



Transforming Teaching Experiences in Online Learning: Voices of Lecturers in Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions as they navigate the challenges of online learning while integrating Islamic values. Although digital pedagogy has been widely researched, little is known about how educators in Islamic contexts balance modern educational tools with cultural and religious values. This study addresses this gap by employing an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the emotional and cognitive experiences of lecturers adapting to digital learning. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), revealing complex pedagogical challenges, including maintaining student engagement and ensuring spiritual connections in digital classrooms. The findings highlight innovative strategies, such as Islamic reflections and flipped classroom models, which effectively enhanced student involvement. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of culturally responsive digital pedagogy within Islamic educational settings. The study also emphasizes the importance of emotional and spiritual engagement, offering practical implications for educational institutions. Future research should explore longitudinal and comparative studies to further understand the evolving dynamics of digital pedagogy in culturally sensitive contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed educational landscapes worldwide, including higher education institutions in Islamic contexts (Le & Do, 2019). Online learning, accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, has become an essential mode of instruction, reshaping traditional teaching methodologies and challenging educators to adapt to new pedagogical paradigms. This shift is particularly impactful in Islamic higher education institutions, where teaching is not only about knowledge transfer but also about nurturing character and integrating Islamic values.

In recent years, the integration of digital platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing tools, and interactive multimedia resources has facilitated remote education (Kharaba dkk., 2023). However, these technological advancements also present unique challenges, particularly in maintaining meaningful student engagement and ensuring the contextualization of Islamic teachings in a virtual environment. The shift to online learning has disrupted the conventional dynamics of face-to-face interactions, raising concerns about emotional connectivity, student participation, and the holistic development of learners in an Islamic pedagogical context.

Prior research has explored various aspects of online education, including its effectiveness, technological barriers, and instructional strategies (Loder dkk., 2020). However, there remains a gap in understanding the subjective experiences of educators, particularly those in Islamic higher education, who are navigating the complexities of digital learning while striving to uphold Islamic educational values. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of lecturers as they adapt to the digital transformation of education.

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to delve deeper into the personal and cultural dimensions of teaching in Islamic higher education institutions (Meng dkk., 2019). It aims to uncover the meanings and interpretations that lecturers ascribe to their experiences in maintaining pedagogical effectiveness, student engagement, and value integration amidst the challenges of online learning. This exploration is crucial in informing educational policies and practices that resonate with the cultural and religious ethos of Islamic educational institutions.

Research on educators' experiences in navigating digital learning environments has gained significant attention, particularly in contexts requiring the integration of cultural and religious values (Hsiao dkk., 2023). In Islamic higher education institutions, the shift to online learning is not merely a technological transition but involves complex pedagogical adjustments to maintain religious authenticity while engaging students effectively. This complexity makes the exploration of subjective experiences a critical area of inquiry, as educators confront challenges in balancing modern educational tools with traditional Islamic pedagogical values.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the technological and instructional dimensions of online learning, often employing quantitative approaches to measure effectiveness or student outcomes (Zhang dkk., 2023). However, these methodologies fall short of capturing the nuanced, emotional, and cognitive experiences of educators, particularly in Islamic educational contexts where teaching involves moral and spiritual guidance in addition to knowledge dissemination.

The limitations of quantitative methods in exploring subjective experiences highlight the need for phenomenological research that delves into the lived experiences of educators (Bhuttah dkk., 2024). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding human experiences from the perspective of those who live them, is particularly suitable for this study. It allows for an in-depth exploration of how lecturers interpret their experiences in adapting pedagogical strategies, maintaining student engagement, and integrating Islamic values in digital classrooms.

This study addresses a crucial gap in the literature by investigating how educators in Islamic higher education navigate the emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical challenges of online learning (Prystupa dkk., 2020). By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study aims to uncover the meanings and interpretations that educators attribute to their experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between technology, pedagogy, and Islamic values.

Despite the growing body of research on online learning and digital pedagogy, the majority of existing studies have primarily adopted quantitative methods or practical approaches focused on technological implementation and instructional effectiveness (Tang & Tang, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into the functional aspects of digital education, they fall short of capturing the depth and complexity of educators' lived experiences, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts such as Islamic higher education.

Conventional approaches in digital pedagogy often emphasize metrics of engagement, student performance, and user satisfaction. However, these quantitative measures are limited in their capacity to explore the nuanced emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions of teaching, which are essential components of the educational philosophy in Islamic institutions (Freeman et al., 2014). The reliance on surveys and statistical analyses overlooks the subjective meanings and interpretive processes that educators navigate while integrating Islamic values within digital classrooms.

The lack of qualitative exploration into these subjective experiences creates a significant gap in understanding how educators make sense of their roles, adapt pedagogical strategies, and negotiate cultural and religious expectations within virtual learning environments. Specifically, there is limited research examining how Islamic educators interpret and reconcile the challenges of maintaining student engagement, delivering value-based education, and fostering spiritual development in online learning contexts.

This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by employing an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the lived experiences of lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions (Lin dkk., 2024). By focusing on their subjective interpretations and emotional journeys, this research seeks to

provide a holistic understanding of the dynamic interplay between digital pedagogy, Islamic educational values, and cultural identity. This approach will contribute to the existing literature by revealing the complexities of teaching in digital Islamic educational settings, offering new perspectives that inform both theory and practice.

Previous research has extensively examined online learning, focusing on technological integration, instructional design, and student engagement (Pesovski dkk., 2024). However, limited studies have delved into the subjective experiences of educators, particularly in Islamic higher education contexts where teaching is intertwined with religious and cultural values. This study builds upon existing literature by exploring the emotional and cognitive experiences of lecturers navigating digital pedagogy while striving to maintain Islamic educational values. The interpretative phenomenological approach employed in this research provides a deeper understanding of how educators make sense of their roles, adapt pedagogical strategies, and reconcile cultural expectations within virtual classrooms.

This study utilizes interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate the lived experiences of lecturers, emphasizing the subjective meanings they attribute to teaching in digital Islamic educational settings. IPA is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of personal and contextual interpretations, revealing how educators negotiate challenges, employ innovative strategies, and integrate Islamic values within online learning environments. By focusing on the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of teaching, this study addresses the identified knowledge gap and offers a comprehensive perspective on the complexities of digital pedagogy in Islamic contexts.

This article is structured as follows: The Introduction provides a contextual background and outlines the research questions driving the study. The Method section describes the interpretative phenomenological approach, detailing participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The Results section presents thematic findings that reveal the pedagogical challenges, engagement strategies, and cultural integration experiences of lecturers. The Discussion interprets the findings within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, highlighting the implications for digital pedagogy and Islamic educational practices. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the key insights and suggests directions for future research, contributing to the broader discourse on online learning and cultural identity in education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions who navigated the transition to online learning (Yang & Hsu, 2020). Phenomenology was selected as the research design due to its focus on understanding the lived experiences and the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it. This approach enabled a deep exploration of the meanings and interpretations that lecturers attributed to their teaching experiences in digital learning environments.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was specifically utilized, emphasizing the double hermeneutic process wherein participants make sense of their experiences, and the researcher interprets this sense-making. This approach was appropriate for revealing the nuanced and complex emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical challenges encountered during the shift to online education.

Participants

Participants were lecturers from Islamic higher education institutions with a minimum of two years of online teaching experience (Vega dkk., 2023). Selection was based on purposive sampling to ensure that participants possessed relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria included active use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), adaptation of Islamic values in digital pedagogy, and willingness to share subjective experiences.

A total of 12 participants (6 males and 6 females), aged between 30 and 55, from various academic departments, contributed to the study. This demographic diversity provided a comprehensive perspective on the pedagogical and cultural challenges faced across different disciplines.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing platforms (Chen dkk., 2024). The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, allowing for an open-ended exploration of participants' experiences. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized, focusing on key areas such as pedagogical challenges, strategies for maintaining student engagement, and integration of Islamic values in digital learning.

To enhance the authenticity of responses, participants were encouraged to reflect on specific incidents and share their emotional and cognitive reactions. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic approach: (1) reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse in the data, (2) initial noting to identify descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, and (5) identifying patterns across cases.

NVivo software was employed to organize and code the data, facilitating a comprehensive thematic analysis. This method allowed for the identification of core themes related to pedagogical challenges, student engagement strategies, and Islamic value integration, ensuring that the findings authentically represented participants' lived experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage (Wang dkk., 2024). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing digital recordings and transcripts. The study adhered to ethical standards in qualitative research, respecting participants' dignity, privacy, and cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Navigating Pedagogical Challenges in Online Learning

The transition to online learning has presented significant pedagogical challenges for lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions. One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was the difficulty in fostering meaningful engagement with students. Many lecturers expressed that the virtual environment often created a sense of detachment, making it harder to establish an interactive and dynamic learning atmosphere. As one participant noted:

"When teaching in a face-to-face setting, I could easily gauge students' reactions and adjust my approach accordingly. In an online setting, however, I often feel like I am speaking to a blank screen."

Furthermore, the adaptation to Learning Management Systems (LMS) was another pressing issue. Several lecturers highlighted their struggles in mastering digital tools, particularly in integrating Islamic values into a digital learning space. The technological barriers sometimes led to a mechanical delivery of lessons, as expressed by another participant:

"I found myself spending more time troubleshooting technical issues than actually engaging students in meaningful discussions. This has been quite frustrating."

Strategies for Maintaining Student Engagement

To overcome these challenges, lecturers employed various innovative strategies to maintain student engagement. One commonly adopted approach was the use of interactive multimedia resources infused with Islamic perspectives. Some lecturers created short video reflections that incorporated Islamic values to provide students with spiritual motivation before each session. As described by one respondent:

"At the beginning of each online session, I provide a brief Islamic reflection to set the tone. This helps students connect emotionally and fosters a sense of community."

Additionally, flipped classroom techniques were increasingly used to encourage student participation. By assigning pre-recorded lectures and focusing on discussions during synchronous sessions, lecturers observed a higher level of student involvement. One lecturer explained:

"When students come prepared, they are more willing to engage in discussions. I noticed that structuring my classes this way made online learning more effective."

Integration of Islamic Values in Digital Learning

A central theme that emerged was the challenge of seamlessly integrating Islamic values into an online learning framework. Some lecturers noted that while the digital medium offered new opportunities, it also presented obstacles in maintaining the holistic Islamic educational approach. A lecturer reflected on this struggle:

"Teaching in an Islamic university means that we don't just transfer knowledge; we shape character. Online learning has made this more difficult because there's a missing personal touch."

Despite these difficulties, creative solutions emerged. Some lecturers leveraged discussion forums to encourage moral and ethical debates rooted in Islamic teachings. Others designed case studies that allowed students to analyze real-world scenarios through an Islamic lens. As one respondent stated:

"By framing assignments within an Islamic context, I noticed students became more reflective and critical in their responses. This was an unexpected benefit of online learning."

The Impact of Online Learning on Lecturer-Student Relationships

One of the most profound transformations observed was the shift in lecturer-student relationships. While online learning initially created a sense of detachment, some lecturers reported that certain digital tools, such as one-on-one virtual consultations, helped bridge the emotional gap. A lecturer shared:

"I started holding individual consultations via video calls. Although time-consuming, this made a huge difference in building rapport with students and understanding their challenges."

However, other lecturers felt that the depth of connection remained limited in comparison to face-to-face interactions. The absence of non-verbal cues and spontaneous discussions was frequently cited as a major drawback. One lecturer noted:

"In an online setting, students participate in a more structured manner, but the organic and spontaneous interactions that make learning dynamic are lost."

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted experiences of lecturers navigating online learning in Islamic higher education institutions. While pedagogical challenges and technological barriers posed initial setbacks, innovative strategies emerged to sustain student engagement and integrate Islamic values. The transition to online learning reshaped lecturer-student

interactions, presenting both obstacles and new opportunities. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of digital education within an Islamic pedagogical framework.

The findings of this study revealed that lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions faced complex pedagogical challenges in online learning, including difficulties in maintaining meaningful engagement and integrating Islamic values in a digital environment (Freeman et al., 2014). Despite these challenges, innovative strategies emerged, such as the use of interactive multimedia infused with Islamic perspectives and the implementation of flipped classroom techniques, which contributed to enhanced student engagement. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of how lecturers navigate the dynamic interplay between digital pedagogy and Islamic educational values.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by addressing the research questions posed in the Introduction. It uncovers the subjective experiences of lecturers in adapting to digital learning environments, revealing emotional and cognitive challenges such as feelings of detachment and struggles with maintaining spiritual connections. The findings also highlight how lecturers creatively integrated Islamic values, fostering a sense of community and moral reflection among students. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study provides a deeper understanding of how lecturers interpret and respond to the complexities of teaching in online Islamic educational settings.

The findings resonate with previous studies that emphasized the challenges of maintaining student engagement in online learning (e.g., Moore, 2019; Garrison, 2020). However, this study extends the literature by exploring the cultural and religious dimensions unique to Islamic higher education, offering new insights into the role of spiritual reflection in fostering student involvement. The results also support Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, as lecturers actively constructed learning communities through culturally relevant content and interactive pedagogies (Rahman dkk., 2023). By contextualizing digital pedagogy within an Islamic educational framework, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive teaching in virtual environments.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer significant implications for both theory and practice in digital pedagogy within Islamic higher education (Akalin & Sahin, 2020). From a theoretical perspective, this research expands the understanding of how cultural and religious values influence pedagogical strategies in online learning environments. It illustrates the importance of culturally responsive teaching that integrates moral and spiritual elements, challenging conventional digital pedagogy models that often prioritize cognitive engagement without considering cultural identity.

Practically, the innovative strategies employed by lecturers, such as incorporating Islamic reflections and utilizing flipped classroom models, provide actionable insights for educators seeking to enhance student engagement in virtual learning settings. These strategies not only maintain cultural relevance but also foster emotional connections, addressing the common issue of detachment in online education. Educational institutions can benefit from these findings by supporting the development of culturally integrated digital curricula and providing professional development opportunities focused on culturally responsive pedagogy.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of lecturers in Islamic higher education, it is not without limitations. The study's scope was limited to a specific cultural and educational context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other religious or secular educational institutions. Additionally, the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, while suitable for exploring subjective experiences, inherently relies on participants' self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability.

Another limitation lies in the sample size and composition, as the study focused on a purposive sample of 12 lecturers, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences across different Islamic educational institutions or geographic regions. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and incorporating longitudinal approaches to examine the evolving nature of digital pedagogy in Islamic contexts.

Directions for Future Research

Building on these findings, future research should explore comparative studies between Islamic and non-Islamic educational institutions to better understand the influence of cultural and religious values on digital pedagogy. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how lecturers' experiences and strategies evolve over time as digital technologies and pedagogical practices continue to advance.

There is also a need for interdisciplinary research that integrates educational technology, cultural studies, and religious education to develop holistic frameworks for culturally responsive digital pedagogy. Investigating students' perspectives on culturally integrated online learning environments could further enrich the understanding of effective digital pedagogy in culturally sensitive contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions as they navigated the challenges of online learning while integrating Islamic values. The findings revealed complex pedagogical challenges, including maintaining student engagement and ensuring spiritual connections in digital classrooms. However, lecturers employed innovative strategies, such as Islamic reflections and flipped classrooms, to overcome these obstacles and enhance student involvement. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of culturally responsive digital pedagogy, particularly within Islamic educational contexts. The study also highlights the importance of emotional and spiritual engagement in online learning environments, offering practical implications for educational institutions. Future research should explore longitudinal and comparative studies to further understand the evolving dynamics of digital pedagogy in culturally sensitive contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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