The Facilitator as Murabi
Exploring the Teacher-Student Relationship in Light of a Holistic Learner Experience Framework in an Islamic University in Egypt

Sarah Mitkees and Dina El Odessy

This paper explores the transformative potential of FIRST (Focusing, Interacting, Reviewing, Sequencing, and Transforming), a new learner's experience framework that promotes active and deep learning within a higher education setting. Based on the reflective experience of a university professor teaching a course on Maxims of Islamic Jurisprudence to 4th-year male students, as well as the experience of his students, this study addresses the following question: How is the FIRST framework transforming the learning experience in a traditional university setting taking into account the teacher-student relationship? The research adopts a case study methodology employing interviews, surveys, and observations of videos of the course lectures. Findings suggest that the FIRST framework can instigate a paradigm shift in how the teacher conceptualizes their role re-envisioning the student's image. Through implementable practices involving adopting the FIRST framework in teacher professional development programs, FIRST aims to gradually transform the classroom into a learner-centered one, potentially empowering teachers to humanize their pedagogies and thereby strengthen

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Mitkees, S., & El Odessy, D. E. (2025). The Facilitator as Murabi. *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies, 7*(1), 51–75.
DOI 10.2979/jems.00041

the teacher–student relationship as well as their connection with students, to reclaim and revive the forgotten role of the murabi in Islamic heritage. This novel study also adds to a pertinent area of research that needs further development: strategies promoting teacher–student relationships. Despite the focus being on higher education in Egypt, the study's findings can be generalized to other educational settings and international contexts.

Keywords: Islamic education, teacher professional development, teacher-student relationship, active deep learning, humanizing pedagogy, student-centered learning.

INTRODUCTION

Examining the holistic meaning that education entails in Islam sheds light on how Islam regards the learner as a whole human being. The holistic view of the learner stems from an Islamic viewpoint that regards education as one that involves the human being from a holistic perspective, *rationally*, *spiritually* and *socially*, and is based on the notion of *tawhid* (oneness) in Islam (Cook, 1999). This holistic view of the human being is also represented by the FIRST framework (Bahgat et al., 2020; Bahgat et al., 2018) that attends to the learner as a whole human, attending not only to the mind and intellectual needs of the students but also looking at the learner's emotional state as one that impedes learning (Bahgat et al., 2018).

FIRST FRAMEWORK

Grounded in a holistic view of the learner as a whole human being, mentally, emotionally, and physically, the FIRST framework (Figure 1) is based on five core domains (Bahgat et al., 2018). It involves "*focusing*" on each learner's needs while trusting the learner and what they bring to the learning experience; "*interacting*" within positive group dynamics ensuring a positive safe environment within the group learning process; "*reviewing*" the learning activities, where real learning happens through reflection after activities in active deep experiential learning; "*sequencing*" the learning activities to engage and motivate the learner; and finally "*transforming*" learning into action through performance (Bahgat et al., 2018). This study explores the dynamics and teacher-student interactions within the classroom as a result of applying key domains of the FIRST framework.

Informed by numerous education theories, the key theories that inform the FIRST framework are Kolb (1984) and Dewey's experiential learning (Bahgat et al., 2018), where the learner's experience becomes the core of the whole learning process, placing the learner at the center of his/her learning facilitated by the teacher.

The FIRST framework can empower and support the teacher by implementing its domains, to mobilize a holistic and humanized student-centered learning experience. The study shall elucidate moments featuring the teacher as a facilitator of learning, where the student is the key player within different learning activities, ensuring this is within a positive learning environment that attends to the special relationship between the teacher and students.

FIRST PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The professor in this study attended a learning journey conducted using the FIRST framework before applying it within his teaching context. During this learning journey, he experienced what it is like to be a learner participating in a program designed and facilitated on the premises of FIRST.

Figure 1. FIRST Framework (Bahgat, 2018)

Among a group of nearly 20 educators, he attended a four-day face-to-face program focused on living the experience of FIRST as a learner before seeking to apply it within his teaching context as a university professor. This was followed by four weeks of practice and online reflective activities, empowering the educators to gain hands-on experience in applying FIRST through video recording their teaching and receiving constructive feedback. This occurred within smaller groups of 4 or 5 educators, each guided by a mentor for feedback and deeper learning. Three months after this program, the professor applied FIRST to teach his 4th-year university students.

THE STUDY

The study witnessed transitional moments of a de-tyrannizing pedagogy, with the teacher relinquishing his authoritarian instructor role through an interplay of heart and mind. Throughout an experience that involved planting the seeds of a teacher-student relationship that could blossom to reclaim the role of the murabi in the Islamic heritage in light of a "humanizing pedagogy" (Freire, 1970, p. 55), this study has found FIRST to promote change through a framework that can instigate a paradigm shift in how the teacher reconceptualized their role while re-envisioning the image of the student. Moreover, in the most traditional learning environments, the smallest dynamic and heart-based changes, acknowledging learners' emotional human needs, can create ripples of change, for when reshaping the relationships between the facilitator and students into one based on positivity, respect and reciprocal dialogue, positive change can be experienced. Finally, FIRST presents an implementable framework that places the learner at the center of the learning experience and thus can be incorporated by educators who believe in empowering theoretical frameworks such as critical pedagogy but often grapple with how theory can be translated into practice.

THE HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE LEARNER: LEARNER AS HUMAN BEING

The Purpose of Education in Islam

When looking at the purpose of education in Islam in the first place, particularly from a holistic and spiritual perspective, there are three words that refer to education, the most well-known is the word *ta'lim*, "stemming from the root '*alima* (to know, to be aware, to perceive, to learn) relating

to knowledge being sought or imparted through instruction and teaching and referring mostly to formal education" (Cook, 1999, p. 345). "*Tarbiya*, coming from the root *raba* (to increase, grow, to rear) implies a state of spiritual and ethical nurturing in accordance with the will of the Lord, al-Rabb" (p. 345). Finally, "*Taadib* comes from the root *aduba* (to be cultured, refined, well-mannered) and suggests the social dimensions of a person's development of sound social behavior" (p. 345). Elucidating the implications of these notions and their educational and spiritual connotations requires understanding how human beings are viewed in Islam. Naquib Al-Attas (1979, p.157), a prominent scholar in Islamic education, describes the human being, men and women, despite using the generic term "man", saying,

> Man, according to Islam, is composed of soul and body . . . he is at once spirit and matter . . . man possesses spiritual and rational organs of cognition such as the heart (*qalb*) and the intellect ("*aql*") and faculties relating to physical, intellectual and spiritual vision, experience and consciousness. . . . His most important gift is knowledge which pertains to spiritual as well as intelligible and tangible realities (cited in Cook, 1999, p. 345).

Thus, from an Islamic viewpoint, education involves viewing the human being from a holistic perspective, *rationally*, *spiritually* and *socially*, where education is "inseparable from the spiritual life", and where its aim is the nurturing of the human character attending to the heart "(*qalb*) (the seat of the spirit and affection, conscience, feelings, intuition)" as it attends to the rational needs (Cook, 1999, p. 345). This is consistent with what the premises of the FIRST framework call for.

The Human Being within the FIRST Framework

Looking at the five domains that the FIRST framework encompasses illustrates how it can foster what an Islam-based education calls for, nurturing the whole human being. While applying the framework entails integrating its five domains altogether, pinpointing what each domain emphasizes sheds light on its focus on the learner's needs as a human being in the first place. FIRST's *focusing* domain involves building a special relationship 'focusing' on the needs of each learner (Bahgat et al., 2018). This involves building a special communication channel with the learners, attending to their human needs, and trusting how their experiences can enrich the learning journey while ensuring their understanding throughout the teaching process. FIRST's *interacting* domain ensures learning occurs within a

positive, respectful, and safe learning environment, acknowledging the emotional needs of the learners while promoting a learning experience that attends to positive group dynamics, considering learners' motivation to learn. The *reviewing* domain focuses on the learners' engagement before, during and after learning activities, checking their readiness beforehand, fruitful facilitation of the activity, and the learners' reflection on what they learnt afterwards. The *sequencing* domain considers arranging and structuring the learning content for further clarity, while repeating different learnt concepts in various ways, as well as summarizing and linking different parts of the content together for further comprehension. Finally, the *transforming* domain entails linking what is learnt to real life, encouraging learners to reflect on what they learn within their different life contexts, and thinking of ways to practice and move forward with the learning.

The five domains work in harmony to mobilize a learner experience that attends to the learners' emotional, mental, and psychological needs. Each of the five domains is further detailed into several principles to guide educators and teachers in their application of the framework. The FIRST framework can thus be used as a practical guideline empowering educators to promote a learner experience that attends to the learner as a whole human being, in line with the viewpoint that an Islam-based education holds. This sets the foundation promoting the role of the educator as a murabi, nurturing students as whole human beings.

The Role of the Educator and Murabi in Islam

Looking at the role of the educator from an Islamic perspective sheds light on the important role a teacher plays in students' lives. Al-Ghazali (d.505/1111), the prominent twelfth-century Islamic scholar, describes the teacher as one who would "advise students generously, look at the desires and interests of the learner, and be patient, kind, friendly, and gentle" (cited in Rufai, 2012). Moreover, al-Ghazali describes the relationship between the teacher and students as a "parent-child relationship" emphasizing the support and development of the learners (cited in Sabani et al., 2016). Moreover, Sayed Hossein Nasr, an Islamic philosopher and professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, also highlights the teacher's key role, underscoring how being a murabi encompasses "a sense of compassion and generosity". This is portrayed in teaching students about "things that matter in life" (Nasr, 2012). Nasr adds that educational systems must begin with "the training of the teacher as both *mu'allim* and *murrabbi*" (p. 24). Indeed, this pinpoints the pivotal role a humanizing

pedagogy plays in humanizing the teacher-student relationship, where the teacher becomes one who cares about the lives of their students as whole human beings. Throughout this study, the role of the educator as a murabi will be explored within the professor's teaching context when applying the FIRST framework, along with other changes it was perceived to instigate.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved a purposeful selection of a 4th-year university course on Maxims of Jurisprudence in an Islamic University in Egypt, where the professor undertook the FIRST framework training and attempted to implement it. The case study methodology was adopted to provide a "holistic" and "context-sensitive" account of the professor's application of the FIRST framework within his university setting (Patton, 2014). The main research question is:

> *How is the FIRST framework transforming the learner experience in a traditional university setting considering the teacher–student relationship?*

To address this question, the research employed semi-structured interviews, surveys, and observation of pre-recorded videos of the lectures. Researchers have integrated multiple data sources for this case study (Patton, 2014), seeking results that consider the experiences of both the professor and his students while considering the researchers' observations of the lectures. Convenience sampling was opted to recruit students who showed interest in participating by responding to surveys about their learning experience in this course. A number of findings were generated through thematic coding and analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For ethical considerations, the names of the university, the professor, and the students were all anonymized to guarantee the confidentiality and safety of the participants.

DATA COLLECTION

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the university professor as a source of "rich and highly illuminating material" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 286), to allow for detailed explanation, examples, as well as a description of his experience applying the FIRST framework, and to be able to "extend" our "intellectual and emotional reach" as researchers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 2). Asking open-ended questions allowed for the professor's reflections on his experience, enabling him to share extensive thoughts on his journey of transformation after learning

FIRST and attempting to implement its domains in his university setting. He mentioned his change of perceptions and views on teaching and learning, his role as an educator, challenges in implementation, aspirations, and moments of hope. He contrasted what he had newly learnt with what he was used to in teaching beforehand, as shall be shared in the results section.

This interview was followed by the researchers' observation of prerecorded videos of the professor's lectures and having 21 students take a survey exploring their learning experience within this course. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions to capture students' personal reflections on their learning experiences. Students were asked to reflect on their emotional state during the classes, write about the main traits they would like to embody if they had a teaching role, describe how they found the classes, and the advantages of the way it was taught, as well as the positive and negative traits of the professor. Students were then asked to select, among several choices, the most important practice they thought any professor should implement, as shall be elaborated further. This included choosing between 'affection and love', 'respect and appreciation', 'continuous follow-up', 'individual communication', as well as 'strictness and discipline', to gain insight into their experience as learners when witnessing the humanized pedagogy that the FIRST framework could potentially induce when implemented. Students were assured that they would remain anonymous when invited to take the survey. Their participation was voluntary, and out of the 250 students who studied the course, 21 responded to the online survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

Guided by the premises of the FIRST framework, the resulting data was thematically analyzed and coded to allow for flexibility with the capacity "to provide rich and detailed" accounts of data (Braun, 2006, p. 78), given the study's focus on the personal experiences of teaching and learning, while considering the teacher-student relationship. While the five domains of the FIRST framework work in integration to produce a holistic learner experience attending to the emotional, psychological, and cognitive needs of the learners, the focus in this study was on analyzing resulting data relevant to only three, the *focusing*, *interacting*, and *reviewing* domains, given the scope of the study, which guided the thematic analysis of the data.

Each of these three domains entails three principles working together towards the implementation of each domain (Bahgat et al., 2018), which in turn guided the coding of the data. Thus, three of the main themes were *focusing*, *interacting*, and *reviewing*, with underlying codes of *individualization, trust the learner, probing and assessing,* representing the three principles of the *focusing* domain; *positive spirit, motivation and attention, social event* representing the three principles of the *interacting* domain; and finally *readiness increase, activity facilitation, reviewing actively* representing the principles of the *reviewing* domain. In addition, the *teacher-student relationship* represented the fourth theme in the analysis, which further included codes such as *love, respect, emotions, advice*, and the *teacher as a father.*

Observations of the pre-recorded videos of the lectures and the professor's description of his experience with what took place in the classroom were coded according to the FIRST framework's domains and principles, including instances of nurturing the teacher-student relationship. In addition, the words used by students to describe their relationship with their professor further elaborated the teacher-student relationship theme. The themes and their underlying codes shall be illustrated in the following section, situating them within the broader context of the findings to share the whole story found during this study.

RESULTS

Research Setting: The Transformative Journey

Seated together one row after another in the Maxims of Jurisprudence lecture, the 4th year university students silently kept their solemn gaze on their professor, Dr Ahmed (pseudonym), as he addressed them, watching in still silence that either bespoke of disinterested detachment or ultimate levels of respect that bordered on fear. The student environment immediately recalled the traditional factory model of education, characterized by an authoritarian power dynamic where a supposedly all-knowing instructor imparts knowledge to students conceived as passive recipients. Such was the introductory scene of the first video we analyzed. However, first impressions do not always last, for we discovered, as we gradually watched and analyzed one video after another, that there was more to the lecture room than first meets the eye.

Indeed, the seating arrangements of students and the students-professor relationship were symptomatic of an authoritarian model of education.

However, the dynamics of the learning processes and human interactions within the room seemed to be gradually developing towards what seemed to be, at times, a crescendo of change and at others, a decrescendo of regression. Rather than discerning a linear development pathway, we observed an undulating dynamic that oscillated back and forth. In the following analyses, we attempt to present how, throughout the duration of the Maxims of Jurisprudence course, the students and the professor embarked together upon a journey of fluctuations, charting its momentum in three synchronized and concurrent phases.

The Throes of Change and Resistance: Relinquishing Power or Yielding to the Ego?

> I did not have mercy upon someone whom I asked and did not answer. There was no opportunity for anyone to talk . . . You will find [my] tyranny apparent in the lectures as I have been teaching that way for the last 20 years . . . It is not a button that I will press to transform, but rather a gradual change. However, the new thing is that I now have a goal for the student to participate and to participate strongly, and I will take into consideration the student's psychological state and develop his ability to interact in the lecture. I also try not to make fun [of the students].

Walking down memory lane, and with the benefit of hindsight, Dr. Ahmed recounted to us his tendency towards *tyrannical* practices with his students before being introduced to the FIRST framework. Being quite transparent about sharing his self-reflections on his journey of change since he joined the professional development program, he candidly and critically shared some very consequential insights as he recounted how "in the very first day of training, [he] found [FIRST framework] admirable, but not applicable to the religious sciences as well as the university setting", further claiming that "the obstacles would make any person believe that it is impossible to apply." This early resistance required time and effort on his part to instigate a change within his perceptions first, and then a subsequent change in his instructional habits and practices.

Indeed, the early part of the course demonstrated how the students seemed to be somehow sceptical of their professor's unusual change in tone, language, and attitude as they were peculiarly silent in response to his dialectic questions. In such a phase, the one-sided monologue continued nearly uninterrupted, except for a few interjections, for the total duration of the lecture. They resisted because they were unaccustomed to this change towards a more progressive pedagogical approach and accustomed

to playing the role of silent attendees. However, interestingly, such an expected resistance was also visible in the professor's discourse. In this initial phase, change was more of verbalized wishful thinking rather than implementable practices, as Dr. Ahmed, in what seemed to be a series of self-reminders, repeatedly avowed to his students that he was arduously trying to change himself. In a candid moment mixed with hope and despair, he told his students:

> I do not want anyone to speak if you please. I am talking. Let me be the one helping him as I will be helping him in a particular way. We, now, all trust one another. In other words, none of us is superior or inferior to another; we are all equal and the same. We want to have this principle entrenched deep in our minds. None of us is academically weak; everyone has excellent capabilities, but there is someone who exerts more effort and another who does not exert enough effort.

When his attempts to engage the students in a way that is aligned with his pedagogical plans failed, and instead of angrily threatening them or resorting to any former habits to which he was accustomed, Dr. Ahmed resorted to a shrewd emotional tactic, humbly engaging his students as partners in his journey. The following transformative anecdote was a climactic moment:

> Please, if you may, I do not want you to chatter or speak. Listen attentively to me. I want to tell you that what I am doing here is opposed by the university, and some believe that this is going to be a chaotic experiment. We have one of two options; either I prove that students deserve to be educated or that I, as a professor, am in an ivory tower and that students are in the lowest of the low, and so, we return to reading from the book, just as we used to. I am trying to prove that this is not true. What do you think? Will you help me or not?

As he calmly uttered these evocative words, many students smiled as an ambience of stillness overtook the room. In this early phase, the two-sided coin of resistance was starkly evident as both students and their professor struggled to reorient themselves towards a more progressive teaching and learning paradigm. Dr Ahmed's resistance may have manifested itself through the rampant and intermittent regression to a loud, irritable tone of voice or the use of dictatorial commands and satirical language. On the other hand, the students' passive resistance emerged in the shape of continued apathy or disinterested quietude.

As Dr. Ahmed continued to fight his power-charged teacher ego, he mobilized the students' agency by continuing to be impressively honest about the whys and wherefores of his transformative journey, instilling

within them a sense of purpose and meaning. By addressing his students' hearts and minds, he began to reap the rewards of his efforts.

These attempts reveal the professor's acknowledgement and appreciation of what he learnt through the FIRST framework despite initially facing challenges in implementing it. Telling us about having "*a goal for the student to participate, and to participate strongly . . . tak[ing] into consideration the student's psychological state*" depicts an authentic desire to adopt FIRST's *focusing* and *interacting* domains to empower students to bring their experiences to the learning journey shaping it as partners in learning while considering their emotions and feelings. Explicitly telling them, "*We, now, all trust one another. In other words, none of us is more superior or inferior than another one; we are all equal and the same*", and asking them to help him as he disclosed to them the transformation he is undergoing, highlights initial steps in trusting his students and empowering them in his early phases of implementing FIRST through different principles it encompasses including, *trust the learner*, *positive spirit*, and *motivation and attention*.

The following section depicts clearer instances of adopting the FIRST framework, empowering students to have a voice about their own learning experiences and sharing what matters to them in a satisfaction survey. It also reveals addressing students' emotions and psychological states more explicitly, towards humanizing the learning space and growing the seeds of a more humanized teacher-student relationship.

De-tyrannizing and Humanizing the Classroom: The Interplay of the Heart and the Mind

> I read in the last satisfaction survey that some of you are upset because I digress a lot or because I cite additional information. I want to tell you about a research fact, not an opinion; if I keep talking about a particular topic for a prolonged time, you will only retain around 10% of the information. Afterwards, your mind will start wandering. This is absolutely natural. Therefore, I try to digress somehow to capture your attention, so we can share a good laugh, joke, or sing. I also try to address your emotions or maybe do an energizing activity. I hope that my reasons are now clear to my brothers and beloved students who have objected to digression. It is easier for me to just read directly from the book, so going back and forth in focus in order to make you better understand the topic requires great effort. I hope you would forgive me then for digressing; you do not have to fully understand my position, but forgive me.

Addressing his students as "*beloved brothers*" and asking for their understanding and forgiveness, as well as highlighting the respect for their emotions, encapsulates the sense of the humanized learning experience

Dr. Ahmed was trying to bring into being in his lecture room. More importantly, by incorporating satisfaction surveys in his class for the first time and considering students' objections, Dr. Ahmed started paying tribute to one of the cornerstone pillars in humanizing pedagogy: freedom of expression and dialogue. This phase illustrates a more obvious incorporation of FIRST's *focusing* and *interacting* domains, which is clear in the students' involvement in shaping their own learning experience, having a say about what matters to them, along with the professor's acknowledgement of their emotions, respecting and empowering them as key players in their learning journey.

A number of times, Dr Ahmed intentionally attempted to de-tyrannize the learning space by reshaping the nature of the power relations binding him to the students. "*Young men, let me tell you again, you and I are partners in this learning journey. Do not worry about making mistakes; be comfortable in your emotions*", he said. With such an unaccustomed statement of relaxed cordiality, Dr. Ahmed addressed his students after most were reluctant to participate in the discussion or respond to his enquiring questions, apparently wary of being at fault. The aforementioned statement is quite relevant, particularly in a university setting wherein a sense of equal *partnership* or camaraderie does not define the contours of the relationship between professors and students. Accordingly, Dr. Ahmed gradually showed more empathy towards his students by addressing students' emotions in an attempt to create a positive and safe environment, as one of the pivotal principles in the FIRST framework. In another telling anecdote, he addressed his students, saying:

> In one of the past assignments, some of you were not given the full grade; this is either because insufficient effort was exerted, the content was copied without any alterations, or the papers presented were untidily cut out of a notebook. Usually, in the past, I would remove such a paper, cut it into pieces and fail the student. But since I am trying to change and become a better *insan* (human being), I convince myself that I must respect the effort and that the student was interested and submitted the assignment, so I give out 7/10 . . . 7 is better than a zero and yet the full grade is reserved for those who exert the effort in a distinguished manner. I have exerted an effort to read every word you have written, and Allah Almighty knows how much effort I have exerted. I was not obliged to do such efforts but I am seeking to improve and develop myself as well as develop you all. I do not want any of you to become upset if you lose 2 or 3 grades. I want you to change in a *positive* way; some of us are satisfied with living nonchalantly in the comfort zone, not wanting to change at all.

In response to Dr. Ahmed's light-hearted explanation, the students laughed. There seemed to be a dramatic transition in the newly adopted language of respect and the calm tone of kindness with which the students were addressed. The candid humbleness with which the professor addressed his students and his confession about his ongoing journey of change towards becoming a better human being and educator seemed to come as a blow of surprise to the students, who were neither accustomed to that level of humbleness nor transparency from their university professors. This again depicts a clear adoption of the premises of FIRST, and the capacity of its *interacting* domain to promote a positive and safe learning environment, and its *focusing* domain in building trust in students, instigating a more humanized learner experience when applying its *individualization* and *trust the learner* principles. Dr. Ahmed's students also strongly expressed this humanized experience.

When asking the students to verbalize their opinions about the Maxims of Jurisprudence course in an anonymous survey, we were surprised that they could accurately pinpoint the nature of the new humanized way of learning. In one telling example, one of the students described the professor, saying: "*He is very humble. I do not feel that there is a huge knowledge discrepancy between us*". Another student proclaimed, "*the student in this lecture is treated as if he were a human being.*" The two simple conjunctions put together "*as if*" speak volumes. In another extremely relevant commentary, one student wrote: "*The university professors treat us, [special needs students] as if we do not matter, no one pays attention to us . . . This is not the case with Dr. Ahmed; I now feel I am a normal human being, and I am treated very well . . . The best thing I appreciated was that I now participate in class*".

In his attempt to become a better *insan* (human being), Dr. Ahmed is simultaneously trying to humanize his instructional practices and methods and, more importantly, respect his students' humanity through empathy and compassion. Essentially, when reflecting on the change he encountered after applying the FIRST framework, Dr. Ahmed highlighted the emotional impact it had as he told us that:

> Learning goals are connected to the emotional aspect. . . . I believe that what the student acquires and understands is in its essence emotional . . . Emotions are the basis for any mobilization . . . and this has been the message of the Prophets to their people, it was built upon emotions and feelings, [f]aith is the emotional part that, if penetrates the heart, makes the human being positive and different in everything.

When asked about the main advantages of this course, three students focused on "*dialogue and discussion*", while others focused on the "*good, kind spirit of the lecturer*". Other students conceptualized respect, academic follow-up and affection as best practices. Indeed, this depicts practices the professor adopted in his implementation of FIRST's *focusing* and *interacting* domains, trusting his students and valuing their participation while fostering a positive learning environment. These idiosyncrasies highlight and constitute the core essence of the humanizing form of learning and pedagogy that Dr. Ahmed was trying to implement.

Generally, both the survey responses and our observations somehow validated how the students could emotionally and intellectually interact with the newly introduced changes and adopt a more participatory attitude over time. Figure 2 depicts the students' choice of the most important practice any professor should implement, revealing how most students value attending to their human needs, emotionally and psychologically.

The aforementioned analysis of responses primarily reveals how students' conceptualizations about university teaching practices are perfectly and seamlessly aligned with the foundations of humanized learning promoted by the FIRST framework, alluding to the central role ostensibly emotive and unacademic practices, such as respect and appreciation play

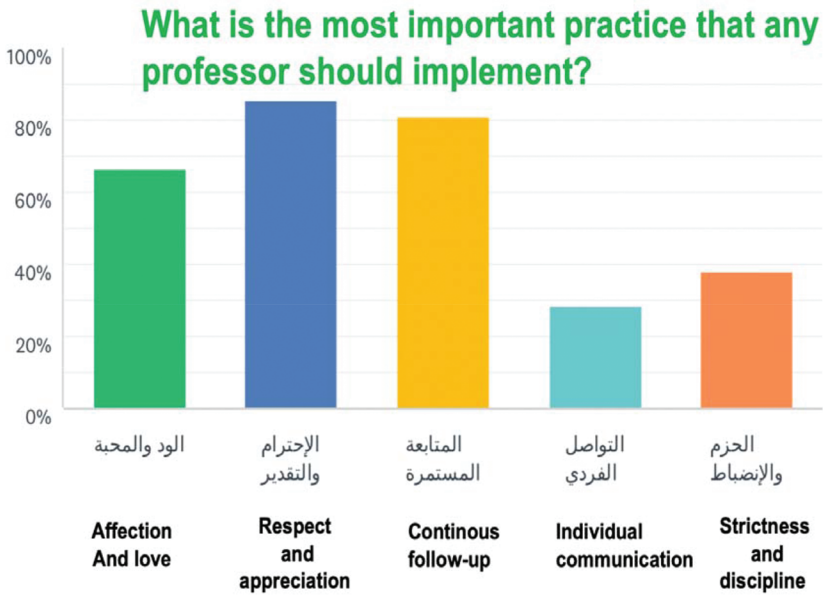

Figure 2. Students' responses to one of the survey questions

in educational settings. Indeed, this can, in turn, build a relationship of trust, respect, and love between the professor and students, humanizing the teacher-student relationship that is core to the role of educators. Research emphasizes how students highly value being respected and listened to by their teachers, linking this to how they positively view the learning environment (Thompson, 2018). This can be seen in light of FIRST's *focusing* and *interacting* domains and how implementing their underlying principles, such as *trust the learner, individualization,* and *positive spirit* can promote a learner experience that fosters a positive and safe learning environment and cares about every individual learner.

Journeying to the Depths of Learning: A Transition toward Progressive Pedagogies

> Choose a jurisprudential rule and then revise and discuss it with your colleague and talk about the points that you found hard to comprehend, each student seated in these bench rows (passing around and pinpointing the rows) should turn around and confront their opposite colleague. You have the *freedom* [emphasis added] to move around and choose the position in which you feel comfortable.

With these simple instructions, the professor asked the students to engage in a collaborative discussion with their peers. After being usually accustomed to large-group passive instruction, the students, probably for the first time in their university life, were given the time and space to engage in a dynamic and active learning experience. After nearly an hour of a soulless and wearisome ambience that prevailed in the classroom, the once-bored faces of students became suddenly engaged and energized as the room bustled with animated discussion noise after being engulfed in dull quietude. Instead of checking their phones or staring in boredom, as was usually the case, they appeared to be beaming with smiles, engrossed in a deep state of learning, discussing together with energy and enthusiasm. Such vibrant sounds that echoed throughout the room were by no means a sign of chaos but rather indicative of focus and engagement. The observed precipitous change in the students' morale and general atmosphere could be attributed to collaborative group work and its accompanying sense of engagement promoted by FIRST. This includes FIRST's *reviewing* domain and its focus on facilitating learning activities, in conjunction with its *interacting* domain and its call for group work and engaged learning in a positive atmosphere when applying its principles of *positive spirit, social event,* as well as *motivation and attention*. Despite showcasing only two of FIRST's five domains in this instance, it is worth reiterating that all five

domains work together in harmony to produce a holistic learner experience, yet the focus here is only on certain domains considering the particular scope of the data analysis.

Indeed, peer discussion as a cooperative learning strategy stimulatingly breathed life into the ambience of the classroom, engaging them in a state of flow. Such an observation is consistent with research looking at the value of cooperative learning in contrast to traditional group instruction. In a study that attempted to compare the quality of emotive and cognitive experiences among university students in the aftermath of large-group instruction and cooperative learning, Peterson and Miller (2004) suggested that "cooperative learning with undergraduate students can lead to greater cognitive involvement, somewhat greater activation, and higher levels of motivation, including higher engagement, greater perceived importance of the tasks, and more optimal levels of challenge in relation to skill" (p.132). This also underscores the value of implementing several aspects of the FIRST framework, such as its *reviewing* domain and its focus on the facilitation of learning activities, as well as the *interacting* domain and its underlying principles, including *motivation and attention.*

As the learning environment became much more positive, warm and power-nuanced, we concurrently witnessed a gradual transition towards the learner-centered paradigm advocated by FIRST. It was also perceptible that the professor started conducting the lectures through a much gentler and lower tone of voice as he simultaneously started to move around more often, making eye contact with students seated in different rows, deserting the traditional authority-laden position of the room's front line and unconsciously transforming the lecture room to a communal space of knowledge sharing. This showcases the application of FIRST's *focusing* domain and its emphasis on building a communication channel with the learners through its *individualization* principle, among other aspects of the FIRST framework. By virtue of the seemingly simple act of departing from the room's front centre, the professor's approachability seemed to have been instantaneously enhanced. In the aftermath of such locomotion, a number of discernible alterations subsequently occurred as Dr. Ahmed embarked on a collective brainstorming interval in which he refrained from '*pushing*' information and instead opted for '*pulling*' the students' rationalizations, viewpoints, and answers to his posed questions, which served as catalysts in sustaining a lively back-and-forth conversation. His trust in his students seemed to continue growing throughout the term, as evidenced by various instances and actions he adopted along his journey of implementing

FIRST, emphasising how adopting principles such as *trust the learner* in FIRST's *focusing* domain can foster this journey of trust.

By further encouraging silent students to participate in the discussion with prompts and inquisitive questions, the students started to become gradually engaged. By the end of the course, we noticed an increase in attendance rate, which suggests that the transformative experience happening within the contours of the lecture room effectively captured the hard-to-win attention and interest of the students.

Changing the Dynamics of the Teacher-Student Relationship: A Mentor, A Murabi and a Facilitator

When asking the professor if there has been a change in his relationship with his students after applying the FIRST framework, he said that "*the students sent me messages saying that I am their father*", adding that this is "a very positive sign" and that he is keen to "continue developing and searching for more opportunities for enhancement". He also quoted them saying: "*We wish we had learnt that way since the first day in college. We wish he had found someone to tell us what to do to be better*". Interestingly, Dr. Ahmed capitalized upon bygone understandings of Islamic knowledge and values, which he said it comprised rich "literature about the relationship between the teacher and students" and the related etiquettes of behavior, referring to writings by al-Ghazali on the fatherly connection between the teacher and students. This reiterates the pivotal role an educator is meant to play when considering how Islam regards the role of the educator as not only a teacher but rather a *murabi*, nurturing students as whole human beings.

In turn, looking at how the students described this relationship with their professor sheds further light on their own experience. The words the students used in describing their relationship depict the professor's embodiment of some of the key values of a murabi, as highlighted earlier. The word '*advice*' was mentioned numerous times in the students' words as per the following quotes:

> The professor offered us . . . precious and important *advice* for our lives and how to apply that
>
> Dr. Ahmed was generous with general knowledge and offering *advice*, we love him
>
> The classes had *advice* from a father to his children
>
> loving the students and giving them *advice*

Furthermore, the nature of the relationship, as elucidated by students' statements, revealed a sense of love and respect, with the word '*love*'

also appearing several times. One student confessed: "*I developed a sense of love and respect for Dr. Ahmed, he has a positive spirit*", while another wrote: "*You laugh to the extent that you really feel it . . . I feel serenity and love*". The correlation between love and academic achievement was also an emergent theme; one student exclaimed that they "*loved the professor and the subject*" and, thus, they "*loved studying*". Another student further rationalized the importance of "*love and mutual respect*" in a teacher-student relationship because if students "*loved their professor, they will be keen to attend and focus during the lecture*". This depicts students' strong appreciation of the human connection with their professor, involving love and appreciation. This, in turn, showcases the potential of the FIRST framework to mobilize a "pedagogy of love", one which deems teaching as "an act of love" (Darder, 2017). Capitalizing on the interplay between FIRST's different domains when implementing their underlying principles as introduced earlier, thus can foster and humanize the teacher-student relationship in a journey to reclaim the role of the teacher as a murabi embodying love, care, and a fatherly relationship.

LIMITATIONS

The results of the study need to be considered in light of a number of limitations. While the students' feedback was obtained from 21 participants through qualitative and quantitative questions, the sample does not represent all the 250 students who attended the course. In addition, the analysis of the different aspects of the FIRST framework depicts only the implementation of three of its five domains. Thus, the resulting data should be seen in light of a partial implementation of FIRST, given the limited scope of this study.

Future studies can further consider student perspectives through deeper qualitative data or larger representative samples. Moreover, other aspects of the FIRST framework can be explored, considering the implementation of its other domains. For example, looking at the transforming domain, educators can explore applying and relating learning to real-life contexts to gain insight into FIRST's further potential, innovative pedagogical implementations, and transformative capacity.

DISCUSSION

This study has revealed the change that the professor and his students witnessed when implementing the FIRST framework, humanizing the

teacher-student relationship. With its focus on situating the student as the key player in a humanized learner experience, FIRST can instigate change in how educators conceptualize their relationship with their students through a humanized pedagogy built on reciprocity and trust. Perhaps one of the key strengths found through the study is how the FIRST framework empowered the teacher to adopt its domains and principles in an interplay that gradually caused changes, despite the professor's strong resistance in his educational institution. This has been seen through implementing practices that demonstrate trust in students, valuing their opinions, and acknowledging their emotional and psychological needs through a humanized pedagogy. Emotions were found to have a powerful impact on mobilizing students' agency, focus, and engagement. Acknowledging students' opinions in feedback surveys, inviting them to participate in classroom discussions, and engaging them in collaborative learning activities within an atmosphere of trust and respect gradually shifted the relationship from being teacher-centered to empowering the students to be the key players of their learning.

FIRST framework can be seen to integrate numerous progressive pedagogies. However, rather than implementing them as separate independent endeavours, they are integrated as one whole conducive to a holistic learner experience that attends to the human needs of students and can thus promote a humanized teacher-student relationship. Transformative pedagogy is often conceptualized as an activist approach that integrates elements of constructivism and critical pedagogy, aiming to empower students to critically examine the world by developing a wide range of skills and learning processes (Khedkar & Nair, 2016). Essentially, innovative pedagogies play a fundamental role in creating an optimal environment for transformative learning to occur by revolutionizing the topographies of the educational landscape. They metamorphose learning from a passive consumptive process of knowledge to one where students become active and critical co-creators.

Relevant existing research highlights a range of pedagogical practices that effectively promote transformative learning, such as dialogic relationships, narrative inquiry, structured online discussions, critical engagement with texts, experiential activities, and implementing humanizing pedagogical methods (Ukpokodu, 2009). Such pedagogical practices can be seen in light of integrating FIRST's different domains throughout their implementation while carefully attending to students' emotional and psychological needs. An exhaustive systematic review concluded that the

amalgamation of a diverse array of progressive pedagogical approaches—such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), SCALE-UP (Student-Centered Active Learning Environment with Upside-down Pedagogies), Flipped Classroom, and face-to-face teaching—is liable to create a highly student-centered and transformative learning experience (Chigbu et al., 2023). By embracing such innovative pedagogies within the realm of a holistic learner experience fostered by the implementation of FIRST, higher education institutions can nurture whole human beings empowered by positive humanized teacher-student relationships.

Research conducted on teacher-student relationships in higher education outlines a number of actions conducive to positive, caring relationships (Pranjić, 2021). This research highlights the importance of setting the foundation with students to nurture caring relationships with students, followed by encouraging trust and respect while acknowledging student needs and interests in pedagogy and teaching, underscoring the importance of knowing the students on a human level, encouraging their participation in a positive and safe environment (Pranjić, 2021). Indeed, this emphasizes the value of the integrative implementation of the domains and principles of the FIRST framework through individualized learning attending to the needs of every student within a positive learning environment built on trust and respect. Moreover, research exploring 24 studies on school-based interventions and how they influenced teacher-student relationships found that teacher-student relationships were enhanced by working on more closeness and less conflict between the teacher and students, fostering social-emotional learning, as well as building on teacher-student relationships in classroom management (Poling et al., 2022). This underscores how a humanized pedagogy involving a human connection between students and teachers strengthens the teacher-student relationship.

IMPLICATIONS

This study's focus on the FIRST framework's capacity to promote humanized teacher-student relationships through implementable principles can add to a pertinent area of research that needs more attention in various education settings. While a large body of research exists on the numerous benefits of positive teacher-student relationships, such as increased student outcomes and academic achievement, little research has been conducted on interventions that promote teacher-student relationships (Poling et al., 2022). Research conducted to explore studies on school interventions

that can potentially promote teacher-student relationships over the past 30 years just found 24 studies, which were located in only five countries (USA, Singapore, Belgium, Netherlands, & Norway) (Poling et al., 2022). Moreover, teacher-student relationships in higher education settings are an area found to be under-researched (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). Thus, this study can add to an area of research that needs further development, not only to teacher-student relationships within higher education settings but also to the wider body of research on interventions that have the capacity to promote teacher-student relationships within the realm of a holistic learner-centered framework that seeks to humanize the relationship between students and teachers.

Studies exploring teacher-student relationships in Muslim contexts indicate the complexity and importance of fostering positive teacher-student relationships; thereby, this study can inform practice within such complexities. In a study exploring teacher-student relationships across universities in Pakistan through the viewpoint of 60 teachers, participants emphasized how a positive teacher-student relationship enhances mutual respect between teachers and students as well as student confidence levels (Hussain et al., 2013). The study also found that promoting a teacher-student relationship takes time and is a result of the teacher's experience. Moreover, studying teacher-student relationships in a United Arab Emirates high school context highlighted how power imbalance between teachers and students led to a decreased level of support and respect, highlighting how nurturing teacher-student relationships involving care and respect can promote both student achievement and identity development (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). Adopting the FIRST framework in teacher professional development programs can thereby empower teachers to foster their relationships with their students through intentional and practical guidelines informed by FIRST's domains and principles, which can, in turn, help overcome complexities and obstacles that teachers often face.

The holistic lens that the FIRST framework entails can promote the teacher-student relationship on a human level, involving not only students' academic development but also nurturing them as whole human beings, emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively. This study has found that implementing the FIRST framework resulted in changes in nurturing the teacher-student relationship, as experienced by both the professor and his students, who found the relationship to represent a fatherly connection involving love, care, and respect. Indeed, this can act as an impetus for

reclaiming the forgone role of the murabi in Islamic heritage, nurturing students as whole human beings.

CONCLUSION

Throughout a journey that witnessed a professor's obvious change in his pedagogical practices, attempting to adopt a humanized learner-centered pedagogy when implementing the FIRST framework, this study explored authentic moments of change, challenge, and reflexivity. After 20 years of embracing an authoritarian teacher-centered approach, Dr. Ahmed shared strong transitions in his journey of learning and implementing FIRST within his university setting, teaching 4th-year undergraduate students. While he faced challenges in the early phases of applying FIRST, he honestly shared his transformation journey with his students, inviting them to help him apply his new pedagogical practices informed by the FIRST framework.

Despite the resistance seen by students who were surprised to be taught in a way they had never experienced in their earlier college years, addressing their emotions and trusting them not only as students but as whole human beings, they gradually embarked on the journey of change along with Dr. Ahmed. This was fostered when they found their voice valued, such as giving their opinions in satisfaction surveys highlighting what mattered to them in their learning experience. Not only did the students gradually become open to participating in class and learning activities, as opposed to only listening to the professor's teachings at the beginning of the term, but their relationship with Dr. Ahmed also underwent a significant transformation. Several students found the relationship with him to be one with their father and not only their professor, expressing that Dr. Ahmed gave them advice on what mattered in life and saw the relationship in light of respect and love.

While this study featured a focus on only three of FIRST's five domains, given its scope, it showcased how a holistic humanized learner experience induced by FIRST, focused on respect, reciprocity, and an acknowledgment of students' human needs, has the potential to transform the learning space and humanize the teacher-student relationship. The learning space transitioned from one focusing on the teacher as the sole source of knowledge and power into one in which the teacher became a facilitator of learning, empowering students to be the key players in their learning journeys. Building a relationship with the students and

addressing their human and psychological needs gradually shifted the teacher-student relationship into one that has the potential to reclaim the role of the murabi in Islamic heritage, nurturing students as whole human beings through care, respect, and love. Adopting the FIRST framework in teacher professional development programs, thus, can empower educators to humanize their pedagogies and nurture their relationships with their students through implementable practices informed by FIRST's domains and principles.

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