fits-all type of curriculum. Indeed, in developing specific lesson plans and instructional materials, effective teachers will certainly want to refer to the treatments and objects they are familiar with in their own work that will be relevant to the place where they teach. With so many unknown variables to be faced, the authors are keenly aware that actual implementation of the curriculum will, of necessity, require hard choices being made. Given the manuscripts in a particular collection—as mentioned before, for example, the presence of many parchment leaves—it might be appropriate for topics related to parchment conservation to be given greater attention. But inevitably, other topics

will then have to be taught in less depth: the time available for instruction imposes certain fixed constraints.

Two innovative ways are identified in this model for getting conservation education to the intended audience. The first is to have the total program available in a location in the Islamic world, such as at the International Islamic University Malaysia, which can be more easily accessed by potential conservators in developing Islamic countries. They would not face the restrictive visa requirements that now often block their going to conservation programs in the US and Europe. Additionally, costs for attending the program would be significantly lower than at a Western university. And the program would specifically focus on the very objects - Islamic manuscripts - that these individuals expect to work with when they graduate. So they can get training more efficiently and with direct and immediate relevance to their work.

The second way is to teach the program as a series of linked but independent modules. A module could be taken to a particular institution and taught to its staff in a relatively short amount of time. Then as time and means become available, subsequent modules can be taught sequentially but spaced out over a longer period so that students do not have to leave their homes or jobs to get the training they need.

Although it would be ideal to have an instructor present throughout a module, the associated costs may be prohibitive and experienced instructors may not always be available. So the model also exploits the potential for affordable long-distance supervision and support provided by such technological advances on the Internet as Skype and Whatsapp.

The curriculum model builds consciously on the network of social relations in which conservators work. For proper training, access to collections is imperative. So the model seeks to engage collection-holding institutions as stakeholders who benefit directly by investing in conservation education.

Finally, this model has important potential applications to other branches of conservation. Islamic manuscript conservation is not the only area which gets little attention in Western education programs but which is the focus of work done by conservators in the developing world. Ivory conservation, rug conservation, conservation to accompany digitization, and exhibition conservation are just a few other areas that might benefit from the development of a training program along the lines proposed by this model.

CONCLUSION

Parts of the modules in this curriculum model have been implemented in manuscript-holding institutions in Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Feedback from the students has been enthusiastic and they are immediately able to demonstrate an understanding of the concepts and techniques they are learning.

The proposed model curriculum for educating conservators of Islamic manuscripts is rigorous and comprehensive. At the same time it is realistic in its goals and design. It has to be cost-effective, since both the time and money available to support education is limited. Still, it directly addresses the challenge that the potential conservators who need training are often not in locations where it is available. This curriculum model advocates bringing focused education to the people who would most use it.

Islamic manuscripts and manuscript collections vary greatly, as do the conservators that work with them. Consequently, the model is flexible and adaptable so that it can be tailored to meet different needs. Students have expectations to meet and assessment tools are specified by which their progress can be measured. They engage in a wide variety of activities and undertake different kinds of projects in different settings, so that they become familiar with the many roles of a conservator. They get both theoretical and practical knowledge and apply it to real treatment and preservation situations.

The preservation of cultural heritage depends increasingly on using available resources wisely. The conservators in developing countries who deal directly with irreplaceable collections and objects are a human resource who deserve support and encouragement. This curriculum design more effectively helps them get what they need and empowers them to be more effective in their work.

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