Creating an Islamic Studies Unit Using Technology and Service Learning

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**Abstract**

Islamic Studies has virtually remained unchanged since the event of the American Islamic School. With contemporary issues becoming such a relevant part of our students’ lives, it is important for the Islamic Studies curriculum to evolve and expand to cover more than traditional topics. It’s necessary to equip our students with the tools to handle contemporary issues that are encountered as Muslims in this day and age. This workshop will work through the steps to create a simple effective Islamic Studies unit. This is done by starting with a current issue, acquiring knowledge by incorporating the use of technology and research, then applying what is learned through service learning. Participants will discuss how service learning projects merge education and community service, will enjoy Hands-on activities, and will generate ideas needed to plan and implement a structured project aligned with the unit being taught.

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**Introduction**

Before any successful unit can occur, procedures and routines must be well established within the classroom. This is one of the most important aspects of any successful class. Classroom procedures and routines include basic transitions and functions of a class. Examples include procedures like entering and leaving the classroom, how to get help, group work, going to the bathroom, turning in work, or what to do if you finish your work early (Murray, 2002). Establishing things that seem simple like what to do with completed work, helps the classroom run smoothly and also allows students to now what are teacher expectations. If classroom procedures and routines aren’t established and students do not know expectations, the valuable classroom time is wasted and this is when many behavior issues occur.

Harry Wong discusses the importance of having procedures, “Student achievement at the end of the year is directly related to the degree to which the teacher establishes good control of the classroom procedures in the very first week of the school year.” (Wong, 2009)

**Steps to Organizing the Unit**

Step One: Understanding the “Big Idea”

A “Big Idea” is an enduring point, or an idea that a teacher wants students to understand by the end of the unit. As a teacher, it’s important to be aware that  it’s not easy to develop Big Ideas. It takes a few tries before one can create a few good ones, because the concept must be general enough to encompass different aspects, and the idea should allow students to explore the topic at depth. In addition, the Big Idea needs to be narrowed down and specific enough to adhere to reasonable timelines while considering learning level and age of the students. The Big Idea should not be longer than one sentence, and should avoid words that incline to the absolute. Words like *always a*nd *never* shouldn’t be used, instead using words such as *often, many, usually*, are preferred. Lastly, it’s important that the students know what the Big Idea is able to connect tasks to the idea throughout the unit.

Step Two: Identify Standards and Objectives

When creating an effective Islamic Studies unit, it is important to align with standards or guidelines required by the school.  Following that, developing objectives, or stating what the students will do, how they will do it, and how it will be assessed is essential. For example, the standards may state students are to learn the five pillars of Islam. The unit a teacher may develop could be “Salah”. An example objective in that unit would state that “students will create a brochure describing steps for making wudu scoring at least four out of a five-point rubric”.     Again, it is important to consider the age an grade of the students when developing objectives. Determining what will a second-grade student needs to know by the end of the salat unit will help the teacher to create the unit more precisely. Harry Wong describes standards as being the backbone of the curriculum because they tell the teacher what students are to master (Wong, 2009). A teacher delivering instruction without standards is like a sailor rowing a boat without an oar.

Step Three: Conclude, Introduce, and Build the Unit

Conclude, introduce, and build the unit, in that order. Begin with the end in mind. Using the standards and objectives as guidelines, develop the end, or summative, assessment. Decide how students will demonstrate what they learned throughout the unit and how they understood the Big Idea. Unit end assessments may include written tests, presentations, or projects. Once the end destination is set, a focus on a strong introduction to the unit involving the Big Idea is suggested. An introduction to a unit allows students to explore concepts and build background knowledge. Solidifying a strong plan for both the beginning and end of the unit gives the teacher necessary parameters for creating the lessons that support the Big Idea. Building the unit with interactive and engaging lessons is essential. Keeping in mind students various learning abilities, learning styles, and learning preferences will help keep lessons varied and interesting to all. In addition, incorporating technology and service learning opportunities into the lessons will offer many opportunities for students to apply Islamic concepts in locally, globally, and virtually.

**Technology Integration**

When building the unit, it is important to consider the use of technology. In our ever-changing world of technology, it is becoming as valuable as ever to integrate technology into instruction, exploration, and assessments. Using technology within the classroom has many benefits for students such as reaching a diverse population of learners, preparing for future careers, student engagement and so much more. Although technology can be costly and is one of the leading reasons for teachers not using it in the classroom (Wolpert-Gawron), there are simple ways to integrate technology without high cost. Most students in higher grades have cell phones. Using websites like Kaboot.com or Quizlet.com can be used to play games, take assessments, or review prior knowledge is a wonderful way for students to use their cell phones to connect to the class as the teacher projects the questions on the board. It engages the students and increases their interest. They become excited about learning as they compete in answering questions related to content taught. These resources can be used from elementary to high school. Another cost-effective use of technology is utilizing the use of cameras. Whether by way of a cell phone or a video camera, students can use them to create class skits on the Seerah or a weekly newscast about current events. Teachers can use them to record mini lessons for a flipped classroom lesson. If technology is used throughout the year, it becomes less tedious for teachers. The first few months requires patience and time. But once students are trained on using technology the benefits will be well worth it. As teachers, it is our duty to constantly learn and stay up-to-date with technology and what will engage the ever changing generations. As Harry Wong puts it, “A true professional and effective teacher is a learner who learns along with the students (Wong, 23).”

If a school can invest in technology, the possibilities are endless. Technology paves a way for students to work at their own pace. Harry Wong mentions in The First Days of School that “Every one of us is both a student and a teacher. We are at our best when we each teach ourselves what we need to learn (Wong, 10).” Teachers can monitor student progress quickly, spot struggling students and provide enrichment. Google Classroom, Quizlet and Nearpod is a wonderful way for teachers to do this. The Islamic Studies teacher can create their own lessons and activities using these websites. Other ways of using technology to enrich learning is utilizing learning communities such as iEARN to connect with students around the world. After reading a novel such as Parvana by Deborah Ellis, students can create pen pals with students from Afghanistan to develop relationships with children like the main character in the novel. They can connect with other cultures by sending and receiving holiday cards from children in China. Technology can be used to create conversations and respectful debates on current events happening around the world. Using technology to research local and global issues, can lead to greater enrichment such as service learning projects to provide high quality and valuable authentic assessments to enrich any curriculum.

**Service Learning**

The incorporation of Service Learning projects into education has become very popular in schools and across all age groups from elementary to high school. Per Vanderbilt University, service learning is defined as: "A form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves.” This new teaching strategy has given educators the opportunity to produce well-rounded students who are both knowledgeable and caring about their surroundings. By organizing Service learning projects at schools, students will receive an authentic educational experience, acquire a better understanding of diverse communities and learn how to develop empathy towards others.

Organizing a service learning project comprises of 5 different stages. The first stage is called “Investigation”. In this stage the students must investigate two things: 1) The resources they have 2) Needs of community or target people. Once this step has been completed and a need has been identified, teachers and students will then move to the planning stage. During this stage, students are required to research information about the selected need, define responsibilities of all involved and identify methods of implementation. Teachers on the other hand, must define a set of standards from the curriculum and tie it into the project. This academic component is exactly what distinguishes Service learning projects from Community service projects. In the third stage, which is called the Action stage, students carry out what they have planned and implement what they have learned in class to the real world. An example can be, making small goodie bags and giving them to kids at an orphanage, or cleaning up a local beach. By taking action, students gain a sense of accomplishment to their society and understand that they can make a difference no matter how young. The next stage is called Reflection, where students can individually and/or in groups discuss their thoughts and feelings about the experience. They will also assess the results of the project and evaluate their performance on a personal level. This process can uncover certain skills or pieces of information that were lacking during application so students can later work together with the help of the educator to improve these areas. In the final stage, which is called demonstration, students share what they have learned to parents, teachers, and peers from other grade levels. This can be done through organizing a presentation, putting up a photo gallery at school, or writing an article in the school newsletter.

Serving and helping others in need is a core principle in Islam. This is what Allah (SWT) ordered us to do. By integrating service learning projects into Islamic schools, we allow students to act on a value or belief that they’ve learned. Also, the Prophet Muhammad (sal Allahu alaihi wa sallam) said: “The similitude of believers regarding mutual love, affection, fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole-body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever.” [Muslim] So being part of the Muslim Ummah, we must learn about others problems and learn how to empathize with them. This teaches students the importance of being aware of local and global issues and helps them initiate actions that make a difference.

**Resources**

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