A RECONSTRUCTION OF ABŪ HANĪFAH'S MODEL OF TEACHING IN
AL-Ā'LIM WA AL-MUTA'ALLIM

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ABSTRACT

Education is an important aspect of Islamic civilization. Muslim have discussed theories and practice of education since the early period of Islamic history. However, modern scholarship that tends to treat their legacy as mere historical artefacts often fails to identify its relevance to modern education. Furthermore, Islamic pedagogy is often criticized for its overemphasis on memorization over critical thinking. This paper would examine these notions by reconstructing a model of teaching employed by Abū Hanīfah (d. 150/767), a prominent figure of ahl al-ra'yī tradition which is known for their rational approach in understanding Islam. As a literature based research, the primary source of this study is a treatise entitled "Al-‘Ālim wa al-Muta'allim." The work is attributed to a student of Abū Hanīfah who documented his learning process and described his master's educational thought and practice. The text will be analysed using the contemporary models of teaching as the analytical framework. Analysing the text in the frame of modern models of teaching allows his legacy to not only be presented as a historical account but also an operative model of teaching that can be adopted in modern educational institutions.

Keywords: Models of teaching, Abū Hanīfah, al-‘Ālim wa al-Muta'allim.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic civilization was a great and leading civilization in terms of science and education. Rosenthal (2007) describes Islamic civilization as a society that revolves around the concept of knowledge. Berkey (2007) points out that the vibrant and creative culture of the medieval Muslim society was in part stemmed from the principles, methods, and standards of its education. However, the rise of religious extremism in the recent decade has distorted the image of Islamic educational institutions as the hub of the radicalization (Bergen, 2006). From pedagogical point of view, Islamic education is often criticized for its overemphasis on memorization. The critics argue that in Muslim’s learning tradition, understanding the text became subordinate to the
memorization, students are encouraged not to question the subjects because questioning is a hindrance to successful memorization (Eickelman, 1978; Hilgendorf, 2003). Some critics even go as far to associate the emphasis on memorization with the radicalization (Boyle, 2006). Therefore, with its current teaching method and curriculum, Islamic education has lost its appeal to the modern world. (Hashim, 2005).

It has been argued that to revitalize the system of Islamic education, Muslim educators should adopt an eclectic approach which means the traditional Islamic education is complemented with elements of modern education (Anshaari et. al, 2012). This paper will present an example of the eclectic approach where a model of teaching a classical Muslim educator is reconstructed using modern theories of education as the “scaffold”. Such reconstruction is essential to enable the integration of the model into modern educational institution. Furthermore, it will also challenge the abovementioned notions that the model of teaching employed by Muslim educators does not nurture critical thinking ability.

The subject of this study is a text entitled al-‘Ālim wa al-Muta'allim, literally means the master and the learner. It is a concise treatise attributed to a disciple, Abū Hanīfah (d. 150/767) the eponym of Hanafiya school of law. The master is Abū Hanīfah, but the identity of the student is disputed among scholars and according to al-Kautsari (2003) whose version is used in this paper concludes that the student is Abū Muqāṭil. The text records Abū Muqāṭil’s learning experience and his master’s model of teaching in form of dialogue. The disciple putting questions on Islamic theology and the master giving detailed explanations. Despite its content, scholars such Abu Zahrah (1947), classifies the text as a treatise on Islamic education.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ABŪ HANĪFAH’S MODEL OF TEACHING

Ellis (1979) points out that each model of teaching has several essential aspects, namely a rationale, a series of steps to be taken by the teachers and students in the process of learning, a description of a support system and method of evaluation. Trianto (2009) employs simpler terms in his description of the elements of a model of teaching saying that a model of teaching is consist of an objective, a syntax, and a social system. An objective is the source from which educators derive the materials, methods and approaches of teaching that they utilize (Abdullah, 2010). Therefore, Joyce (2011) emphasizes that every model of teaching is essentially formed to achieve an objective that has been established by the teachers. The objective of learning in Abū Hanīfah’s model is expressed in his explanation on the function of knowledge; Know that actions follow knowledge as limbs follow the eyes. A few good deeds done based on the correct knowledge is far more beneficial than a lot of action with ignorance. In same manner as a person who has a few provisions, but he knows how to utilize it is safer in his journey than he who has many resources but does not know how to utilize it. (Abū Hanīfah, 2003: 582).

This statement indicates that for him, the main purpose of learning is not merely to master the materials cognitively. The mastery should result in the learner’s ability to utilize the acquired knowledge as a guidance to improve his personal quality. Therefore, a learned person must be able to recognize the justice from injustice, the truth from falsehood.

When the scholar is described as just but does not recognise the injustice of those opposed to him, he is ignorant of both injustice and justice. Know, my brother, that the most ignorant and base of all classes in my view are people like that. They are like four people who are given white garments
and then are asked about their colour. One says it is red, one says it is yellow, one says it is black
and the fourth says that it is white. He is asked, ‘What do you say about these three: are they right
or wrong?’ He replies, ‘I know that the garment is white, but perhaps they are speaking the truth.’
That is how such people are (Abū Hanīfah, 2003: 573).

Furthermore, Abū Hanīfah’s idea about the aim of learning can be inferred from his
characterisation of the scholars in a statement of him as reported by al-Shaymari (d. 436/1044);
Verily, the scholars should always be vigilant of a social turmoil (fitnah) that might happen. They
must prepare themselves to face the turmoil before it appears. So, when it actually takes place,
they know how to not be involved in it and the solution to solve the turmoil. (al-Shaymari, 1985:
36).

Clearly, to Abū Hanīfah, the objective of learning is not only to acquire knowledge that
guide the students in their personal life, but also to train them to be aware of social problems and
solve them. In the modern theory of model of teaching, these are the objectives of “Information
processing models”, a model that according to Joyce (1996); “Emphasizes ways of enhancing
learners’ ability to make sense of the world by acquiring and organizing data, sensing problems
and generating solutions and developing concepts and language to convey the solutions”

The similarity of Abū Hanīfah’s model and information processing model will be more
apparent when we consider the syntax that he employed. Syntax is the sequence of activities and
steps that describe how a model of teaching being implemented in a classroom. From the
perspective of the contemporary theory, Abū Hanīfah’s syntax is comparable to the inductive
thinking model which is a member of the information processing model (Joyce, et.al, 2011). There
are four main steps in the syntax of the model, including; (1) identifying data relevant to a topic,
(2) grouping the data into categories whose members have common attributes, (3) developing
labels for the categories, (4) turning the categories into hypothesis. (Joyce, 2011; Joyce, 1996).
The resemblance might have been because of the subject namely Islamic theology, especially a
classification of various schools of thought into the orthodox one (ahl al-sunnah) and heretics by
examining the views of each group regarding some controversy themes (Schacht 1964). This topic
requires student to develop the ability of concept formulation, labelling, and classification which
can be attain by following the steps similar to those in the syntax of inductive thinking model.

Before engaging in the main steps of his syntax, Abū Hanīfah begun with a pre-learning
session in which he motivates his student by emphasizing the importance of the subject they are
about to study. Upon realizing that he was going to learn a crucial topic, Abū Muqātil states;
“Verily, you have boosted my desire to seek knowledge” (Abū Hanīfah, 2003). The statement
indicates that Abū Hanīfah successfully invoked his student’s curiosity and ready to continue to
the next steps. Abū Muqātil starts with identifying relevant data, namely the views of the groups
and then grouping them base on the common attributes that he calls “ashnāf”.

After discussing the first group, Abū Hanīfah and his student proceeded to discuss the other
groups’ theology. Abū Hanīfah then guide his student to grasp some key concepts in theological
discourse such as the definition and components of iman (belief), the status of the grave sinners,
monotheism (tauhid), and others (Abū Hanīfah, 2003). The next step in Abū Hanīfah’s syntax is
employing these theological concepts to critically examine the arguments and views of each group.
Due to the importance of these concepts, Abū Hanīfah warned his student to be patient and careful in studying them;

Do not maintain a conclusion in rush. When you find my explanation on a topic hard to understand, do not hesitate to ask me. Because people might be hostile to a term he does not understand, but when the true meaning of the term is explained to him, he accepts the term willingly (Abū Hanīfah, 2003: 576).

Other scholars who study Abū Hanīfah’s intellectual biography give relatively similar descriptions of the syntax of Abū Hanīfah’s model of teaching. Abū Zahrah observes that, Abū Hanīfah would receive questions and then laid out the question to his students who then engage in discussion trying to find solutions to those problems. In the end, Abū Hanīfah would offer his own conclusion based on the opinions of his students (Abū Zahrah, 1947). In addition, Bakri (1988) explains that before letting his student discuss the problems, Abū Hanīfah would maintain several principles that must be followed in discussion.

In the modern theory, each model needs its own social system which refers to the classroom environment, especially the teacher-student interaction. Each model requires different pattern of student-teacher relation; in some models the teachers have more control, whereas in other models there are less teacher control (Dills and Romiszowski, 1997). To support the flow of the syntax described before, Abū Hanīfah created a democratic and dynamic social system. In his study circle every student has a chance to express his opinion and he appreciate each student’s view (Marzuk, 2012). Al-Baghdadi reports that students in Abū Hanīfah’s study circle came from various intellectual backgrounds and each one of them would examine the subject according to their expertise (al-Baghdadi, n.d).

Abū Hanīfah nurtured this social system by encouraging his students to states their opinion and developing positive relationship with them. In many places in al-‘Ālim wa al-Muta’ālim, Abū Hanīfah and his student compliments each other. For instance, the student praises Abū Hanīfah as one of the best teachers he knows and prays for him;

May Allah grant you paradise as the reward of what you have taught me. You are indeed an excellent teacher who have opened for me many doors of knowledge I have never known before (Abū Hanīfah, 2003: 574).

When his student made mistakes, Abū Hanīfah tenderly correct him using word that contain prayer such as, “May Allah make your situation better, do not maintain a conclusion in rush” (Abū Hanīfah, 2003). With such social system, it is understandable that students who attended Abū Hanīfah’s study circle had confident to express their opinions.

Another aspect of the social system of Abū Hanīfah’s model of teaching is maintaining enthusiasm and focusing during a study session. Al-Shaymari narrated a dialogue of Abū Hanīfah on this topic;

A man asked Abū Hanīfah about the way he strengthen his understanding on a subject and memorize it, to which he answered, “By keeping his enthusiasm and motivation” The man asked him again, “How does he keep being motivated?” Abū Hanīfah answered, “By removing
distractions.” The man asked again, “How does he remove the distractions” And Abū Hanīfah answered, “By only doing activities (other than study) that I really need to do” (al-Shaymari, 1985: 22).

In the conversation, Abū Hanīfah maintains three principles in creating a conducive social system; being motivated, concentrating and self-control. In modern educational discourse, one of the widely accepted theory is that positive emotions and motivation relate positively to students’ academic achievement (Mega, et. al, 2014). Furthermore, Abū Hanīfah’s emphasize on the importance of self-control to eliminate distractions is essential because according to Joyce (2011), concentrating is the first requisite of the inductive thinking model.

After discussing the three defining aspects of Abū Hanīfah’s model of teaching, it is also essential to discuss his approach and method in delivering the lesson in *al-ʿĀlim wa al-Mutaʿallim*. Abū Hanīfah’s syntax and social system show that his student plays an active role in the learning process, he is not just a passive recipient. Such approach is known as student-centred approach where the teacher considers the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time (Jones, 2007). The whole conversation in *al-ʿĀlim* revolves around the need of Abū Muqātil who came to Abū Hanīfah because he encountered various religious groups who asked him questions he could not answer (Abū Hanīfah, 2003).

Regarding his method, Abdullah (2010) explains that Abū Hanīfah utilized two methods of teaching, namely conversation and *qiyyās*. The later is actually a term used in Islamic legal theory, but in this context, it refers to Abū Hanīfah’s usage of metaphor and analogy in his explanation. It is done through association of new concepts with existing ones. Contemporary research maintains that metaphor as pedagogical tool helps student’s engagements with new ideas, it also informed teachers when the students needed additional support (Lynch et.al, 2017). In the case of Abū Hanīfah, the method was proven to be effective in explaining abstract theological concept and Abū Muqātil admits it.

Like the way you illustrate these topics by allegory. A person might be interested in studying these topics but does not understand them…. But if you employed allegory in your explanation, it would be easier for them to understand (Abū Hanīfah, 2003: 577).

Abū Hanīfah himself considered the method as a great method. He insisted that every student who could not understand a lesson should ask his teacher to use allegorical illustrations because according to him, correctly used allegories would help the student to understand the subject (Abū Hanīfah, 2003).

To conclude, base on the book, it is clear that Abu Hanifah encouraged his disciples to actively question and not merely memorize the subject. From modern pedagogical theory point of view, the he employed inductive thinking model of teaching with student-centered approach; his strategy was a combination of discovery and exposition learning, and his method was discussion and dialogue with an element of allegoric explanations.
Bibliography


