Practitioner’s Note

Islamic Pedagogy for Guidance and Transformation
Toward an Islamic Experiential Learning Model

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INTRODUCTION

Education is not a modern innovation that emerged from Western civilization. It is as ancient as the human experience and intrinsic in the human psyche to learn, grow, and develop. Contemporary scholars and practitioners in education worldwide continue to grapple with the conundrum of the definition of “sound education,” from its higher objectives and philosophical underpinnings to pedagogical understandings and delivery modes. There has been an increased emphasis on repealing and undoing the standardization of education that has shaped the modern education system due to the industrial revolution, free market economy, imperialism, and colonialism, among other factors. Within the context of Muslims and Islamic education, the call for the renewal of education has been echoed in most educational circles worldwide. This renewal and paradigm shift in education necessitates an objective rather than a problem-based approach to inspire a new vision in Islamic thought and education based on divine guidance and embedded in wholism and interconnectedness (Auda, 2021).

Isra Brifkani holds a doctorate in education and has over fifteen years of experience in educational research and practice. Her research focuses on holistic education approaches to teaching and learning. Dr. Brifkani has led numerous transformative educational initiatives as an academic researcher and school improvement expert to foster a paradigm shift and inspire renewal in education.
A paradigm shift in Islamic education necessitates a redefinition of concepts and the design of new conceptual understandings of what it means to educate, the modes of delivery, and the outcomes of the educational process within an Islamically rooted worldview. Accordingly, this inquiry seeks to gain a deeper conceptual understanding of the modes and methods of education found in the Holy Quran as it relates to learning through experience. The scope of this paper is centered around the notion of experiential education and learning and its manifestations in the Quran as a pedagogy for guidance and transformation as higher objectives of Islamic education. Importantly, this inquiry also proposes a model for experiential learning that does not neglect spirituality and meets the needs of Muslim learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

Before delving into an Islamic perspective on the role of experience in learning, in the mainstream literature, cursory research on learning through experience highlights two terms that are often synonymously used: experiential learning and experiential education. In schools and educational settings, these terms often imply educational programs presented as add-ons to the curriculum; thus, on a cursory observation, not enough emphasis is placed on the role of experience in education as an intentional and integral part of learning. Experiential learning is considered a “progressive” educational philosophy, influenced by John Dewey’s epistemology (1938). His work influenced many other scholars to shift the educational paradigm from positivism and standardization to one that nurtures all realms of development and adopts a constructivist approach, albeit the spiritual dimension has been greatly neglected. Experiential education is multidisciplinary and refers to constructing meaning and knowledge through experience. Learning from experience plays a pivotal role in learning, whether consciously or subconsciously. It is also imperative to note that not all experiences are equal and have a positive impact on learning and the learner. The benefits of learning through experience depend on the quality of the experience.

Designing learning experiences can be overwhelming for educators to understand how to apply the concepts in educational settings. David Kolb (1984) established a model for experiential education influenced by Dewey’s Model of Experiential Education. The model emphasizes the holistic and integrative nature of experiential learning and highlights that knowledge
is a process, not a product. It emphasizes the notion that human beings continually adapt, and that learning is a continuous process built on experience. Experiential Learning Theory indicates that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2015, p. 38). He further elaborates that experiential learning is whereby work, education, and personal development are linked and interconnected and discusses the importance of the notion that learning is a process rather than a fixation on outcomes. The theory underscores the importance of learning and relearning as part of the experiential process.

From an Islamic and religious perspective in general, one of the challenges of contemporary and progressive schools of thought is that they are secular and disregard transcendent reality and spirituality as part of the education process. In addition, contrary to Islamic beliefs, many of these philosophies advocate that universal truths are relative, and that the origin of knowledge is not sourced from the divine. In an Islamic worldview, the transcendent and ultimate reality is at the center of a practicing Muslim’s life, and all aspects of life revolve around that inner core, including education, forming a harmonious whole. The Islamic perspective on education is holistic and implies that education is a process that aims for a balanced development of the whole person. It aims to nurture all aspects of an individual’s life, including spiritual, rational, and social dimensions. Nasr (1987) states that “The Islamic educational system never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul and the whole being of the person” (p. 123). Holiness being related to wholeness; the Islamic worldview of education concerns itself with the whole beings of the people it aims to educate.

Another point of contrast between an Islamic worldview of knowledge and the mainstream and progressive schools of thought is the nature of knowledge and its creation. From an Islamic perspective, the source of knowledge is the divine, and human beings are merely uncovering, reflecting, analyzing, and understanding knowledge through different means. Islam encourages lifelong learning for the betterment of the self, community, and most importantly, a stronger conviction in the divine. In dissimilarity, Kolb (2015) states that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). Delving into the scope of the role of experience in learning from an Islamic perspective, one can understand that some of the foundational underpinnings differ, such as the end goal of learning, the construction of knowledge, and the purpose of education.
In the Arabic lexicon, the word “experience” can be understood as “خبرة” khibrah, which denotes a combination of a deep knowledge base and awareness coupled with application. A well-experienced person with a deep knowledge base regarding a specific subject is called a khabeer. From a cursory Quranic analysis, it can be inferred that experience is a form of pedagogy presented in the Holy Quran for human guidance and transformation. Thus, from an Islamic perspective, the role of experience in education is not a contemporary educational epistemology. Reflecting on the stories of prophets relayed in the Holy Quran, starting with Prophet Adam, one can notice the role of experience in the process of divine guidance. Examples of transformative experiences from the Quran include the transformational process of building the Kabbah for Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail and how God led Prophet Musa through multiple experiences for guidance and enlightenment. For Prophet Muhammad, the multiple physical and spiritual journeys he embarked on signified the importance of physical and spiritual journeys to gain a deeper understanding of the divine. These are several examples, among many others, relayed in the Holy Quran that depict the notion that learning is not confined to the four walls of the classroom and that learning through experience is embedded in Islamic educational thought.

A renewed conceptual understanding of education from the perspective of revelation indicates the holistic nature of education from an Islamic perspective. In the Quran, there are many examples of the value placed upon reflection, taddabur, tafakkur on the creation of the heavens and earth to achieve conviction. The process is experiential in nature, as learners learn from experiences and thinking about the experiences. In the Quran, storytelling is utilized extensively to communicate the experiences of prophets, nations, and people as proof for conviction and understanding. Thus, learners learn from direct experiences, thinking about their own experiences and learning from other people’s experiences as a source of learning and transformation.

TOWARD AN ISLAMIC MODEL FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In describing experiential learning, Kolb (2015) elucidates that experiential learning is spiral in nature, contending that as learners go through experiences, knowledge is built on previous experiences and expounded in a spiral fashion. In the experiential learning model developed by Kolb (2015), experiential learning is a cyclical process that involves concrete
experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. While the model has been widely used and referenced, Kolb (2015) addresses the criticism that the model has received as well in terms of its simplicity and individualistic nature: “The learning cycle describes an individual model of learning that ignores the historical, cultural, and social context of learning” (p. 52).

An experiential learning model that addresses the needs of the Muslim learner is needed that is built on the foundations of Islamic educational thought and rooted in divine guidance and transformation. This inquiry proposes a cyclical model, indicating that learning is an ever-evolving process (Figure 1). In contrast to Kolb’s model, the center of the model highlights the central and foundational impact of divine guidance and transformation that permeates all the steps in the model. This is a significant distinction from the mainstream experiential learning model and one that considers the vital role of spirituality, divine guidance, and the presence of transcendent reality. In doing so, learning is not devoid of spirituality.

![Figure 1. Proposed Islamic (Religious) Experiential Learning Model](image)
In the proposed Islamic Experiential Learning Model, the process is cyclical and has two main stages: the immersion stage, and the transformation stage. In both stages, the learner is an active participant in the learning experience. The starting point for experiential learning or experiential education is an inquiry or a question. The role of questioning in education is essential, especially critical thinking questions that stimulate thought and drive further learning. Literature on education highlights the importance of essential questions that drive higher-order thinking. These questions do not demand a simple answer but “stimulate thought, provoke inquiry, and spark more questions” (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013, p. 4). In addition, reflecting on the critical role of the question’s intent and why it is being asked in the learning process is essential. Starting the inquiry with a deep and intentional question will further drive inquiry to higher levels of learning. In the Quran, countless examples portray the essential role of questioning to stimulate thought and reflection.

The next step in the proposed model is the process of pondering. It allows the learners to wonder about the inquiry and take their questions to a deeper level of thinking before they embark on the active experience stage. Pondering allows the students to actively think about the inquiry versus the traditional transactional model of education where the teacher transfers knowledge to students. The active experience stage in the model refers to the experiences the learners embark on to gain deeper knowledge and understanding that can lead to transformation. This refers to wholesome experiences that engage with the environment and consider the whole person. The process must include the spiritual dimension, encourage critical thinking and problem-solving, utilize different modes and modalities of learning, encourage flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and be situated within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), with facilitation from an experienced individual, among other pedagogical methods that encourage holistic learning. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) concept of flow refers to activities where the individual or group is fully immersed in an experience, a feature which is lacking in many educational settings.

In today’s fast-paced learning environments that stress the standardization of education, little emphasis is placed on the critical role of reflection in the learning process. The next step in the proposed model is the reflection stage, which is the process whereby learners actively think about their learning or metacognition. Reflection helps learners internalize learning, meaning making, and the understanding of essential takeaways that can aid in transformation. From an Islamic perspective, reflection (tadabbur
and ta'akkur) is essential in spiritual development. The action stage in the proposed model refers to the application of the learned knowledge with self, others, the community, and the environment. Hence, knowledge is not attained but with purpose and intentionality. The transformative process of experiential learning aims to result in the transformation of the individual and the community.

CONCLUSION

Experience is an integral part of human learning and development. The modern era’s standardization of education resulted in a teacher-centered approach to learning that does not emphasize developing holistic competencies and centers on academic achievement. A renewed understanding of education necessitates thinking beyond the boundaries of a positivistic paradigm that heavily emphasizes rote learning and not enough on innate learning modes such as experiential learning. This inquiry proposes a model that addresses the Muslim learner within the experiential learning paradigm. The Islamic Experiential Learning Model can aid educators and practitioners in designing learning experiences that develop the whole person and can result in transformation.

References


