

Scheherazade - Early Islamic civilisation

This planning unit is aimed at upper Key Stage 2. It can be used to teach the non-European society study: early Islamic civilization c. AD 900, from the new history curriculum, as well as create opportunities for cross-curricular links to other subjects.

It uses the story of Scheherazade, and the tales of One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, to create a context where the students work as researchers and writers helping Scheherazade to find new stories to tell the king and keep her alive.

The original story of Scheherazade is not entirely appropriate for young children, so you may want to edit it for your own class. There are several excellent versions of the story written for children, one of the best is by Geraldine McGaughrean.

You may also want to do a little bit of background research if the subject matter and history of this time period are not be as familiar to you as the other history studies in the new curriculum. I did mine by reading some articles online (found using Google) and looking at the relevant pages on Wikipedia.

The sequence starts by using a short film made using the powerpoint (see website page).

The film tells the story of Scheherazade and gives the students some background information to Baghdad and the historical context. It is accompanied by the symphonic suit, Scheherazade, by the composer Rimsky-Korsakov.

Opening Teaching Sequence – introducing the context

Step 1: Show the film to the class. They may want to watch it more than once. Give them the opportunity to ask questions. Make sure they understand the story of Scheherazade and tell them about the music.

Step 2: “It must have been awful for Scheherazade, every night having to find a new story to tell the king. I suppose she had a bank of stories she knew at the beginning. But later on she must have felt desperate.”

Adult-in-role (AIR): As Scheherazade in her bedroom in the palace.

Purpose of the role: 1. To give the children the opportunity to ask her questions; 2. To bring the children into the story; 3. To explain to them what she wants them to do.

Note: If you don't have another adult to represent Scheherazade you can represent the role yourself, but it would not be a role for one of the children.

“Mrs. Brown has agreed to be Scheherazade in the story, just for a few minutes, when you see her it might give you an idea of her state of mind.”

AIR sits on the chair and begins to brush her long hair, as if she were Scheherazade sitting in front of the mirror.

“What do you notice?” [Allow the students to make some observations]

“I'm going to read this, its an extract from the story she is in: ‘Scheherazade sat in her room at the top of the tallest tower in the palace, combing her long dark hair. The image of the woman staring back at her from the mirror was one she now barely

recognised. 500 days and 500 nights she had lived in the palace and every night, when the king visited her, she had to tell him a story that would delight and enthral him enough that the next day he would not kill her.””

Step 3: Give the children the opportunity to ask Scheherazade questions. Give them time to think and talk together if necessary. Don’t allow them to interrogate her; they must be polite and respectful. Model the language for them if necessary.

“Accuse me my lady. We were wondering if you had ever tried to escape?””

The purpose of the AIR is to answer in the best way she can but within the limits of the story. Don’t worry if the AIR doesn’t know the answer. Remember not to say too much, a short answer is usually the best.

“No, I must not leave.””

The AIR needs to convey Scheherazade’s sadness and desperate plight. However, remember in the story the king is not portrayed as a tyrant (whatever we think of him) and she is falling slowly in love with him. Also, remember she can’t be rescued and set free otherwise the king will only start marrying and killing more girls. It was to stop this madness that she volunteered in the first place.

Step 4: After the children have asked questions it is time to bring them into the fiction and to introduce the commission.

“My lady, are you allowed visitors?””

“Yes, I am. So long as the King approves.””

“Could we visit you in the story? Perhaps we might be able to help you.””

“That would be most kind. Thank you. I need help to find more stories, could you help with that?””

“We’ll see.””

Now talk to the children: “She says we will need to get permission from the King. What do you think would persuade him to let us enter?””

Note: You could use this as an opportunity for persuasive writing or you might want to do it as drama. Remember the children are not themselves in the story, but a team (or guild) of researchers and writers.

Step 5: Once you have permission from the King (in the form of a letter) you can enter the palace and visit Scheherazade in her chambers.

Bring back AIR. “Lady, we are here to help. You said you needed help finding more stories to tell the king?””

“Yes, I need you to visit the Great Library in the centre of the city. It is called the House of Wisdom. The library contains every book, ever written, in any language. Please search out new stories from these books, stories that have never been heard before by the King, and bring one to me every day so I can read it to him. My life depends on it.””

Curriculum Tasks and Further Activities

Once the children have agreed to do this then the initial teaching sequence, introducing them to the context, is over. From this point on you have many choices to develop the narrative and create cross-curricular activities for learning. The following list represents only a small sample:

- Creating the House of Wisdom
 - Designing the doors and windows of the building. Students look at examples of Islamic art from the period and create their own patterns and designs.
 - This can include different designs for different knowledge domains in the library: mathematics, astronomy, medicine, alchemy and chemistry, zoology and geography and cartography.
 - Designing the gardens around the library. Gardens, especially water gardens were very popular during this period of history. Look at images of Granada and read accounts of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.
- Read stories from the 1001 Arabian Nights
 - Students read these stories and then choose extracts to read (in role as Scheherazade sitting in her chair) at the end of each school day.
 - Students could write retellings of some of the stories.
- Create new stories found in the library but not in the 1001 Nights book
 - Once the students have become familiar with the format of the 1001 stories they can start writing their own.
 - These might be illustrated and written in an authentic looking book made by the class. There are instructions on how to do this on the internet
- Study the history of Baghdad as a backdrop to this work: the design of the city (the most populous in the world at the time), surrounded by giant walls; the role of religion (a good opportunity to bring in RE, Islamic studies); the role of trade (Baghdad was a major trading city between Europe and the East); fashion, design, and art (all extraordinarily vibrant); and the development of mathematics and science (many discoveries were made at this time. They were especially interested in looking at the stars).