



## TeachableMoment Classroom Lessons

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# RESPONDING TO THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN

Submitted by [Marieke van Woerkom](#) [1] on Wed, 05/11/2011 - 13:39

**Area:** Current Issues

**Grade Level:** High School

**Topic:** Handling Difficult Issues

**Description:**

In this high school level lesson, students share their reactions to bin Laden's death, read and discuss background information, and then consider a range of responses to the killing. Includes guidelines for discussing this sensitive issue.

By [Marieke van Woerkom](#)

### To the Teacher

The killing of Osama bin Laden has probably triggered strong feelings in teachers and students alike. The challenge for teachers in dealing with emotionally charged events like this is to establish a climate of safety so that students can share their thoughts, feelings, confusions and questions without feeling judged. This is not easy when we as teachers have strong feelings ourselves. In such situations, we need to take special care to be aware of our feelings, views and possible biases on the issue and to make a conscious decision about whether to share these with our students or not. How we share our feelings and views can affect whether our students feel they can freely express themselves without feeling judged by us, the teacher.

Some educators argue that the best way to foster inquiry and critical thinking in students is to keep our views as educators to ourselves and that our role is to play devil's advocate instead - pushing students to clarify and deepen their thinking, whatever that thinking may be. No matter where we come down on this issue, it is important to be aware of the power of our example in the classroom and to put the priority on creating a climate where students feel comfortable and safe sharing their thoughts and feelings freely. (See [Teaching on Controversial Issues](#) [2] for further suggestions on these questions.)

For teachers in NYC, Boston and Washington DC especially, consider that you might have students in your class who have lost people in their family or community in the attacks of 9/11 and the continued fallout since then. Some may have family members who were first responders after the 9/11 attacks. Many of these people, including firefighters, police and medics, are now suffering from potentially deadly respiratory diseases; some have died." Of course students

all around the country may have been strongly affected by Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network in other ways: They may have family in the military or relatives in other parts of the world that have been targeted by al Qaeda or were affected by the US military intervention in response to the 9/11 attacks. Or, if they are Muslim or Arab, they may have experienced discrimination in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

As you open up a conversation about the death of Osama bin Laden and the reactions to it in the days that followed, establish supportive group norms that include speaking for oneself, listening to each other with the goal of understanding, confidentiality, and no put downs, accusations or attacks.

Emphasize the importance of listening. You might remind the class that though some people may assume that listening is passive, it is in fact, quite active. It involves effort, especially when listening to things that are hard to hear, issues that are complex and potentially controversial and/or opinions that are conflict with what we believe to be true. For purposes of this lesson ask your students to "listen for understanding" which includes:

- paying close attention to what others in the class are sharing;
- asking questions to learn more about other people's points of view;
- paraphrasing to make sure we understand what is being shared; and
- being patient with each other.

Asking your students questions gives them a chance to share their thoughts and feelings as they grapple with what they've heard in the news about the killing of bin Laden and people's reactions to it. As the teacher, listen and paraphrase. Acknowledge students' feelings and thoughts. It is important, especially with a charged topic such as this, for students to know they are being heard without judgment. Listening, paraphrasing, and acknowledging what students share allows them to process their feelings and thoughts. Eventually, they can then move beyond some of their initial pain, confusion and concern and begin to explore the issue and generate questions that might deepen their understanding of events.

## **Definitions**

Note that this lesson refers to Osama bin Laden and those in his al Qaeda network as Islamist, not Islamic or Muslim. Islamism, also known as political Islam, refers to an ideology that considers Islam not as a religion but as a political system that expects all Muslims to turn to a militant form of their religion and to unite politically. Muslims who do not espouse this view are considered to be infidels by Islamists as much as non-Muslims are.

Some people are quick to generalize and incorrectly consider Osama bin Laden as representative of all Muslims, rather than of a tiny minority of extremists who use Islam to promote their views - much as a handful of extremists use other religions like Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism to propagate their political agenda, at times even using violence to attain their goals. It's important to foster better understanding of these distinctions - and to be especially sensitive to this issue if there are Muslim students in your classroom.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the lesson are to:

- Give students a safe and supportive place to share their feelings;
- Provide students with information about bin Laden and al Qaeda, so that their views have some basis in fact.
- Encourage students to think more deeply and critically about various responses to the killing of Osama bin Laden.

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## **GATHERING**

(10 minutes)

A "web" is a good way to gauge what students know and what they are feeling about a particular subject.

Write the words "killing of Osama bin Laden" on the middle of the board or a piece of chart paper. Ask the students to share any words or ideas that come to mind when they hear these words. There are no wrong responses. Continue for a few minutes while interest remains high. When you have a good number of responses, draw lines out from the central phrase to the words students have provided, creating a web.

Ask students questions about the web, such as:

- What do you notice about the words in the web?
- Are there any words or ideas you don't understand?
- Do any of the words or phrases evoke feelings for you? What feelings?
- What questions, if any, does the web raise for you?

Review with the class the lesson's agenda and objectives.

Then ask students to read the following.

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## **STUDENT READING 1:**

# **A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSAMA BIN LADEN**

(20 minutes)

Born into a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden was raised in relative comfort, the son of a Yemeni businessman who owned a construction company with close ties to the Saudi royal family.

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan galvanized Osama bin Laden to support the Afghan resistance. He moved to Afghanistan and started recruiting fighters from around the world to join the fight alongside local Afghan troops. Both the US and Saudi Arabia, at this time, wanted very much to contain Soviet influence in the region and did so by funneling money into Afghanistan to support the local Afghan troops and bin Laden's recently arrived international fighters. Whatever the reason for the Americans and Saudis, let alone those of the Afghans themselves, for bin Laden and his recruits the fight was about ridding Afghanistan, a predominantly Muslim country, of the Soviet infidels, or non-believers.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1986, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia where he forged alliances with radical Islamist groups in countries including Egypt, Algeria and Yemen. He founded an organization to help veterans of the Afghan war, which became the base of a loose international network of seasoned fighters ready to take on Islamist causes in places including Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Tajikistan and the Philippines.

In the late 1980s, bin Laden founded al Qaeda (which means the base or foundation). Al Qaeda is a loosely organized network of Islamist militants whose principal stated aim is to drive Americans and American influence out of all Muslim nations, especially Saudi Arabia. Al Qaeda also aims to destroy Israel and bring down pro-Western dictatorships around the Middle East. Finally al Qaeda, under bin Laden's leadership, sought to unite all Muslims and establish, by force if necessary, an Islamic nation adhering to a fundamentalist Islamic rule of law.

When Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States and a coalition of allies, including Saudi

When Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States and a coalition of allies, including Saudi Arabia, responded with military force. Bin Laden considered the American use of Saudi bases to stage their entry into Kuwait an intolerable foreign occupation of his country—a violation of Islam's holiest sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina. Although bin Laden initially had set his sights on fighting what he considered "ungodly" Muslim states, he now turned his attention to the West and soon became a symbol for anti-western militancy. His continued criticism of the Saudi monarchy put him at odds with that regime as well. It led to his exile, first in Sudan and ultimately back in Afghanistan.

From his base in Afghanistan he started plotting attacks against the West. In the run up to 9/11 he and al Qaeda were held responsible for a series of deadly attacks on the United States and its allies - the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya; and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen. Bin Laden was behind the September 11, 2001, attacks that brought down the World Trade Center towers, damaged part of the Pentagon, and resulted in a plane crash in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed that day. At first he denied involvement in the attacks, but he later took responsibility for "inspiring" the events of September 11.

For all the death and destruction that Osama bin Laden inspired and the attention he received over the past two decades, it is important to keep in mind that he was the leader of a very small group of radical extremists. For the vast majority of Muslims he was not a hero and no faith leader.

Since 2001, Osama bin Laden had evaded all attempts by the US government and military to capture or kill him—until Sunday, May 1, 2011. That night, President Obama made the following announcement: "Today, at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small team of Americans carried out the operation with extraordinary courage and capability. No Americans were harmed. They took care to avoid civilian casualties. After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body.

"For over two decades, bin Laden has been al Qaeda's leader and symbol, and has continued to plot attacks against our country and our friends and allies. The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al Qaeda. But his death does not mark the end of our effort. There's no doubt that al Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must and we will remain vigilant at home and abroad."

### **Discussion Questions**

Before you begin discussing the reading, take a few minutes to establish guidelines for the discussion that emphasize listening without judgment (as described above in "To the Teacher").

1. What struck you about the reading?
2. Did anything surprise you? If so, what?
3. Did the reading raise any feelings or memories for you? What were they?
4. What questions do you have about the reading? How might they be answered?

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## **REACTIONS TO BIN LADEN'S KILLING**

*(25 minutes)*

In the next activity students will examine a range of views expressed by Americans in media outlets and blogs in the days following President Obama's announcement.

Tell students: People around the world have responded to the death of Osama bin Laden in vastly different ways. Here in the US too, people's responses have been varied. The handout contains excerpts from online media sources that provide a range of different responses and reactions to Osama bin Laden's death.

Give students about 10 minutes to read the excerpts.

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## **STUDENT READING 2:**

# **AMERICAN RESPONSES TO THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN**

### **Victims' families relieved at bin Laden death**

**By Vicky Buffery and Teresa Larraz for Reuters**

"For me, this man symbolized evil, and all the misery that I've been through for ten years. To know this symbol is gone is a great relief for me," said Bruno Dellinger, a French businessman who survived the collapse of New York's twin towers after al Qaeda hijackers flew planes into them on September 11, 2001.

Dellinger, who was on the 47th floor of the North Tower when the planes struck, told French RTL radio he felt a "burst of joy" at bin Laden's death.

He said he had always believed U.S. secret services would track down the man behind September 11 and a series of other plots. ....

The news, announced by President Barack Obama early on Monday, brought thousands on to the streets of New York and Washington to celebrate, including relatives of people killed in the worst militant attacks in U.S. history.

"I never figured I'd be excited about someone's death. It's been a long time coming," said firefighter Michael Carroll, 27, whose father, also a fireman, died in the September 11 attacks.

"It's finally here. It feels good," he said while celebrating at Ground Zero in New York, the site of the World Trade Center's twin towers destroyed in the attack.

<http://www.interaksyon.com/article/2886/families-of-911-victims-relieved-at-bin-ladens-death> [3]

### **Mother of 9/11 victim reacts to death of bin Laden**

**By Donna Marsh O'Connor, guest columnist for Metro NY**

As the mother of a young woman killed on 9/11, I have to say that neither I, nor would anyone in my family celebrate or revel at the death of another human being, even if that human being is Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden is dead and so, still, is my beautiful daughter. ....

As a family member of a young woman killed in the attacks, I want the response to the death of bin Laden to be one of somber reflection, one that marks how far we have come from the days of that attack and accounts for all we have lost—our civil rights, our trust in our government to act ethically. I want our civil liberties back, our reliance on the Constitution and the rule of law. I want, again, for my children to feel free.

Let's take that energy and reclaim our land as the land of the free, the civilized and the just. There are dire costs to shirking this duty. We've just seen it in our streets."

<http://www.metro.us/newyork/local/article/850030—mother-of-9-11-victim-reacts-to-death-of-bin-laden> [4]

### **No dignity at Ground Zero**

**By Mona Eltahawy, posting on UK's Guardian website**

"I could hear the cheers as I got out of the taxi, two blocks away. ... It was minutes after President Obama's announcement that Osama bin Laden had been killed, and I was heeding a friend's suggestion that we - both Muslims - take candles and stand in vigil where the World Trade Center stood before bin Laden's foot soldiers took it down.

So it was a shock to find hundreds of others had turned that hallowed ground into the scene of a home crowd celebrating an away victory they hadn't attended, the roots of which they were probably not there to experience or were too young to remember. .... Olympic-style chants of "USA! USA!" I could just about take as a freshly minted American, as of Friday. But "F\*\*\* Osama! Ole, ole, ole!" crushed any ambition of dignity for the thousands killed, many of whom had jumped hundreds of stories to their deaths, their bodies shattered to pieces close to where we stood

Good riddance, bin Laden. An unwelcome squatter in the house of my religion who tore down all the walls and was prepared to throw them on a fire to keep himself warm. Al Qaeda killed more Muslims than non-Muslims. Anytime it committed an atrocity anywhere, Muslims over here paid for it. My brother, a cardiologist, was among thousands of Muslims visited by the Federal Bureau of Investigations in November 2001 and forced to submit to special registration fingerprinting, his photo and information for ever in homeland security's files. Hundreds were detained. Hundreds were deported. Profiling."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/03/no-dignity-ground-zero-frat-boy/print> [5]

**Phoenix sisters of 9-11 victim: 'Justice has been done'**  
**by Karina Bland, AZ Central**

For nearly 10 years, the shock, grief and anger that accompanied thoughts of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks was never far from the surface.

But for families and friends who lost loved ones in the attacks, news of Osama bin Laden's death brought a new sensation Sunday evening: relief.

For the family of Gary Bird, a 51-year-old Tempe resident killed in the attack [on the World Trade Center], the news brought a sense of pride Gary's widow, Donna Bird, said in a statement.

Bird, a father of two and longtime community volunteer in Tempe, was in New York for a business meeting on the 99th floor of Tower Two when the second plane hit.

"My family never lost confidence that America would prevail, that this inhumane instrument of evil would be eliminated from this earth, and that we would eventually have the peace of mind to be gained from learning that the murderer of our dear husband and father has been brought to justice," Bird's statement read.

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/ahwatukee/articles/2011/05/02/20110502bin-laden-death-9-11-victim-sisters-brk02-ON.html> [6]

**Osama bin Laden is dead. One Buddhist's response.**  
**By Susan Piver, on her blog**

So, Osama bin Laden is dead. We killed him. There really was no choice. We were clearly in an "us or them" situation and if we didn't kill him, he was going to continue to do everything in his power to kill us.

As Buddhists, we are supposed to abhor all killing, but what do you do when someone is trying to kill you? Obviously great theologians have pondered this question for millennia and I'm not going to try to pile on with my point of view, which would be totally useless.

Instead, I'll pose this question: How do you kill your enemy in a way that puts a stop to violence rather than escalates it?

## Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts and feelings as you read these excerpts?
  2. Did you see similarities between some of the responses? What were they?
  3. Did you see differences? What were they?
  4. Did any thing surprise you about the excerpts you read? What?
  5. Do you have any questions about the reading? If so, how might you find the answers?
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## CLOSING

(5 minutes)

Ask students to share their response to the following question in pairs. Then reconvene and ask volunteers to share their responses with the class.

What is one thing you are taking away from today's reading and discussion?

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*This lesson was written for TeachableMoment by Marieke van Woerkom, a trainer and global facilitator who works as a staff developer for Morningside Center. See her website at: <http://vanwoerkomprojects.com> [8].*

*We welcome your comments. Please email them to Marieke at: [9][marieke@vanwoerkomprojects.com](mailto:marieke@vanwoerkomprojects.com) [10], or to Morningside Center at: [lmcclore@morningsidecenter.org](mailto:lmcclore@morningsidecenter.org) [11].*

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/users/marieke-van-woerkom>

[2] <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/teaching-controversial-issues>

[3] <http://www.interaksyon.com/article/2886/families-of-911-victims-relieved-at-bin-ladens-death>

[4] <http://www.metro.us/newyork/local/article/850030—mother-of-9-11-victim-reacts-to-death-of-bin-laden>

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/03/no-dignity-ground-zero-frat-boy/print>

[6] <http://www.azcentral.com/community/ahwatukee/articles/2011/05/02/20110502bin-laden-death-9-11-victim-sisters-brk02-ON.html>

[7] <http://www.susanpiver.com/wordpress/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-is-dead-one-buddhists-response/#more-2650>

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