

12th Annual ISNA Education Forum 2011

Prophetic Pedagogy: Teaching “Islamically” in our Classrooms

Nadeem Memon and Ramzy Ajem

Abstract:

This workshop will attempt to rediscover key aspects of the pedagogy hidden within the teaching practice of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*Allah bless and give him peace*). These underlying principles that can transform our approach to teaching are just as relevant today for our schools as they were in the past. However, every principle must manifest itself differently depending on the circumstances of the time, place and recipient of education. This workshop will show teachers the practical implications that come forth from these principles allowing them to connect with the classroom in ways that are creative, authentic, and effective.

Presenters:

Nadeem Memon is the Director of the Islamic Teacher Education Program (ITEP); a collaboration between RAZI Education and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). He is also currently lecturer in Muslim Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. His research and workshops focus on the philosophy of Islamic education. Nadeem holds a Ph.D. in Education from OISE/UT.

Shaykh Ramzy Ajem is the director of Dar al-Marifa, a home education program for Muslim children and a lecturer in the Islamic Teacher Education Program. He began studying the Islamic sciences abroad in 1995. His teachers include several renowned scholars such as Shaykh Ramadan al-Bouti, and Shaykh Nur al-Din Ittar—in addition to studying at Abu Nour University in Damascus, Syria. His studies continued in classical Islamic education becoming one of the first Westerners to be admitted to the ancient school of Tanalat in southern Morocco (Madrassat al-Hajj Muhammad al-Habib). There, he would complete several texts and receive ijazas in jurisprudence, theology, and Arabic language.

12th Annual ISNA Education Forum 2011
Prophetic Pedagogy: Teaching “Islamically” in our Classrooms
Nadeem Memon & Ramzy Ajem

In the name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful

Introduction: The Need for an “Islamic” Instructional Approach

There are arguably three overarching aspects to schooling: 1. School administration (which includes policies related to school vision, values, and environment); 2. School Curriculum and; 3. Instructional Approaches or Teacher Development. What grounds the importance of this paper is the contention that thus far in the establishment of Islamic schools in North America, there has been an imbalance of attention placed on the first two of aspects mentioned above over the third.

Of the three areas, we have, as a community, attempted to develop institutions that adhere to and are guided by school policies and administrative practices that exhibit a uniquely Islamic approach. Although there are certainly distinctions and varying interpretations in how we administer our schools, it is likely safe to say that the vast majority of schools have in place policies related to an Islamic dress code, student behavior, and even administrative practices such as “*shura*” or taking counsel as a way of making school-wide decisions. Similarly, there have been numerous attempts to develop curriculum frameworks for Islamic schools either to advance the Islamic Studies curriculum, Islamize existing curriculum, or to create holistic, character based curricula founded on Islamic principles. The one area that has been relatively untouched and arguably most if not equally

number as a way of making school-wide decisions. Similarly, there have been numerous attempts to develop curriculum frameworks for Islamic schools either to advance the Islamic Studies curriculum, Islamize existing curriculum, or to create holistic, character based curricula founded on Islamic principles. The one area that has been relatively untouched and arguably most if not equally important is the training of teachers and need for a nuanced Islamic approach similar to the above two.

For most Islamic schools today, teachers who have achieved the conventional qualifications for the profession (i.e. Bachelors in Education or its equivalents) are deemed qualified for teaching in an Islamic school. The assumption is that the conventional state mandated curriculum is inadequate but the conventional state mandated requirements to teach are sufficient. This is disconcerting in many ways knowing that the Prophet Muhammad (*Allah bless and give him peace*) provided a model of teaching that has thus far been unharnessed. The oft quoted hadith from *Ibn Majah's* collection reinforces this when the Prophet (*Allah bless and give him peace*) said "Verily I was sent as a teacher." The Prophet Muhammad's example (*Allah bless and give him peace*), as we well know, provides a methodology of teaching and his approach in every interaction and moment of his life exhibits a particular rationale. Teaching in all cases implies a particular procedure and approach even if not articulated. Every aspect of teaching from tone of voice to classroom set up and from instructional approach to method of responding to student inquiries is based on an underlying approach that is not arbitrary.

What is most important to recognize is that every approach to teaching is influenced by a worldview or an orientation, perspective, or philosophy of education. The approaches to teaching that are considered normative and conventional today are equally influenced by a philosophy of education –one based largely on constructivism. Although it is undeniable that cooperative learning strategies –which are most common in schools today– have consistencies with Islamic perspectives on education, the roots of contemporary cooperative learning is based on a constructivist educational philosophy that can manifest as an acceptance of a relativist worldview (i.e. promoting the validity of contradicting conceptions of a single reality).

Adopting conventional practices as "best practices" can be problematic if a teacher is unaware of the roots, or guiding principles of a particular approach. This example is not intended to imply that modern teaching approaches ought to be abandoned in Islamic schools. The point being made here is the need to acknowledge that teaching approaches are rooted in philosophies of education within which are principles of teaching and learning.

The challenge for Islamic schooling globally is that such principles have not been articulated, developed, revised, standardized, and implemented. Once principles of teaching are established, a teacher, administrator, and school board can then use those principles for consistency in teacher training and in establishing approaches to instruction that are grounded in a particular vision of education. Going back to the example of cooperative learning, the approaches of cooperative learning can then be implemented in Islamic schools within a framework of teaching that employs both constructivist with didactic ones. The following subsections of this paper will outline an initial attempt to conceptualize and articulate the purpose, relevance, principles, and implications of an Islamic pedagogy.

What is an Islamic Pedagogy

Muslim scholars, theologians and jurists have a saying among themselves, "لا مشاحة في الاصطلاح", which means "Let there be no disputing about terminology." It is vital at the beginning of any new study or investigation to define the terms before we put them to use so as to avoid unnecessary dispute.

In this case we will briefly discuss how the term pedagogy has been conceptualized in order for there to be clarity in how we apply the term.

The word Pedagogy, before the seventeenth century, had a meaning closely related to its etymological connotation and has only come to a common definition over the past hundred years of mass public schooling. In the classic "The History of Pedagogy", the nineteenth century scholar Gabriel Compayre states that older dictionaries define pedagogy as the "moral education of children" and that "today not only in language but in facts and institutions the fate of pedagogy is settled." From that point onwards to this very day the term pedagogy has been commonly understood as "the knowledge or art of teaching." Although it is sometimes used to refer to the field of study that deals with the method and practice of teaching, it is more commonly used to refer to the very method and practice of teaching. And in this sense, one could say, for example, "The instructor's pedagogy reflects our principles and aims of education." Pedagogy then is the method and practice of teaching:

1. The method of teaching is the particular procedure, theory or approach of an educator.
2. The practice of teaching is the actual application of that approach and theoretical procedure.

Taking these two meanings into consideration we can establish that:

- a. A pedagogy is coherent when a teacher's practice is consistent with his or her theory and approach to teaching. This is the How?
- b. A pedagogy is effective when a teacher's practice facilitates the aims and objectives of education, which includes curriculum. This is the What?

- a. A pedagogy is coherent when a teacher's practice is consistent with his or her theory and approach to teaching. This is the How?
- b. A pedagogy is effective when a teacher's practice facilitates the aims and objectives of education, which includes curriculum. This is the What?
- c. A pedagogy has purpose when a teacher's practice is rooted in a philosophy, belief or reflects a particular ethos or worldview. This is the Why?

A comprehensive pedagogy must take into careful consideration each of these three aspects. The challenge is that in the absence of a well articulated and agreed upon "why" or Islamic worldview related to education, the instructional method is left inconsistent across a school. Schools then rely on individual "lead" or "exceptional" teachers but have no professional development strategy to ensure that all teachers within a school have a consistent, and more importantly, coherent purposeful approach in teaching.

Most Islamic Schools generally share with each other a common belief, vision of identity and sense of religious responsibility. And most would agree that for a pedagogy to be "Islamic" it should:

- not contradict the aims, objectives and ethics contained in revelation (Quran);
- a. closely reflect an Islamic ethos that is based on:
- b. Revelation,
- the teachings and practices of the Messenger of God (*Allah bless and give him peace*), and
- the intellectual and spiritual heritage of his followers.
- c. Prove effective in developing the student's:
 - intelligence (*`aql*)
 - faith (*iman*)
 - morality and character (*khuluq*)
 - knowledge and practice of personal religious obligations (*fard ain*) and;
 - knowledge, skills and physical abilities warranted by worldly responsibilities and duties.

However, based on our research, most educators and administrators in Islamic Schools would agree that their schools do not have access to an Islamic philosophy of education that sufficiently expounds on, and contextualizes the pedagogical matrix mentioned above. Furthermore, even if there was access to it, there still remains a great challenge for school administrators to implement mechanisms and strategies that aim to re-educate their teachers and restructure their schools towards embracing a new consciousness and towards implementing a new pedagogy.

In the following sections we will describe how principles of teaching are derived from the Islamic tradition, provide an example of a pedagogical principle, and then close the paper with an explanation of the implications for our teaching in Islamic schools.

Deriving Principles of Pedagogy from the Islamic Tradition

A principle is generally defined as "a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning." In connection with the word pedagogy, as in 'principles of pedagogy', the meaning intended is the propositions that serve as foundations for a system of instruction. When qualified by the word Islamic, as in 'principles of Islamic pedagogy', the scope of the principles are delineated by the general body of knowledge emerging from the intellectual and spiritual heritage whose roots are established in divine revelation and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (*Allah bless and give him peace*).

Principles in this context, presupposes three underlying characteristics: the first is that each principle is sufficiently comprehensive to govern specific aspects of an entire system related to instruction; the second is that each principle is able to give rise to relevant implications and that the 'lineage' of each implication is genuine, in that it can be traced back to its root; the third is that each principle itself is an accurate articulation of understandings that are founded and substantiated by either revelation (Quran), the traditions (Sunna) of the Prophet (*Allah bless and give him peace*) or the early community of Muslims (*Salaf*), or the counsel, experience and works of the later scholars (*Ulama*) on these sources. We will refer to these sources, henceforth, as sources of prophetic pedagogy.

We are in a unique position among all other faith communities in that the long and profound history of Islamic law has yielded for us exceptional developments in legal theory that have been refined and documented over the centuries. We have the good fortune of having access to a complex system that governs the way we view and interpret our sacred texts. The study of that system, termed *usul al-fiqh* (the principles of legal rulings), documents those principles that together inform a sophisticated legal method that a jurist must use when exercising expert legal reasoning (*ijtihad*). Just as a jurist would need these principles to ensure the accuracy of his judgments, it can be argued that, Muslim teachers need principles in pedagogy in order to ensure that they are teaching Islamically. Perhaps this has never been done before; a re-examination of the sources of prophetic pedagogy as seen through the eyes of an *usuli* (practitioner of *usul al-fiqh*) in an attempt to unveil the hidden universals that could serve as the foundations for a system of educational instruction—a lucid relevant Islamic pedagogy for twenty-first century educators.

The main task of an *usuli* is to research, investigate, and analyze the primary textual evidences in order to discover, define and formulate universals which become part of the foundations of a system

for twenty-first century educators.

The main task of an *usuli* is to research, investigate, and analyze the primary textual evidences in order to discover, define and formulate universals which become part of the foundations of a system through which specific legal rulings can be known and established by the jurist (*faqih*) or *Mufti*.

As for our task at hand, it is to research, investigate, and analyze the sources of prophetic pedagogy. Such an analysis would assist in discovering, defining and formulating universals which can become part of the foundations of a system of Islamic pedagogy. The direct result of an Islamic pedagogy would provide specific pedagogical implications to aid Muslim teachers in classroom instruction.

The following chart is an example of how a single straightforward principle might be cognitively demonstrated by a practitioner of *usul al-fiqh*.

The parallel between *usul al-fiqh* and principles of pedagogy is that both these sciences entail the careful study of primary texts to derive, establish and formulate principles. As such, our presentation of each pedagogical principle and its various implications will resemble the format above.

Prior to laying down the foundations of an Islamic pedagogy and articulating its principles, there are some assumptions that ought to be recognized and clarified.

Firstly, that there is an unspoken pedagogy underlying the teaching practices of the Prophet (*Allah bless and give him peace*) because he was, as he said, “sent as a teacher” and every notable teacher has an approach and methodology—even if unarticulated.

Secondly, that God’s Messengers (*Allah bless and give them peace*) are necessarily, by definition, capable of demonstrating their message and teachings with the utmost effectiveness and they are intellectually equipped to defend their claims with unequivocal evidences. The Prophet (*Allah bless and give him peace*) changed the course of history forever and, despite his being unlettered, he set in motion what was to become the most literate of civilizations that the world has ever known, and this is sufficient evidence indicating the effectiveness of his pedagogy.

Thirdly, that his being God’s Last Messenger (*Allah bless and give him peace*) to mankind entails that his unspoken pedagogy contains within it a spiritual *baraka*, lasting relevance and universality. And because his deed and speech is inspired by God, he is, therefore, the highest example ever exhibited for teachers and seekers of knowledge, understanding, and guidance.

Fourthly, that there are tremendous amounts of reports and accounts of the Prophet’s message, teachings and behavior (*Allah bless and give him peace*) which include a level of detail unparalleled by any other faith based community. Furthermore, the credibility of these reports has been established by a rigorous method of veracity which exceeds modern academic standards traditionally employed by historians.

Our methodology in discovering and unpacking these pedagogical principles consists of seven phases conducted by researchers, scholars, teachers and academics:

1. Compilation of relevant sources:
 - b. Quranic verses;
 - c. Quranic commentaries;
 - d. Hadith from the six books and beyond;
 - e. Selected known commentaries of the six books;
 - f. Account of the Prophet’s character, life and deeds (*Allah bless and give him peace*);
 - g. Works related to *tasawwuf* and *tarbiyah*;
 - h. Works by the Muslim scholars related to pedagogy and learning;
 - i. Later works and contemporary papers on pedagogy and education and;
 - j. Interviews with Muslim thinkers and educators.
2. Research, analysis and selection of materials from the above sources;
3. Categorization of selected materials into topics and sub-topics that relate to pedagogy;
4. Prioritization of topics and supporting material according to a North American context;
5. General derivation of pedagogical principle;
6. Refinement of each principle to ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy;
7. Unpack the principle into:
 - a. Explanation;
 - b. Evidence and;
 - c. Implications

- a.
- b. Evidence and;
- c. Implications

The principles are expressed in comprehensive yet concise ways that do not explicitly refer to particular practices or teaching strategies. Although they are intended for the teacher, they are nevertheless central in guiding the development of goals, initiatives and policies within the school.

The explanations provided for the principles are meant to clarify and expand on the significance of the principle as it relates to our faith, worldview and classroom. The evidences provided for the principles are not exhaustive. They are meant to provide Muslim teachers with a sense of confidence and certainty in the hopes that this will produce higher levels of consciousness and intention which will certainly show in the practice and application of the principle. Each principle may have a variety of implications that may look different in practice depending on the circumstances relating to the students, subject, classroom and school.

Based on our research and methodology summarized above, the following is an example of one of the pedagogical principles embedded within the sources of prophetic pedagogy:

1

1

Principles in Practice: Implications of an Islamic Pedagogy

Every principle of Islamic pedagogy would have direct implication for classroom practice. These implications are open to interpretation, reinterpretation, context, and student needs. Generally, however, educators would be able to agree upon a set of implications that are relevant to a particular principle.

Such principles and their implications can also be relevant not only to Islamic schools but to all forms of schooling including public institutions. In many ways, principles of an Islamic pedagogy would assist non-Muslim teachers to understand the educational needs and perspectives of Muslim students and acknowledge the relevance of an Islamic pedagogy as an alternative educational framework applicable to all schools. Aspects of an Islamic pedagogy could be adopted and adapted to various settings and for varying needs.

Thirdly, once the teaching approach in Islamic schools or institutions is grounded in pedagogical principles that are rooted in the Islamic tradition, an educator will have gained a rubric for assessing the congruence of contemporary educational methods. At the beginning of this paper we gave the example of cooperative learning strategies. If we were to extend that and consider current trends in "Cooperative Discipline" an offshoot to the former, it would be safe to say that classroom management strategies promoted by the Cooperative Discipline approach would be consistent with an Islamic pedagogical approach. What is crucial in determining congruency between principles and approaches is establishing a strong sense of principles first, and then considering, adapting, and adopting from existing educational trends.

Now if we take the principle above and attempt to extract implications from it, we will begin to see significant relevance for our own classrooms in Islamic schools. Below we have elaborated on the implications focusing on four main areas within the principle.

Principle Restated: The learning atmosphere is 1. sacred, 2. disciplined, 3. caring and 4. functional.

Sacred

One implication of the classroom being a sacred space could be that the teacher sets a classroom ambiance that reminds students of the sacredness of knowledge and the virtue of learning in the sight of God.

Such an approach would be very unique from the modern classroom where spirituality is not central in the values promoted or classroom environment. In an Islamic school, gratitude for everything from the physical aspects such as access to chairs, desks, pencils etc. to the sensory, i.e. that we even has the ability to learn, see, touch and ought to be constantly and consistently reinforced. This could be achieved through the types of messages that decorate a classroom, or in a classroom code of conduct, or even in the way a teacher exhibits and models appreciation in the maintenance of the classroom and all that within it. Sacredness should not be misinterpreted as "anti-fun." It does not mean that students must always act as though the classroom is equivalent to a place of prayer. A classroom is a classroom. It is a place where learning must be loved and lived, which in many ways also means that it must be exciting and engaging for students. But that does not mean learning cannot be fun and sacred at the same time.

classroom is a classroom. It is a place where learning must be loved and lived, which in many ways also means that it must be exciting and engaging for students. But that does not mean learning cannot be fun and sacred at the same time.

Disciplined

Building from the previous implication, essential to this principle is the disciplined nature of the classroom. Again, a term like discipline often conjures images of strictness, top-down, instruction-based classrooms where fun never happens.

The implication of a classroom being a disciplined place implies that a teacher promotes a culture of care, value and respect for individuals based on the religious etiquettes and principles of sisterhood and brotherhood.

This means that Islamic school classrooms are spaces where teachers exhibit respect toward their students as a responsibility and seek to earn the respect of them. Equally, students exhibit respect to their teacher as an elder, one who has been given the responsibility to facilitate learning, and as a parent-like figure who can influence their upbringing (*tarbiyah*).

For a classroom space to be disciplined this can mean many things. It can manifest in the way a teacher conducts themselves, models respect for others, interacts with dignity, and so on. It can also mean the way a teacher develops classroom rules, encourages students to communicate with respect for one another, and so on. At the essence of establishing discipline, however, is the need for proficient learning and caring relationship building.

Caring

For a balance in sacredness and discipline caring is an essential aspect of an Islamic school classroom environment. Such an implication can easily be taken for granted and often is the case. It ought to be recognized though that in every service profession, there are those that are passionate about their work and others who are solely financially motivated. In teaching, much like medicine, a student or patient for that matter can very easily sense sincerity and care. Teachers never have to verbalize their lack of care, for it becomes evident in their body language, tone, expression, and instruction.

This implies that in an Islamic school it is essential that a teacher builds positive relationships through knowing and valuing each student. A teacher encourages success by recognizing and valuing students' work and providing beneficial feedback. A teacher's tone is not harsh or scathing but encouraging and yet demanding and inspiring. All of this exhibits care.

Functional

The last implication of the principle is that classrooms ought to be functional spaces. The term functional can be interpreted many ways but what is most important for teaching that is sacred, disciplined, and caring is that students are intellectually, spiritually, and physically engaged. Teaching must promote student's humility to ask, confidence to discover and willingness to take risks with their learning. Islamic school classrooms that do not promote questioning, discovering, and debating are troubling. Classrooms must be spaces where students grapple with material and where teachers push the boundaries of a student's thinking as well as their own in a manner that is healthy and productive.

Concluding Thoughts

What we have attempted to outline in this paper is the urgency, method of deriving and potential of an Islamic pedagogy. We have been establishing and administering Islamic schools for far too long in the absence of codifying and systematizing an instructional approach that is grounded in the Islamic tradition.

There is no doubt in the minds of any Muslim educators that the Islamic tradition is rich with advice and approaches for teaching and learning. This paper is an initial step at harnessing the tradition and structuring an approach to teaching that we can all call uniquely "Islamic."

