

# Transforming Islamic Studies and Quran Classes into the most beloved classes in School

By: Zahir Lewis & Tamer Osman

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## Universal School at Buffalo

Hafez Zahir Lewis & Tamer Osman

### ISNA Education Forum –Presentation:

## Transforming Islamic Studies and Quran Classes into the most beloved classes in school

Statistics show that the Quran/Islamic Studies courses are among the most disliked subjects by young students. We are faced with the challenge of changing this prevalent attitude and transforming it into becoming one of the most liked subjects for our students. The teacher's role is most crucial to achieving this goal. Mastery of the subject is a prerequisite, yet it is not enough to win the hearts or the attention of the students. At Universal School, the teachers, the administration and the students work as a cohesive unit to help make Islamic and Quran studies the most beloved classes in the school.

There are four components for effective learning:

1. The teacher
2. The student
3. The materials
4. The (school/classroom) environment

The most important of these foundations for learning originates from the teacher. The pious has a proverb. "One *salih* can change a city but a city can never make a *salih*". The etymology of the word *salih* inclines towards the meaning of a teacher who sets the moral standards and

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endeavors towards righteousness. Therefore, educators first and foremost need to become the student's moral compass. It is evident from many studies that the example set by the "role model" is crucial to the education of the student.

One of the duties of the teacher is to set standards. The setting of a standard through the teacher's dedication in the subject area is the groundwork for success in the classroom.

Students are extremely aware of their surroundings and especially critical towards their teacher. By nature, children are less hypocritical and if they do not sense the teacher's dedication they will rarely be dedicated themselves and will quickly lose interest. Dedication is expressed through the love for the subject area and also the genuine love and respect for the students. If the teacher does love and enjoy the subject they are teaching or are nonchalant about their students, then teaching becomes more challenging. This is not a reference to the amount of information the teacher conveys to the student so that the students can regurgitate it on a test. It is the actual love of the subject and the students, if instilled in the heart of the teacher, that will inevitably give students an opportunity to love the subject and want to implement what they learn. After all, if it was not for the Prophet's (peace and blessings be upon him) love of Islam and his followers, the companions would not have accomplished such high ranks as they did and Islam would not have flourished. Islam is a living reality, and the path of knowledge is alive in every generation. Love is the foundation.

Another aspect that must be considered is that a teacher should avoid approaching the course material as a collection of semantics and narrations to be memorized by the students and evaluating the students based on how well they can parrot what their teacher says, though a degree of memorization is needed. The teacher's objective is to have students learn the information, though that is not the complete goal. The teacher should also aspire to convey to the students the love and the beauty of the language or subject and to provide them with the opportunity to appreciate it as well.

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In the Classroom Management Action Plan by Harry Wong, he mentions on page 2, lesson 2, "The number one problem in education is not discipline. It is the lack of procedure and routines resulting in students not knowing what to do responsibly in the classroom". The first few days of school will have a great impact on how the classroom will be conducted. The teacher should have ample preparation of the unit and lesson. Many educators have experienced an outstanding lesson performance when well prepared before each class. In regards to the level of knowledge of the teacher, mastery of the subject is the ultimate objective. In the book, Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment, Leonard argues that there are three types of people when it comes to learning, dabblers, hackers and masters. He writes that the dabbler is a person who just learns the basics of a subject, while a hacker is someone who reaches a level of proficiency of the subject matter. The master is one who is committed to mastery. The master may not have mastered the subject in its entirety, but they are committed to achieving mastery. This is the only acceptable category for a teacher. There needs to be continuous growth, specifically from two paths. The first is through the information and connectedness of the subject, and the second is the ability to grow as an educator: knowing the effective theories, strategies, tools, technology and procedures to give a successful lesson delivery. At Universal School, there is an axiom which everyone tries to follow, "life-long learners". Life-long learners are the standard goal for the teachers as well as the students.

The teacher's intention must be aligned to please our Lord through the means of sincerely wanting to truly guide the students to the pinnacle of success. Educators receive the title of educators because of the education process not because of the profession. Imam Al Haddad (May Allah be pleased with him) compiled a beautiful du'a of intentions one can make as a teacher.

To summarize this section, teachers must have ample knowledge and deep love of their subject and their student. They must also be in constant pursuance of growth for their development as

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an educator and maintaining their good intentions. What an honorable of an endeavor to have the lifestyle of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). In the book, "The Virtues of Good Deeds, Shaykh Zakariya mentions on page a hadith in which the Holy Prophet said, "I was only sent as a teacher".

As for the second area of consideration, the role of student will be discussed. The student is first and foremost a servant of Allah with God given rights. Educators often forget that Allah ta'ala loves children and we overlook the fact that even when they are wrong, they are still innocent. This is proven from our Islamic Aqa'id. These students are the future of our religion and our contribution to a better society and humanity at large. This is a tremendous trust that is not to be taken frivolously. Although this section is about the student, one must emphasize the educator's part in having a successful student. The teacher's role is not just to perfect the student, but rather to perfect our relationship with the student as well.

One should consider the importance in reviving the Sunnah of how to treat children. One of the most all-inclusive and absolute wise statements came from Sayidina Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) when he said the following, "As for your children, play with them for seven (years), teach them for seven, befriend them for seven and then let the reigns go". This statement could not have come from other than a psychologist of the highest order and it needs its own thesis. However, let us just elaborate on this remarkable statement. There is clearly such a thing as developmental stages. A teacher of any subject needs to not only be familiar with these stages but also have such an understanding of them where they can recognize these stages in their students to teach them accordingly. Fairness is not to treat all the students the same. Rather, it is to treat them according to their overall situation, to differentiate their instruction, which is clear in the sunnah. Another main point in the road of student's success is the means of

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evaluation. A successful method is when students are well aware of what is expected of them through clear rubrics. Rubrics should be provided prior to students being the work being evaluated. It also can be reviewed after the evaluation in order for students to clearly identify their errors. Also, students can thrive when they are evaluated in numerous ways and the lessons are tailored to their needs and their interests. Using a variation of assessments is quite helpful in giving students an opportunity to express their talents in how they learn differently. Lastly, when students are able to monitor their own progress by maintaining histograms or a visual of their progress over time, it encourages them to succeed. At Universal School there is the concept of students "owning" their own grades. They generate their own benchmarks based on their scores and compete with themselves which is the healthiest form of competition. This is eluded in the hadith of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) where he advised us to not make today worse than yesterday. It should be better and at minimum it should be the same.

As for the lessons, teachers should be flexible on modifying the lesson plan according to the interest of the students. Teachers should be aware of what keeps the students engaged and challenged. There should be a balanced mixture of games, stories, plays and hands on learning. The use of technology is important and a great benefit can be derived from it. However, education should not be reduced to only fun and games. Balance is the best medicine and it is the path of the Beloved of God (peace and blessings be upon him). One of the best ways of increasing the interest of the students is by implementing the concept of shura by acquiring input from the students about their interests. This is what is referred to as being "real" with the students. Through sharing life experiences and appreciating them, their stories and life experiences become keys to building a successful relationship. The modern education system is lacking in this area tremendously and Muslims need to revive this tradition. One must be very

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careful not to turn our students into robots that can fulfill the role of a modern consumer who has all the information they need to continue their robotic lives. The best lessons are always when the teachers are actively engaged with the students in the lesson and are raising them up while descending to their ground of knowledge.

The teacher should avoid direct critical or negative feedback. The way of our Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), was through indirect critiquing for self-improvement allow the student to grow. On the other hand, positive feedback must be direct. There is rarely a story from the *seerah* where a *sahaba* did a good thing or got an answer correct except that the Prophet praised him. What is blameworthy is the "extreme unwarranted praise". The objective of the feedback is for a student to succeed not to punish. This works wonderfully, especially if the school is protocol based rather than rule based. Otherwise, animosity will grow from the students and they may see the teacher in opposition of their well-being. Here we should also point out that the modern usage of guilt is strongly contradicting the to sunnah and shame (Haya') is what needs to be nurtured. If a teacher has ever been criticized by a student "this teacher doesn't like me, or hates me" then the teacher should reconsider their feedback strategy.

In conclusion, power is through mercy and if one is blessed with it they should know that this is a great gift and a lordly attribute. It is not a by chance that the first hadith in hadith science handed down to hadith students is the Hadith of Al-Rahma, (The hadith of mercy).

In this paper we discussed the role of the teacher and the student in transforming your classes into classes the students love. God willing the last two, the environment and the material, will be looked at in a different workshop.

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يَا فَتَاحُ يَا عَلِيمُ افْتَحْ لَنَا فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ط

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا

مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ وَسَلَّمَ

نَوَيْتُ التَّعَلَّمَ وَالتَّعْلِيمَ وَالتَّذَكُّرَ وَالتَّذْكَيرَ، وَالتَّنْفِعَ وَ

الْإِنْتِفَاعَ، وَالْإِفَادَةَ وَالْإِسْتِفَادَةَ وَالْحَثَّ عَلَى

التَّمَسُّكِ بِكِتَابِ اللَّهِ وَسُنَّةِ رَسُولِهِ وَالدُّعَا إِلَى

الْهُدَى وَالدَّلَالَةَ عَلَى الْخَيْرِ وَابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ اللَّهِ

وَمَرْضَاتِهِ وَقُرْبِهِ وَثَوَابِهِ سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى

Al-hamdu lilahi rabb il 'alamîn wa sallahu 'ala saydinâ Muhamamdin wa 'alâ âlihi wa sahbihi wa sallam.  
Nawaytu al-ta'alluma wa talîma wat\_tadhakkara wa-tadhkîr wa\_nâ'fa' wa\_l\_'intifâ' wal-ifâdah wa'l\_istifâdah  
wa\_l-hath 'ala\_tamassuki bi kitâbillahi wa sunnati\_rusûlihi wa\_du'â il\_al-hudâ wa\_dalâlata 'ala\_l\_khayri  
wabtighâha waj\_hillâhi wa mardâtihi wa qurbihi wa thawâbihi subhânahu wa ta'âla

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*All praise to Allah, Lord of the Worlds. And salutations and greetings upon our master Muhammad and upon his family and companions. I intend to study and teach, take and give a reminder, take and give benefit, take and give advantage, to encourage the holding fast to the book of Allah and the way of his messenger, and calling to guidance and directing towards good hoping for the countenance of Allah and His pleasure, proximity and reward, transcendent is He.*