Abstract

The paper recommends that Islamic Religious knowledge teachers should study, understand and implement some of the 'Effective Teaching practices' proven to be successful teaching strategies in other subject areas. It explores the research in the field of 'Effective Teaching Strategies' with special reference to the Constructivist approach. The paper recommends that teachers of Islamic Religious Knowledge teachers should explore, study and implement the researched based learning and teaching strategies in the development of the curriculum, selection of the subject matter, creating a learning environment and implementing the planned lesson in their classes.

About the Author

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Effective Teaching Practices
With special reference to Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK)

Introduction

Let us reflect back to our days as students in schools, colleges and universities, where we have experienced 'good teachers' and 'bad teachers'. Some teachers made learning a new concept very easy for us and some were unable to help us as much. Why does this happen? How can we tell the difference between a 'good' teacher and a 'poor' teacher? Why a particular approach to teaching helps or hinders student's learning? We can find the answers to some of these questions in the research and practices on Effective Teaching. The researchers and practitioners in the field of education have come up with suggestions and recommendation that can help students' learning but they all agree that teaching and learning are such complex processes that "no strategy is effective all the time for all learners." (RoyKellin 2006). However, there is enough research in the field to guide teachers to develop a systematic approach to effective teaching.

Review of the Literature

A brief review of the literature on the concept of 'effective' or 'good' teaching shows that the concept was discussed in the circles of teachers, educators and even parents in the early 1900s. However, the notion of 'good teaching' was very closely associated to the notion of the 'goodness of the teacher'. It was assumed that an honest, friendly and dedicated person will be a good teacher if he or she can keep the classroom organized, authoritarian and well disciplined. Works of John Dewey and others gradually changed the concept of 'effective teaching". Furthermore, the experimental works of Psychologists like Skinner and Pavlov encouraged the educational research to include classroom observations, which lead to the concept of 'effective teaching' being closely related to the teaching practices and activities of the teachers in the classroom. Thus, the theories of learning from this time on were linked to the understanding of how people learn. For example the Stimulus/Response theories (Skinner & Pavlov) developed an understanding of 'good teaching' in terms of the specific isolated behaviors that appeared to provide the stimulus which demanded a response from the students.
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an understanding of 'good teaching' in terms of the specific isolated behaviors that appeared to provide the stimulus which demanded a response from the students.

By 1980s the role of teaching context was gaining grounds in the field of effective teaching and learning. The researchers began to realize that the teaching context had a significant influence on students' learning . They found that the teachers' behavior that helped students to learn in one context did not seem to help student learning in a different context.

By 1990's, the idea that teaching effectiveness should be judged by both, the extent and quality of student learning, was gaining acceptance. Our understanding and thinking about the ways people learn has changed dramatically during the last 30 years. New research in cognitive and developmental psychology shows that learning is a much more individualized process than thought before. It is now accepted that 'most people learn best from personally meaningful experiences that enable them to connect to their knowledge to what they already know, believe or understand." (Ray Kellin, 1996) Now, most acceptable role of the teacher is to facilitate learning rather than be the 'source of all knowledge'. A good teacher is the one who helps students to make sense of the new information and to integrate it with their existing ideas. He or she will further help the students to apply the new understanding in meaningful and relevant ways.

BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING
Teacher's own belief about teaching and learning influence the way they plan and teach their lessons in the class.
Make a list of things that you believe about teaching and learning.
Share your list with a colleague and discuss the ways in which your beliefs are likely to influence ways you plan your lesson.

...standing of
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...behavior
and actions into a new patterned whole."

According to Nightingale and O'Neil's following six characteristics make high quality learning in any context.

1. **Students are able to apply knowledge to solve problems**
2. **Students are able to communicate their knowledge to others.**
3. **Students are able to perceive relationships between their existing knowledge and the new things they are learning.**
4. **Students retain newly acquired knowledge for a long time.**
5. **Students are able to discover or create new knowledge for themselves.**
6. **Students want to learn more**

We can summarize the research on learning and teaching in the worlds of Brandt (1998):

1. **"People learn what is personally meaningful to them.**
2. **People learn better when they are presented with challenging and meaningful goals.**
3. **Learning is developmental – novice typically approach tasks differently from those who know more about issues.**
4. **Individuals learn differently but in general, people construct new knowledge by building on their current knowledge.**
5. **Much learning occurs through social interactions.**
6. **People need feedback to learn but feedback needs to be accurate, useful and timely.**
7. **Most people have to learn ways to use successful learning strategies.**
8. **A positive emotional climate strengthens learning.**
9. **The total environment influences learning so teachers need to attend to the physical, social, and psychological aspects of the learning context."**

Above views are consistent with the basic principles of cognitive and social Constructivist views of learning.

Constructive Approaches to Teaching and Learning
The idea of Constructivism was introduced by Piaget when he used the term "The Construction of Reality" in the title of his book. There are many interpretations of the concept of Constructivism as it related to education. Snowman and Biehler (2000) have summarized them in the following four principles:

1. **"What a person knows is not just received passively but is actively constructed**

Constructivism as it related to education. Snowman and Biehler (2006) have summarized them in the following four principles:

1. **"What a person knows is not just received passively but is actively constructed by the learner—meaningful learning is the active creation of knowledge structures from personal experiences.**
2. **Because knowledge is the result of personal interpretation of experiences, one person's knowledge can never be totally transferred to another person.**
3. **The cultures and societies to which people belong influence their views of the world around them and influence what they know. In general the understanding that people reach are largely consistent within a given culture.**
4. **Construction of ideas is aided by systematic open-minded discussion and debate ."**

A Constructive approach is based on the premise that a person's learning and knowledge is expanded through active construction and reconstruction of mental framework. Learning is an active process which involves 'deliberate, progressive construction and deepening of meaning'. Constructivist views are heavily influenced by the work of Piaget which emphasizes the idea that a child constructs his understanding of the world through his interaction with his environment which results in 'integration' or 'accommodation'. These views are in agreement with the current research in the field of cognitive development.

There are different perspectives on Constructivism leading to many views about Constructive approaches to learning and teaching. This leads to conclusion that there is no one given way of planning a Constructive curriculum. However, most people agree on the philosophy that 'Constructivist teaching is based on the common belief that learners develop understanding when they are active and seek solutions for themselves'. Teacher has an important role of guiding and motivating the child to learn.

In a Constructive classroom the child is the center of teaching/ learning environment. The teacher's job is to structure learning environment and activities to help the student to 'construct knowledge' and not just memorize it. The students are guided and helped to use their existing knowledge to figure out what they need to know. The student's interaction with the content is very important in the teaching /learning process. Students need to make sense of the content and should be helped and given opportunities to analyze and synthesize information from various sources. They need to be able to create new categories and develop new frameworks or accommodate the existing ones. Learning is considered to be an active process.

Teachers can use the strategy of 'Scaffolding" where they give enough help to the students to finish a task and gradually take a step back as the students become more independent workers. Teachers are required to use realistic learning contexts to help students' understanding. They should be using teaching strategies which will encourage students to look at a particular situation from many perspectives.

To summarize in the words of Brooks and Brooks (1999),"there are five overarching principles evident in Constructive Classrooms:

1. **"Teachers seek and value their students' points of view.**
2. **Teachers pose problems and structure classroom experiences that foster the creation of personal meaning.**
3. **Classroom activities challenge students' suppositions.**
4. **Teachers build lessons around primary concepts and big ideas and help students to discern for themselves the parts .**
5. **Teachers assess students' learning in the context of daily teaching rather than viewing assessment as separate distinct from normal classroom activities.**

Selected Application of Quality Teaching/ Learning Research in the Development of Islamic Religious Knowledge Teaching Practices

Above research and theories conclude that the ultimate goal of teaching is to help students develop 'understanding' of the content they are studying. The question is what we really mean when use the word, "understand'? Teachers may have different meanings and ideas when they talk about students' understanding. We need to think about this issue from the very beginning when we are writing the 'Learning outcomes' of Sirah& Hadith, Qur'anic Studies or 'Aqidah, Fiqh and Akhlaq curriculum at each grade level. We need to be very specific and precise in the description of desired learning outcomes.

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Developing a Research based Curriculum

Development of research based curriculum is the **first step** which should be followed by every Islamic Religious Knowledge program in our schools. The Curriculum should include;

.   A Statement of Philosophy about the subject of study
.   Broad Goals according to the Philosophy (Focal points)
.   Clearly stated measurable learning outcomes or behavioral objectives
.   A meaningful scope and sequence
.   Time frame
.   Some examples of teaching strategies to be used in executing the planned lesson in the classroom.
.   A bibliography and list of required material

(See Appendix 'A' Sample Curriculum unit)

Relating New to the Known

Figure

It is important to remember that the meaningful learning (deep) will take place only when the students will form a deep understanding of a concept by relating the new information with their existing schema of the topic under study. For example when after investigating the topic of "Islamic Calendar' can tell 'what is an Islamic calendar? We know that he or she knows what an Islamic Calendar is. However, he has to do some more to convince the teacher that the he or she understands the concept. For example answer following questions:

"How an Islamic Calendar different from a Gregorian Calendar?
 What is the difference between a lunar and a solar calendar?
 Why is it called a Hijrah calendar?

Hijrah from where to where?
 What direction is Makkah to Madinah?
 What does Allah swt say about people who make Hijrah for His sake?

Selecting the Content (teaching topics)

The content is the vehicle which will help the students to achieve the understanding which is described in the Learning Outcomes. Project Zero of Harvard University developed the concept of "generative topics" which they called as "issues themes and ideas that give enough depth, significant connections and variety of perspectives to support student's development of powerful understanding."

We should keep following points in mind when selecting contents / topics of study :

- They are central to the field of study (for example birth, family, foster family, titles, revelation, Hijrah etc. to the Sirah of Rasulullah saw)
- They are conceptually complex and worth understanding (differences in the Qur'an and Hadith)
- They are interesting to most students. (the Last sermon of Rasulullah saw, Surah AL Fatihah)
- They can readily be explored through open ended questions (issues related to Fiqh, 'Aqidah and Akhlaq)
- They can be investigated through a variety of strategies and activities (research, cooperative learning, project work, group discussions, role playing etc.) by students at many stages of development. (Hadith, Sirah, topics in Islamic history and geography of the Muslim world)
- They present students many opportunities to connect with their existing knowledge. (Wudu and importance of conservation of water, the water cycle, cleanliness etc.)
- They can be explored more and more deeply and in variety of ways.(Rasulullah's final Sermon, Surah Al-fatihah, issues of Halal and haram etc.)

Selection of text materials to deliver the content to the students an important responsibility of the teachers. The text materials should be relevant, interesting, challenging and written the students' reading level to say the least.

Ways in which a teacher interacts with the content determines the quality of students' learning outcomes. Teachers need to have a deep understanding of the content they are teaching. They need to take an extra effort and make the content easy enough for the students to access the important knowledge of the subject.

Critical Thinking Strategies

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Critical Thinking Strategies

The teacher has to develop and implement specific questioning techniques to stimulate critical thinking in the students. Students cannot develop their thinking unless they are engaged in activities that promote such outcomes. For example just as students cannot develop an understanding of the theories of Science on their own observation because Science requires a special way of thinking. Similarly, Study of the Qur'an (especiallyTajweed) requires a particular way of thinking and specific previous knowledge, a student cannot develop a deep understanding of the Ayat of the Qur'an without the proper guidance of the teacher. Thus, Qur'anic Studies teacher has to develop specific strategies to plan and implement a lesson in the Tajweedor meaning and Tafsir or Memorization of an Ayah or Surah of the Qur'an. Same is true of all Islamic religious Knowledge subjects.

Appendix B Sample of Critical Thinking Activity

Planning the Lesson

First step is to clearly describe what it is that you want your students to understand – the real important point. State these fundamental points as clearly as course outcomes . Course outcomes are the 'glue' that holds the entire course together. Following are some examples of clearly stated learning outcomes of Sirah lesson.

Appendix C Sample lesson plan

Teaching Strategies in Teaching for Understanding

Some principles of Constructivism can be combined the Teachers of Islamic Religious Knowledge subject in planning and teaching a lesson to develop a deep understanding of the content in the students. These are referred to as **Elicitation, comparison, resolution and application. (Dykstra 2005)**

Elicitation involves drawing out some information from someone(students in this case). The teacher's role is to engage students in such activity which will bring out their existing beliefs, understanding and knowledge . Teacher will use this knowledge to facilitate their further learning. The students should be able to share their ideas, knowledge by discussing, talking or writing about their ideas. (Example: Teaching a Hadith Lesson about "Our responsibilities towards our neighbors")

Comparison involves matching the existing understanding of the students to the present reality. Once students have made their understanding clear, they are provided with opportunities to check it out and match with the existing concepts or realities of the topic. This will either 'enhance or challenge' students' previous understanding.(Comparison of Students' current understanding of who is a Neighbor?)

Resolution Once the comparison is made, the teacher will guide the students to a resolution of the differences between his or her previous understanding of the concept and their new experience and reality. Resolution means students' ability to modify their earlier understanding to accommodate new ideas.(expanded concept of a neighbor according to the Hadith)

Application is the final step where students apply their understanding to further investigate the topic at a higher level. It may mean applying the knowledge in real life practical application. (our responsibilities towards our neighbors without any distinction, treating all our neighbor with compassion and love, taking care of older neighbors, community workers as neighbors etc.)

In Summary, we conclude that teachers should work towards providing learning experiences which are focused on challenging intellectual work and centered on significant concepts and ideas. These approaches to teaching require intellectual quality and do not involve students in simply memorizing information and then bringing it out in examination. Even the memorization of the Suwar of the Qur'an should combine a definite component of learning the meaning and understanding of the concepts imbedded in the Ayat of the Surah, InshaAllah. Just think for a minute is it the quantity and number of suwar memorized by a child of greater value than understanding the depth of the meaning and message of Allah's Words and then memorizing them, the quality of the content?

Creating an Ahsan Learning Environment

Emphasis on the concept of Ahsan quality in learning and teaching begins with some simple actions such as being genuinely interested and enthusiastic about what the teacher wants the students to learn. It also means taking the time to enhance her or his own understanding of the subject he or she is teaching. Teachers' understanding of the concepts and topics she or he is planning on teaching to the students should be at a much higher level than what he or she expects

students to learn. It also means taking the time to enhance her or his own understanding of the subject he or she is teaching. Teachers' understanding of the concepts and topics she or he is planning on teaching to the students should be at a much higher level than what he or she expects the students to achieve. Teacher should share his understanding with the students. He or she should work continuously to improve his or her understanding of the concepts to be taught to the students.

An Ahsan learning environment is supportive, encouraging and focused on learning. The learning environment is more than just the physical space of the classroom, it consists of the relationships and interactions among students, between students and teachers. It also includes the 'shared expectations and norms of learning and behavior'. The teacher needs to do the following in order to create an Ahsan learning environment:

1. Create a safe and comfortable environment (physically and psychologically)
2. Structure the learning experiences which are meaningful and take the students towards valuable and achievable long term goals.
3. Create interesting, challenging and realistic learning experiences.
4. Create learning experiences which can provide the opportunities for cooperative learning and group work.
5. Always respect and value the efforts made by the students and help them to improve their work to achieve successful learning.
6. Establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect among students and between teacher and the students.
7. Invite student participation in planning the lessons and give them a chance to discuss 'what', 'when' and 'how' they learn. Set classroom rules with students' participation.
8. Expect high performance (Ahsan) from the students.
9. Train students to be responsible for their behavior and learning..

Above aspects of Ahsan Learning Environment and Teaching practices are presented in the following Ahsan Teaching Model.

Ahsan Teaching /Learning Environment Model

Explicit Quality Criteria
High Expectations
Academic Engagement
Social Support for Student's Achievement
Background Knowledge
Knowledge Integration
Students' Self-Regulation
Learner Choice

In Summary we can say that establishing an Ahsan learning environment requires some simple steps such as learning the names of his or her students, keeping a genuine interest in their backgrounds, interests. Teacher should be listening carefully to their stories. Teacher should model high standards of interaction with the students and believe that each one of them can achieve high standards in their work. Teacher needs to continuously find ways to make herself and her classroom a supportive place for her students.

Ahsan Characteristics of a Muslim Teacher

Studies in Teacher effectiveness research conclude that the teachers who are most likely to use Ahsan teaching strategies in their classrooms have following qualities

Knowledgeable
Enthusiastic
Confident
Committed
Compassionate
Curious
Patient and Persistent
Resourceful and Inventive
Well Organized
Optimistic
Ethical

Huseyin !Can you put them in a circle figure .? I think, I have run out of limit of 12 pages.

Ethical

Huseyin !Can you put them in a circle figure .? I think, I have run out of limit of 12 pages.

Following figure presents the concept of a knowledgeable teacher in a clear and effective way.

Huseyin! Place the figure on p.44 here.

In the above figure, the overlapping Circles A& B emphasize that teachers need a deep understanding of the content and the learning theories.
Overlapping circles A&C emphasize that teachers need to understand how to teach a specific content.
Overlapping circles B &C emphasize that teachers need to comprehend the pedagogical implications of the learning theories.

In conclusion we want to say that development of Curriculum objectives, selection of learning content, creation of an Ahsan learning environment and implementation of Ahsan teaching /learning practices should always be based on the theory and practices of the most recent research in the field of education, cognitive development and educational psychology. Our programs, our books, our teachers and our schools should never comprise quality for it is required of the ummah of the Last of the prophets and best of human being, Muhammad saw.

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