The pedagogical approach I advocate to teaching about Islam in popular culture is founded on the principles of research-based learning, which encourages critical thinking in students, who are then prepared to become models and advocates for lifelong education. The philosophy of research-based learning incorporates three different approaches—narrative analysis (oral history, surveys, and interviews), ethnography (systematic and observable study of people and cultures), and fiction (literary, digital, and multi-media popular culture). The integration of these approaches allows students to learn, retain skills, and devise creative solutions to everyday problems.

In this era of “flipped classrooms” and Massive Online Courses (MOOCS) that compete for students’ attention, teachers are increasingly moving towards developing course materials that are digital, interactive, and visually appealing. Where once we could lecture and provide textbooks/readings, we may now integrate gaming and digitally enhanced learning whether via film, online videos (YouTube) or social media. This evolving way of instruction has come with its challenges and opportunities. The challenges include knowing that anyone with the requisite technology and technological know-how can use these new avenues to say—virtually—anything, regardless of whether it enhances or diminishes the educational experience. Juxtaposed is the opportunity to enhance critical thinking and tolerance while also reaching and engaging hundreds or even thousands of people at one time.

Islam-inflected popular culture materials in the forms of literature, films, music, and games can challenge students to revise old assumptions. Learning about Islam-inflected popular culture can encourage students to discuss, voice their opinions, and to write fearlessly. Students can develop critical thinking by exploring the variety of perspectives and the complexities of Islam in America, an act possible only if students understand that no complex issue can be understood thoroughly in a binary framework. Knowing how to research the varieties of Islamic practice and of Muslim societies, which requires, among other things, that students identify authentic resources, is a valuable life skill, for not everything Googled is legitimate.

Students can be helped to learn about Islam in America through the use of electronic and digital tools, but I believe that we also want to encourage real-world engagements whereby students are sitting next to or learning from someone who is Muslim. Bringing in speakers who are Muslim gives students opportunities to discuss questions they have about Islam or Muslims in a context that will allow them to enrich the understanding they have often developed mainly through media. By visiting mosques and Islamic Centers, and by talking to a diverse group of Muslims, students practice listening to and responding to a range of perspectives, skills they will need in many other situations. The understanding that no one person or group represents all Muslims is an especially important learning outcome.

The importance of research-based learning is that it develops students who are better prepared to learn throughout their lives. Research-based learning encourages students to take an active role in their learning, with the result that they develop critical thinking skills. And research-based learning about Muslims and Islam in America connects students’ academic lives with their memberships in many communities--campus, family, faith, city, nation, and the world.