

## PROBING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPROACH IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Received: 3, 2023. Accepted: 12, 2023. Published: 12, 2023.

### ABSTRACT

This study delves into the effective strategies employed in Islamic religious education to illuminate the nexus between instructional approaches and subject matter alignment. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological orientation, the investigation involved fifteen high school Islamic religious education teachers. Participants were selected using a purposive technique, focusing on eligibility criteria specific to Islamic religious education instructors. Data collection took place through structured interviews with an interview protocol, followed by analysis stages encompassing data collection, reduction, and interpretation. The results discern five overarching themes elucidating the strategies employed in teaching Islamic religious education. Firstly, three schools integrated experiential learning into their pedagogical approach, intertwining it with discussion strategies. Secondly, the application of experiential learning strategies is more straightforward with less intricate subject matter. Thirdly, addressing complex topics necessitates teachers to demonstrate competencies across pedagogical, personal, professional, and social dimensions. Fourthly, not all students readily engage in experiential learning due to unfamiliarity with articulating personal experiences as educational content. Lastly, the study advocates for incorporating advanced methods to tackle complex subject matter. These findings offer a foundational reference for future research endeavors, acknowledging the study's limitations and the recommendations proposed.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Islamic Religious Education, Learning Strategy

### ABSTRAK

Kunci untuk mencapai hasil pembelajaran yang efektif terletak pada penerapan strategi yang selaras dengan materi pelajaran. Penelitian ini berupaya menjelaskan strategi yang digunakan dalam ranah pendidikan agama Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif yang berorientasi fenomenologis, penelitian ini melibatkan lima belas guru pendidikan agama Islam SMA sebagai responden. Pemilihan peserta dilakukan secara metodis dengan teknik purposif, dengan kriteria kelayakan berfokus pada guru pendidikan agama Islam. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara terstruktur dengan menggunakan protokol wawancara. Analisis data terungkap melalui tahapan pengumpulan data, reduksi data, dan interpretasi data. Hasil analisis ini menggambarkan lima tema utama yang mendasari strategi yang digunakan dalam pengajaran pendidikan agama Islam. Gambaran pertama mengungkapkan bahwa, di tiga sekolah yang diteliti, para guru telah mengintegrasikan pembelajaran berdasarkan pengalaman ke dalam pendekatan pedagogi mereka, menggabungkannya dengan strategi diskusi. Yang kedua menyoroti bahwa penerapan strategi pembelajaran

*berdasarkan pengalaman cenderung lebih mudah dalam kasus-kasus yang melibatkan materi pelajaran yang tidak terlalu rumit. Hal ketiga menjadi jelas bahwa ketika menangani topik yang lebih kompleks, guru harus menunjukkan kompetensi di seluruh dimensi pedagogi, pribadi, profesional, dan sosial. Poin keempat menggarisbawahi bahwa tidak semua siswa siap terlibat dalam proses pembelajaran berdasarkan pengalaman, terutama karena mereka tidak terbiasa mengartikulasikan pengalaman pribadi sebagai konten pendidikan. Kelompok kelima menganjurkan penggabungan metode yang lebih maju untuk mengatasi permasalahan yang kompleks. Temuan-temuan ini siap menjadi referensi dasar untuk upaya penelitian di masa depan, selaras dengan keterbatasan penelitian dan rekomendasi yang diajukan.*

*Kata Kunci: Strategi Belajar, Pengalaman Belajar, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Kompetensi*

## INTRODUCTION

Religious education is a component of the national education system, spanning from elementary school through university levels. In the context of high school education, it serves as a means of enhancing the religious literacy of students, a point underscored by (Skerrett, 2014). Religious education plays a pivotal role in shaping and nurturing the foundation of national character education. By cultivating students' character in alignment with the values of faith and piety, it contributes to the creation of well-rounded individuals who embody the essence of a complete Indonesian citizen.

Conversely, as an applied science discipline, religious education maintains a strong connection with an individual's capacity to evolve into a well-rounded citizen, possessing the competence to comprehend and apply the fundamental tenets of tolerance, democracy, and responsibility. This perspective aligns with the viewpoint articulated by (Sakai & Isbah, 2014), which underscores the idea that heightened religiosity has played a significant role in the expansion of socially engaged religious organizations, leveraged to address societal issues.

The challenge that arises from this situation pertains to the necessity for effective instructional approaches when conveying abstract materials within Islamic religious education. This complexity prompts educators, in this case, teachers, to seek out an appropriate pedagogical method. Considering both the characteristics of student learning and the unique attributes of religious knowledge, one of the learning models found to be suitable is the experiential learning model. This model places significant emphasis on the significance of students' personal experiences. Experiential education, in particular, underscores the deliberate involvement of educators with students in direct experiences and dedicated reflection to enhance knowledge, cultivate skills, clarify values, and foster individuals' abilities to contribute to their communities (Gross & Rutland, 2017).

Within the realm of education, firsthand experiences assume a pivotal role in shaping an individual's knowledge development (Clark & Zimmerman, 2014). A student's experiences are instrumental in infusing significance into the subject matter they are studying. This meaningful knowledge equips students with problem-solving capabilities, enabling them to address challenges effectively. In the context of high school education, including religious education (Islam), this implies that students must embrace a higher degree of self-directed learning, exercise discipline in time management, and engage in more focused and intensive learning activities. These actions empower students to demonstrate productivity, creativity, and innovation (Kormos & Csizér, 2014).

Student experiences serve as a valuable educational asset for the development of knowledge, in line with the perspective presented (Reigeluth et al., 2017). Experiential learning follows a four-stage process, comprising: Concrete experience; Observation and reflection; Formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and Testing implementations (Kolb, 2015). A more detailed representation of these stages can be found in Figure 1.

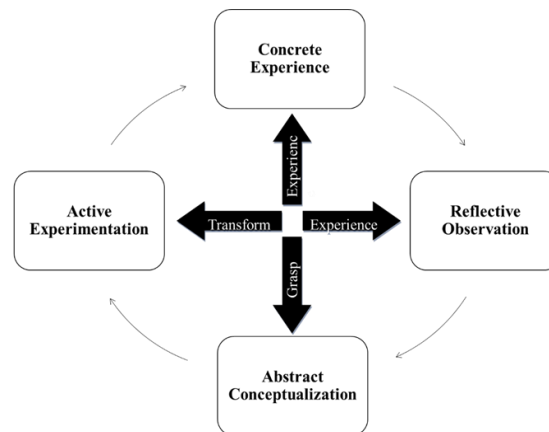


Figure 1. Lewin's Experiential Learning Cycle Adaptation Model

The experiential learning model places the student at the centre of the learning process. This signifies that the primary actors engaged in the learning journey are the students themselves, rather than the teachers. In this framework, students assume control over their learning and inquiries, enabling them to be self-reliant and accountable for their educational progress. The experiential learning model is characterized by a focus on active participation, with students frequently engaging in activities, trials, experiments, role-playing, demonstrations, and other hands-on experiences as part of their learning process (Cahyo et al., 2022).

Building upon the contextual issues described above, a number of challenges come to the forefront. One such issue pertains to the presence of high school teachers who have already integrated experiential learning models into their teaching methods. This approach, rooted in experiential learning, is designed to enhance educational outcomes. Furthermore, it recognizes experience as a strategic tool for enhancing students' creativity and innovation (O'Connor et al., 2018). The predicaments surrounding the strategy of Islamic religious education in high schools encompass various facets, including the delivery of course materials, the readiness of students, the utilization of educational resources, and more.

Recent research in the field of education has demonstrated an increase in students' comprehension of the subject matter when employing experiential learning. The research conducted by Apdoludin and Martinissyamin in 2022 concluded that fostering critical thinking alongside experience and autonomy yields enhanced learning outcomes compared to traditional methods. These findings align with the results of McCarthy's research, which affirmed the positive outcomes associated with experiential or active learning. Such approaches promote students' capacity for independent learning, stimulate creativity, encourage inquiry, and enable reflective thinking based on experiential knowledge, thus optimizing students' abilities. In a similar vein, Hawtrey's research in 2007 revealed that experiential learning greatly aids students in recognizing their potential and empowers them to develop that potential, a discovery that holds true even at the tertiary level.

The novelty of this research to demonstrate that the aforementioned descriptions collectively emphasize the objective of high school education, which is to foster independence while considering students' life experiences as a means to address the challenges they encounter. Consequently, it strongly advocates the adoption of an experiential learning model to tap into students' potential, grounded in their abilities and prior experiences.

The primary focus of this investigation is to delineate the tactics employed by high school IRE teachers during the process of instruction. The pedagogical approach employed at the high school level is characterized by experiential learning. Recognizing the pivotal importance of teachers' competence in the realm of IRE and their contribution to enhancing educational

quality, this research centres on the meticulous examination of the instructional strategies implemented by high school teachers.

## METHOD

This study uses a phenomenological approach according to the type of qualitative research (Kistoro et al., 2021). The main data sources or participants are IRE teachers at senior high schools in Yogyakarta. With the large number of schools that will be participants, the researcher determines the main participants using a purposive technique, where the informants are selected according to the provisions or criteria that have been made, namely all of them are special IRE teachers in high school which are favorite schools. The planned number is 15 participants representing each region in Yogyakarta which includes Yogyakarta City, Bantul Regency, Sleman, Gunung Kidul and Kulonprogo. This selection is based on reasons as a regional representation in carrying out religious learning at the high school level. In addition, another consideration is a large number of students which is the reason for determining participants. The characteristics of the participants involved in this study can be shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Profile from Senior High Schools

School Domicile	Status	Male	female	Total
Yogyakarta	IRE Teacher	2	1	3
Sleman	IRE Teacher	3	0	3
Kulonprogo	IRE Teacher	2	1	3
Bantul	IRE Teacher	1	2	3
Gunung Kidul	IRE Teacher	3	0	3
Total				15

Source: results of interviews in the field

The research commences with the initial observational phase, which serves as one of the methods for collecting data and assessing the learning system in place. Subsequently, the next step involves conducting comprehensive interviews with the respondents to gain deeper insights into the learning strategies employed. These interviews encompass various aspects, including the preparatory stages of learning, the actual implementation of the learning process, and the subsequent evaluation of the learning that has transpired.

The process of data collection was initiated following the receipt of approval to collect data from the IRE study program. Out of the originally planned 10 IRE teacher participants, data were successfully obtained from 5 participants through in-depth interviews. However, there were other intended participants from whom data could not be acquired due to various reasons, including scheduling conflicts with school exams or other unforeseen circumstances. Each interview, lasting between 15 and 25 minutes, was meticulously recorded using a tape recorder to ensure high-quality data. Following the interviews with all informants, the data were subsequently transcribed verbatim, word for word. The transcripts of the interview data were then systematically coded based on key themes and sentences deemed significant for the ensuing analysis.

The significant phrases are subsequently condensed or categorized into specific themes, aligning with the discourse, following the approach presented (Secolsky & Denison, 2012). The meanings embedded within these distinct themes are then synthesized into a comprehensive overarching theme through the creation of in-depth and comprehensive descriptions. The final step in the analysis involves interpreting the data by interconnecting and elucidating the outcomes of the reduction process in accordance with the overarching themes established

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Implementation of an IRE learning model based on experiential learning

Based on the analysis and discussions, it can be deduced that three IRE teachers have employed an experiential learning model as part of their instructional strategy. In contrast, two teachers have adhered to traditional or classical lecture-based teaching methods. These conclusions have been drawn from an examination of five interview transcripts with respondents. These interviews have unveiled five principal themes shedding light on the instructional approaches adopted by these educators within the classroom.

The first theme underscores that three high school IRE teachers have adopted a student-experience-based learning model, often complemented with discussion-based methods. Consequently, students have exhibited enhanced comprehension and a deeper grasp of IRE subject matter. IRE teachers frequently encounter challenges in explaining abstract content, such as the significance of prayer. An effective approach involves prompting students to share insights about their personal experiences and feelings after prayer, aiding their understanding and benefiting from their growing maturity and encouragement for rational thinking, thereby streamlining the learning process (Teacher S, personal communication, September 2022)

The essence of this experiential learning strategy aims to encourage students to engage in introspection and independent thinking, drawing upon experiences acquired in their everyday lives and immediate surroundings. Given the intricate nature of religious education, students are nurtured to develop critical thinking skills, absorb and internalize the instructional materials, ensuring a comprehensive understanding that can be practically applied. This learning approach is particularly well-suited for adult education, with the foundation of experiential learning being the firsthand experiences encountered by the students themselves.

Regarding the second theme, the utilization of experiential learning strategies, while effective, remains relatively uncomplicated and predominantly focuses on straightforward topics. Furthermore, it is apparent that the teachers' expertise and competencies need enhancement. This factor significantly influences the teaching and learning dynamics. When educators possess ample resources concerning instructional strategies and a deep understanding of the subject matter, the implementation of this approach can be extended to more complex topics. As an IRE teacher with a closely aligned educational background, I encounter challenges, specifically the insufficient availability of supplementary resources for implementing experiential learning strategies. I am of the belief that participating in training, such as microteaching and similar initiatives, could significantly improve my ability to conduct instruction more effectively (teacher A, personal communication, September 2022)

The third theme underscores the presence of intricate and multifaceted themes in teaching IRE, necessitating that teachers possess proficiency, especially in terms of pedagogical, personal, professional, and social competencies. IRE involves complex subject matter due to its abstract nature. As articulated by an experienced IRE teacher, "In my teaching experience, a robust teaching competence is considered the primary requirement for a religious teacher. The paramount objective is to understand the students' capabilities beforehand, enabling the formulation of tailored teaching strategies, especially as religious education involves a multitude of abstract content (teacher C, personal communication, September 2022)

The fourth theme pertains to the fact that not all students have fully developed their proficiency in utilizing experiential-based methods within the learning process. One of the challenges faced is that students tend to be unaccustomed to articulating their personal experiences as part of the instructional content. Enhancing this capability is essential for comprehending the subject matter effectively. One potential solution involves incorporating educational media to facilitate a more seamless absorption of the material. Additionally, IRE teachers employ diverse strategies throughout the learning process, as supported by insights

provided during an interview with one of the teachers. The speaker expressed that media is highly beneficial in the learning process. They mentioned using an LCD projector to display materials like slides and occasionally showing films related to the learning theme. This is done to enhance students' knowledge and facilitate their understanding of abstract material (teacher D, personal communication, September 2022).

In the fifth theme, there's a clear need to introduce more intricate methods. When it comes to educational matters, particularly regarding IRE content, the inclusion of a diverse array of methods is essential for a comprehensive understanding. While the experiential learning approach grounded in students' experiences serves as the primary teaching strategy for IRE subjects, it should be complemented by methods and techniques aligned with the students' capabilities. This ensures that students can effectively assimilate the subject matter and apply it in their daily lives, both within their families and communities.

### The Main Theme Of IRE Learning Based on Experiential Learning

In alignment with these perspectives, another teacher highlights a teaching model tailored to students' circumstances, incorporating practical exercises, direct observations, and instructional videos within the school environment. They emphasize the adaptability of these models to different subject matters, exemplifying sociodrama for historical or narrative content and employing audio-visual media for engaging lessons about prophets and their companions. A teacher emphasized the teaching model employed here, well-suited to students' circumstances, involves practical exercises, direct observations, and instructional videos adaptable to various subjects. For instance, sociodrama is effective for historical or narrative material, and audio-visual media featuring animated stories about prophets engages students more effectively, ensuring they retain knowledge and understanding (Teacher D, personal communication, September 2022).

In more detail, the research results based on the themes that have been analyzed can be shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Themes and Values

School Domicile	Status
First	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students' experiential learning results in a better and stronger understanding of receiving IRE material.</li> <li>2. The meaning of learning based on experience stimulates students to think critically following the experience gained from everyday life in their environment.</li> <li>3. IRE learning is complex so that experiential learning can be internalized, understood, and implemented by students.</li> <li>4. learning strategies are suitable for adult learning.</li> </ol>
Second	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The use of this experiential-based learning strategy is still very simple and related to easy themes.</li> <li>2. The ability or competence of IRE teachers needs to be added and improved.</li> <li>3. IRE teachers who have adequate provisions will have innovative learning strategies and make it easier to understand other themes.</li> </ol>
Third	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The theme of IRE learning is more complex because the material is abstract</li> <li>2. Abstract themes require teachers to combine skills in pedagogic, personality, and professional and social competencies.</li> </ol>
Fourth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The ability of students in learning based on experience has not all been able appear.</li> <li>2. One of the obstacles is that they are not used to expressing their experiences as material for learning.</li> <li>3. Learning media can help stimulate and develop students' potential.</li> </ol>

School Domicile	Status
Fifth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is necessary to add the application of more varied and innovative methods in experiential-based learning to make it more comprehensive.</li> <li>2. The student experience base can be the main strategy in teaching religious subjects, with the support of methods and techniques that are suitable for student's abilities.</li> </ol>

IRE particularly in the context of Islam, holds a pivotal role in Indonesia's educational landscape. Its primary aim is to instill and nurture a robust character, shaping individuals into well-rounded human beings equipped to address global challenges. IRE also serves as a catalyst for honing students' critical thinking abilities, a trait considered essential in various realms of life (Meacham & Meacham, 2015). In several countries, there is a growing recognition of the importance of including Islamic knowledge in the curriculum, underscoring the notion that IRE encompasses themes that can stimulate students' critical thinking across diverse domains, including science, society, and character development. In the face of the rapidly evolving global landscape, the overarching goal of progressive Islamic education is to produce graduates who possess not only scientific knowledge but also social, spiritual and emotional intelligence (Kistoro, 2017). These individuals should be enriched with spiritual values that form an integral part of their identity. Furthermore, the qualifications of educators are expected to align with the objectives of this educational model, which draws inspiration from the example set by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). This model emphasizes four key competencies: personality competence (Sidiq), social competence (Amanah), pedagogical competence (Tabligh), and professional competence (Aristyasari, 2019).

In Indonesian high schools, there exist religious education strategies that employ an experiential model, grounded in students' experiences and combined with a brainstorming approach. This model is acknowledged for its potential to enhance students' comprehension of religious content. From a learning theory standpoint, humanism underscores the significance of experience in shaping perception and highlights the autonomy and accountability of individuals in realizing their full capabilities. These fundamental principles form the basis of numerous adult learning theories that stress the self-directed nature of adult learners and the pivotal role of experiential learning in the educational process (Miettinen, 2000). The study's outcomes indicate that implementing this comprehensive experiential learning approach has led to an improvement in both material understanding and students' attitudes toward learning (Lee et al., 2016).

The essence of employing the experiential learning strategy is to encourage students to engage in introspection and independent thought, utilizing experiences gleaned from their day-to-day interactions within their immediate surroundings. This direct, immersive learning environment consistently yields more favorable outcomes, rooted in the firsthand experiences of students (Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2020). IRE constitutes a multifaceted form of learning. Present-day religious education tends to be characterized by the divergence of religious instruction from lived religious practices (Gearon, 2014). However, religious values should ideally equip individuals to resolve the challenges they encounter in their lives. Consequently, students should be equipped with the ability to think critically, receive educational content, and internalize it within their cognitive framework for comprehensive understanding and practical application (Joseph Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2019). This learning strategy is particularly well-suited for adult learners, given that it is fundamentally grounded in the unique experiences encountered by students themselves (Gazley et al., 2013).

The utilization of the experiential-based approach to religious learning in high schools is closely tied to prominent themes, notably the consistent execution of prayer rituals that foster qualities like sobriety and discipline. Proficiency in this practice can significantly enhance an

individual's capacity to manage high levels of stress (Cañas et al., 2020).). Following these religious practices, students engage in discussions about their personal experiences. Combining experiential methods with these discussions requires the teacher to possess the necessary skills and expertise. With the teacher equipped with adequate strategies and a profound grasp of the subject matter, the learning process becomes more seamless when addressing various themes. Ultimately, this dynamic enhances the enjoyment and appeal of the teaching and learning experience.

Comprehensive IRE demands a high level of proficiency. In essence, the full competency of IRE teachers encompasses their pedagogical capabilities, personal attributes, social acumen, and professional skills (Kistoro et al., 2020). Competence in pedagogy necessitates the aptitude to recognize students' abilities. The teacher's personal expertise lies in their ability to furnish examples and offer diverse experiences. Proficiency in observing religious issues in the community or broader environment becomes a vital component of their social skills. Simultaneously, their capacity to harmonize socio-religious themes within the framework of learning proves immensely valuable in the realm of professional skills.

The field observations indicate that, even though students are capable of engaging in experiential learning, not all of them can readily articulate their complete experiences. Some require prompting through questions that link to their personal encounters with the subject matter. For instance, when students were queried about whether they felt calm and stress-free during prayer, they responded that they didn't know. However, when probed further with questions about whether they experienced a reduced inclination to engage in undesirable activities after praying, they replied negatively, indicating a lack of such desires. This situation highlights a challenge that students still encounter in experiential learning – their limited inclination to express their personal experiences within the learning context.

This skill ideally needs refinement and enhancement to aid in the comprehension of the subject matter being taught. One approach to achieve this is by employing educational aids or learning media to facilitate the absorption of the material. Furthermore, teachers utilize a diverse array of strategies in the learning process. This approach aligns with the principles discussed by Hoover et al., (2010), which revolve around a framework for enhancing effective experiential learning. This framework includes elements like (1) interaction between students and teachers, (2) interactions among students, (3) active experiential learning, (4) dedicating more time to assignments, and (5) deriving enjoyment from various effective learning methods.

In order to enhance the experiential IRE learning process, it is essential to incorporate more sophisticated approaches. Particularly in IRE materials, it is imperative to introduce various methodologies that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. While the core strategy remains rooted in the students' experiences, it is equally crucial to complement it with methods and techniques tailored to their capabilities. This facilitates students in comprehending the subject matter and applying it in their everyday lives, both within their families and communities. Additionally, the incorporation of theories such as andragogy, transformational learning, experiential learning, as well as the integration of independent learning and critical reflection practices, as articulated by Bass (2012), can significantly enhance the effectiveness of education.

An effective way to enhance and expedite student comprehension in the experiential-based learning process is by integrating information technology, particularly media tools, as suggested Naseh et al., (2022). Utilizing audiovisual learning media can offer students fresh insights into the narratives of the prophets. This approach is highly effective compared to verbal narration, which can lead to quick disinterest among students. The use of audio-visual media enables students to vividly recall and engage with the stories of the prophets and their companions, making the learning experience more memorable and impactful.



Experiential learning isn't solely focused on the outcomes; rather, the learning process itself plays a vital role. Experience is acquired through personal engagement with the environment, as indicated by Bosra et al., (2020). The greater the number of experiences in these interactions, the more dynamic the learning process becomes, resulting in the acquisition of robust knowledge that students can apply in their daily lives within society. By fostering innovation and creativity among both teachers and students during the learning process, this learning model becomes even more beneficial for adult learners.

Experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to directly encounter and engage with concepts. Through this, students can gain a more profound and meaningful understanding of how these concepts are applied in real-life scenarios. This is exemplified by students' active participation in problem-solving, which is an integral part of their learning process. As they engage in activities such as analysis, sharing, discussions, and personal reflection, they enhance their memory retention of these concepts. This approach not only aids in the acquisition of knowledge but also molds students' attitudes towards learning and self-discovery. Consequently, it fosters profound personal insights and a heightened awareness of diverse perspectives, achieved through critical self-reflection.

## CONCLUSION

The experiential learning model underscores the importance of students connecting their everyday life experiences as a valuable reference for understanding religious education content. This approach is especially effective for adult learners or high school students accustomed to reflecting on their experiences in the learning process. To further enhance experiential-based IRE learning, integration with other instructional models and the use of appropriate educational resources are beneficial. For example, during the initial learning phase or apperception, introducing stimuli in the form of illustrative cases from students' personal experiences or other sources, along with visual aids like films, can provide a more tangible understanding of the subject matter.

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