

“Grades 5-8 Teaching Islamic Studies like a core subject: using Co-Operative Learning Strategies, Creative Writing, and Graphic Organizers”

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Abstract: Islamic Studies is a living subject. It is more relevant to our children than ever before. There is so much to be taught in it. But what is the most effective way to get the information across? How can we make Islamic Studies as important as Math, English, and Science? Part of it has to do with the structure of Islamic Studies at school, but a lot of it depends on the teacher and the type of tools he or she is using in class to get the message across. Research has shown that core subject teachers are constantly encouraged to use certain methods and teaching strategies to make the information more accessible to their students. However, these methods and strategies are not necessarily being applied in teaching Islamic Studies. In this session we will discuss those strategies and how they can be applied to teaching Islamic Studies.

Introduction

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught his companions in the best of ways, using the most effective strategies. So effective was his teaching that even after hundreds of years, his message spread to the remotest of lands and people and still continues to guide many. His teaching method and style changed from one student to another, yet there are many Islamic schools that haven't changed their teaching styles for generations.

In the Quran Allah (swt) says, *“Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah”* (Quran, surah Al-Ahzab 33/21). In following the example of the prophet then, it becomes even more of an obligation on us to constantly review and adapt our teaching strategies. As Professor Şevki Aydın mentions in his article, *Muallim Peygamber (The Prophet as a Teacher)*, “We can see the education principles and methods put forward by modern education scholars in the practices of the Prophet,” some of them included modern teaching strategies such as, “organize the content” for an age appropriate audience, “make learners participate actively by thinking, searching, and asking questions”, “create activities to reinforce what is learnt”, “make them (the students) like what was being taught and to avoid their hating it or getting bored”, and many other successful methods (Aydın, 1996). Unfortunately, Islamic Studies text books are rarely equipped with fun activities, diverse strategies, or even have age-appropriate standardized material. The mundane lectures, notes, and overwhelming lessons can easily bore the students and the teacher, making the subject less interesting or even irrelevant.

We live in an age of technology and multi-tasking where our children's attention span is only "10 to 12 minutes" ([Vawter, 2009](#)). On top of that we have the rise in Islamophobia, which makes Islamic Studies demand of the time. Ideally in Islamic Studies students have to not only learn about Islam, but learn to implement it effectively. Most urgently, use the knowledge to uplift their morale and debunk all the negative stereotypes that media portrays about Islam 24/7 for themselves and those around them. As Islamic Studies educators we have a responsibility to prepare our children using the best and the most effective strategies available to us, so they can be ready for their time. We cannot expect them to learn like we did tens of years ago. As Ali (ra) beautifully mentioned, "Do not force your children to behave like you, for surely they have been created for a time which is different to your time."

Effective Teaching Strategies

There are many good books out there on the various teaching strategies available for teachers. But, how do we know which ones are the best strategies and the ones that will prepare our students for tomorrow. Many educators, scholars, and leaders have been throwing the term "21st century skill set" around. The idea of 21st century skill set for teachers and students is not clearly defined or coded by any authority. Nevertheless, many individuals and organizations have tried to define the idea according to their own needs. Therefore the definition can shift from one place to another, but on the overall, "(the) concept is motivated by the belief that teaching students the most relevant, useful, in-demand, and universally applicable skills should be prioritized in today's schools, and by the related belief that many schools may not sufficiently prioritize such skills or effectively teach them to students. The basic idea is that students, who will come of age in the 21st century, need to be taught different skills than those learned by students in the 20th century, and that the skills they learn should reflect the specific demands that will be placed upon them in a complex, competitive, knowledge-based, information-age, technology-driven economy and society" (Great Schools Partnership 2015).

According to *Educational Technology and Mobile Learning* three 21st century skills that every classroom should generally have are: inquiry, problem, and project based learning. This is because it is no longer enough for our students to just know, it is more important for them to know how to apply their knowledge. The 21st century skill set for Muslim students coming out of an Islamic Studies classroom would also include a list of skills and tools that will help instill pride, confidence, and faith in their identity. Skills such as: global awareness, self-direction, public speaking and presenting would only be some of the many. ([Great Schools Partnership, 2015](#)) There are many effective teaching strategies to help students attain the above-mentioned skills, and yet how many do we see being implemented habitually in Islamic Studies or even Islamic Schools?

In the recent decade the conversations about teaching and learning are recognizing the fact that effective instruction engages students intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Many prominent journals and magazines often post articles on the need for students to move in the classroom, to be active participants, and discuss more openly in classroom. The shift in education is going away from the traditional style of teaching and learning. Despite the research, too many of our classrooms, especially Islamic Studies remain reserved, stagnant, lacking any element of creativity, excitement and/or physical engagement.

Despite the success of these strategies in other areas, somehow many Islamic Studies teachers feel immune to them. There could be many reasons for this; the educator/administration may feel that Islamic Studies is not like the core subjects or that Islamic Studies cannot be taught using the methods and strategies used in core subjects. In addition to that, it could be that the Islamic Studies curriculum itself lacks any sort of structure/standards, the mundane textbooks often have nothing in them except text and review questions, teachers could lack the support from the administration to experiment and try new and different strategies, etc... Whatever the reason, the boring classrooms not only do injustice to the subject, but also the students who might even get an A in the subject, but outside the classroom still prefer to call themselves “Mo” instead of “Mohammad”.

Due to the above mentioned reasons, although there are some Islamic Studies programs that are taking the initiative to change, for the majority schools Islamic Studies continues to lag behind the core subjects. Many Islamic Studies classrooms look very typical of a traditional classroom where the teacher is the only one teaching and students are expected to take notes, memorize, and reproduce everything they have learned when they are assessed. This style works great for some students, but for many it drives them to boredom leading them to disengage from the subject and the teacher. These students are then labelled as the attention mongering “trouble-makers”. But truth be told even adults would get bored in these traditional settings. Students need to move, they need to feel excited, they need to have discussions, and be intellectually engaged with Islam, only then Islamic Studies will truly be a life-changing experience for them, until then it will be nothing more than another 45-minute period in their schedule, which is “not that important anyway.”

Another issue that I would like to briefly like to touch on is the “stale” mindset surrounding the subject of Islamic Studies. Islamic Studies is the subject that makes the school “Islamic”, yet it is usually the subject with the least resources- from the physical conditions of the classroom to a well-qualified teacher. The teachers teaching Islamic Studies, the administration, parents, and the students themselves usually do not seem to be as proud of the Islamic Studies subject, as they would be of another core-subject. These double standards could be witnessed in the value of grades in Islamic Studies versus other core subjects, the lack of teacher’s confidence and

pride while teaching the subject; and the parents' lack of enthusiasm in prioritizing the subject's HW/projects over that of other core-subjects. There is an air of "staleness" around Islamic Studies, as if it's a subject that we just need to touch and run. Why is that?

In fact, given the politically charged circumstances that our children are growing up in, this will be the subject that they will carry with them every day of their life. Unarguably, the core subjects provide the students the tools and skillset to compete and succeed in this day and age, but it's Islamic Studies that will give them the confidence in themselves, about who they really are inside as a person; their beliefs, their values, their morals, their faith. If the subject is given the attention it requires from everyone starting with the administration, this could be the most transformative subject that a student ever comes across and it rightly should be the case. We owe it to our students. Not only should they learn about Islam in their Islamic Studies class, but they should learn about it in the best way possible with the most advanced technology and research-based strategies.

Implementation

Co-operative Learning Strategies and Graphic Organizers

In his book, *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Dr. R. J. Marzano talked about nine instructional strategies that are the most effective teaching tools in any classroom. Cooperative learning and graphic organizers were two of the nine he mentioned. Many scholars have written about the different learning styles that individuals have. We have visual, linguistic, kinesthetic, social, aural, and verbal learners. Cooperative learning addresses almost all of the above mentioned learners.

Co-operative Learning is also called small-group instruction. According to David Johnson and Roger Johnson (1999), there are five basic elements that allow successful small-group learning:

- **Positive interdependence:** Students feel responsible for their own and the group's effort.
- **Face-to-face interaction:** Students encourage and support one another; the environment encourages discussion and eye contact.
- **Individual and group accountability:** Each student is responsible for doing their part; the group is accountable for meeting its goal.
- **Group behaviors:** Group members gain direct instruction in the interpersonal, social, and collaborative skills needed to work with others occurs.

- **Group processing:** Group members analyze their own and the group's ability to work together.

The authors of *Classroom Instruction that Works* cite research showing that organizing students in cooperative learning groups can lead to a gain as high as 28 percentiles in measured student achievement (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001). Other researchers report that cooperation typically results in higher group and individual achievement, healthier relationships with peers, more metacognition, and greater psychological health and self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson 1989).

An Islamic Studies classroom should be the ideal space for the students to exchange ideas, work together, and develop bonds that will last a life time. Students need to interact with the material, instructors, as well as each other. Although educators are aware of the cooperating strategies, many are not certain of how to incorporate the strategies into the Islamic Studies curriculum. I learned about cooperative learning strategies about two years. I am still new to the idea, but every strategy I have used has been incredibly effective and helpful in making the material more fun and lively for the students. And as an educator, I realized for the first time that I could have fun with the material as well.

My favorite cooperative learning strategy is the *Jigsaw Groups* (Johnson and Johnson 1989). This is a great way to break down the material, challenge the minds intellectually by incorporating HOT questions, and get the students to move around. According to *the Washington Post*, “movement is a powerful teaching tool, and when we as teachers thoughtfully incorporate physical elements into instruction, we elevate the learning experience.” (Strauss 2015) Students get an opportunity to read in groups, discuss, and use their bodies to teach and present the material to other students. According to a research conducted by Penn State Professor, children learn better when they figure things out for themselves and present to others. (McDade 2013). As a teacher, I only facilitate the activity and experience the learning as it unfolds at many different levels. It is a great way for me to take a step back and focus on the students who are really having trouble with the material, while simultaneously keeping my advanced students engaged.

As an Islamic Studies teacher for the past 5 years, I have had to do much lesson planning and curriculum modification to incorporate the cooperative learning strategies into my lesson plans. I am grateful to be a part of an administration team who want to see Islamic Studies just as intellectually challenging and engaging as any other core subject. It's a challenging task but at the same time, it is a very rewarding experience to be able to take the material and have the freedom to modify it to fit mine and student needs. When I started researching cooperative learning strategies, I was overwhelmed with the amount of information. However, the key is to pick a couple strategies and stick with them. (Johnson and Johnson 1989)

Based on my experience, it is best to pick a strategy that makes sense to you as an educator and you can have fun with. Once you are comfortable with it, students also enjoy it and fall in love with it as soon as you make it a routine. As I plan my lessons now, it is quite customary for me to

take the information packed long lessons and break them down using the Jigsaw strategy. This strategy can be applied to any lesson. The teacher has to break down the lesson, create handouts to go along with each sub-section, assign each section to a group and let the student take-over from there. Students have to then discuss the section, answer questions, and come up with ways to present the material.

Any educator, who would like to find out more about the strategy and its success, simply has to look it up. There are many online resources and student feedback pointing to the effectiveness of this strategy. From personal experience, I have observed student participation and interest go up at least 40-50% more compared to when I taught the same lesson in a traditional “copy down my notes” method. Higher participation has led to better test scores and willingness to learn. I have seen students who are kinesthetic, visual, and oral learners improve their scores every time I have implemented this strategy into a lesson.

Moving on to creating graphic organizers; Islamic Studies textbooks often lack maps, tables, graphs, and any other form of visual cues. Gardner’s *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* posits that students are better able to learn and internalize information when more than one learning modality is employed in an instructional strategy. Since graphic organizers present material through the visual and spatial modalities (and reinforce what is taught in the classroom), the use of graphic organizers helps students internalize what they are learning. (McKnight 2010)

It is imperative that an Islamic Studies teacher knows how to create graphic organizers and use them routinely to teach new concepts and review old ones. It is an effective way to break down concepts and help students remember important events and concepts. One can also get creative with graphic organizers and use them for multiple purposes. For example, I often have a graphic organizer to go along with any text that the student reads. I also use them for notes, as assessment tools, for group work, study-guides, and assignments.

Creative Writing

“I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living.” -Dr. Seuss

Educators and parents emphasize and know the importance of good writing, but a very few focus on the creative writing aspect of it. And, even fewer focus on the importance of creative writing in Islamic Studies. Islamic Studies is a great area for creative writing. The Quran is filled with amazing stories and each one of them can have its own creative writing piece attached to it. According to a recent study, “creative writing” combines handwriting and cognitive writing processes, which are predominantly associated with memory, integrating information from diverse sources, and spontaneous writing composition. The results emphasize that literary

composition is based on very complex brain mechanisms and not restricted to a single brain area. (NeuroNet Learning 2013)

So, how can creative writing be a part of Islamic Studies? There are many ways to do it and it is up to the educator to find the one that works best for him or her. Creative writing can be a tool that can bring a dead story alive. To many students, the stories of the prophets, the important historic events are tales of the past. But, as practicing Muslim adults, we know that the truth is far from that.

Students enjoy the creative writing process. They can take a story or an event and have fun with it by adding dialogues to historic events, creating a scene, turning the story into a play, or simply keeping a journal. They take a story that is in the books and make it personal and memorable when they interact with through a creative writing process. (Ciotti) Many of my students love to read books, write stories, and are creatively intelligent. Once again, I have observed a student who is often bored light up when I attach a creative writing piece to and say the words, “now imagine...” as you can imagine the possibilities are limitless.

As an Islamic Studies teacher, my goal is always to make Islamic Studies more than just a subject that has HW and CW. I want them to learn from it, be challenged, and more importantly internalize it. I want my students to see Islamic Studies as a way of life and have fun with it. I want Islamic Studies to be the air that my students breathe. After all that was the case with the best of Muslims, who carried Islam with them everywhere they went.

Conclusion

It's interesting times for Muslims in this country. Our children are uniquely positioned to be the representatives of Islam in America. As educators, we need to enable them to be proud Muslims who are productive members of the society. They need to be prepared for the world that they will face. Through his teaching methods the prophet (pbuh) had instilled so much love for Islam in his students, that no matter who they faced, they were able to impress their competitors with the best of Islam. They were able to do so because they were the best and proud to be Muslims. In order for our children to be proud and balanced Muslims, our schools need to work outside and inside the classrooms. Firstly, psychologically we need to change our mindset towards Islamic Studies. And secondly, inside the classrooms, we need to use the most effective strategies to provide a balanced Islamic education.

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Presenter Bio

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