Providing Islamic Learning Structure for the Muslim Net-Generation

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Abstract: The changes in the digital era have created new breed of generations different in capabilities and way of thinking and acting. On one hand, the changes posed new challenges to life, on the other hand the digital era also comes with new potential tools to help human face the challenges. The changes also prompted the Muslim community to react accordingly to enable Muslim to adapt to the changes swiftly and comfortably while ensuring that Islamic ideals is preserved and the struggle towards achieving Islamic objectives continue. One critical tool to realize these needs is education. In order to ensure its idealism and survival, the need to redefine Islamic learning model to befits the current needs and Muslim net-generation has been ever critical. Our proposed model will fulfill two aspects the need and requirements related to the digital changes while still fulfilling Islamic education objectives and requirements. These requirements were obtains via thorough literature survey related to the theory of the net-generations literatures and practices in the Islamic education world. The model proposed is a direct mapping of these two elements to be implemented in the form of a Lifelong Learning Management System (LLLMS) prototype as its main delivery form. The future direction will involve usability studies and expert reviews on the LLLMS prototype to be built.

Key words: Islamic learning structure, net gen, digital era, idealism and survival, LLMS

INTRODUCTION

In reality, a widely known fact in the Muslim learning community is that the traditional religious studies running in the masjids and surau (prayer houses) were exclusively attended by the older generations while the younger generation shy away from such programs. It is either due to the reason that they do not find the setup attractive enough for them or that the traditional setup is not fulfilling their idealism. Perhaps understanding the nature of the new generation way of thinking and worldviews will help us understand the reality of the situation. In this regard, it helps to turn to the net-generation or digital native theory to try to explain the younger digital generation phenomenon and from that coming up with a proper Islamic learning model to cater the needs of the Muslim net-generation.

Despite the swift and intensive developments in the education area in the world today, the Islamic education sector has not become quite alerted to the dire needs for an appropriate and effective Islamic learning model for the digital era. An important requirements needs to be sorted out before a full swing effort towards providing the solution for the problem can be initiated. An important prerequisite is to secure a paradigm shift of the Muslim community religio usly in accepting a new way of learning Islam. The challenge is that some of the so called modern learning setup seems to be very much against all traditional learning setup practiced for decades in the community. It is not uncommon to hear sarcastic terms and wild accusations floating in the community such as "learning without a direct teacher is equal to learning with the devils" or "learning with 'ustaz google' or 'sheikh google'. Such jest or mockery terms serves more to widen the gaps even further between the problems and its solutions if not between the generations itself. It is pertinent for us to start accepting the fact that there is a critical need to start redefining certain terms and views towards Islamic learning according to current situation. Failing to do so will leave the Muslims in a severely disadvantage situation in facing the current challenges. The second famous second Khalif (representative or leader) after the Prophet (PBUH), Umar al Khattab voiced his practical ire and concern on how the later Muslim are going to face the ever changing dynamism in their younger generation thousands of years ago. Umar reminded the Muslim community to always "teach your children according to their time, for they are born in an era which is different from yours" (Feisal, 1995).

Isolating Islamic case in discussing learning needs does not mean that the whole spectrum of Islamic education is totally different from the other learning paradigm. A lot of area from the 'non-Islamic' education realm is in fact very useful to t he advancement and improvement of Islamic learning. Learning is still learning in every situation. However, certain needs, vital

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requirements and principles of Islamic education need to be underlined when entering the Islamic education dominion. Islamic education differs from the non-Islamic education in its contents and its objectives although the delivery and infrastructure requirements are more similar rather than different (Hashim and Langgulung, 2007). This study is a preliminary finding in the direction of proposing an Islamic learning model which will fulfill two main concerns:

- A learning model utilizing current technology and best practices, able to fulfill the Muslim needs especially the so called Muslim net-generation (Muslim Net-gen) needs related to Islamic education in the current digital era
- A learning model which will fulfill Islamic requirements, Islamic education objectives and idealisms

An important point to be emphasized is that this study does not argue for the case of Islamizing the existing learning environment but rather to modernize the Islamic learning environment while maintaining the Islamic education authenticity so that it can help the Muslim community walk through challenges of the digital era comfortably.

DEFINING MUSLIM LEARNING NEEDS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

This study will limit the scope of the discussion to only two groups of age in the society the young generation which falls under the category of the Net-generation (Net-gen) (Tapscott, 2009) or Digital Natives in the range of 17-35 of age and the so-called digital immigrant (Prensky, 2001) which represent the older generation. The digital Natives are those born during the internet era and brought up all their life with Internet. On the other hand, the digital immigrants are those born before the internet but are living in the internet era. These two generations are supposed to be different in their characteristics particularly in their way of learning. To make the discussion easier and more practical, we will use the digital wisdom categorization, defined by Prensky in his later literature following his early digital native idea. The digital wisdom concept focus on defining certain characteristics or capabilities of those who live during the digital era rather than age group. Prensky (2009) argued that as the base for the digital native generation widened, more people are falling in the category which makes it more practical to define the needs for those with the characteristics rather than just a specific class of specific age.

UNDERSTANDING THE NET-GENERATION

The design of the net generation's learning environment (and for that reason the Muslim Net-geners) should be shaped based on the needs of the target groups or the entering students and not as the function of the available technologies (Dede, 2005). The important consequence of understanding the net-geners are the impact it left on current pedagogical design. Tapscott foreseen the impact of the net-gen on our educational paradigm when he mentioned: "In education they (the net generation) are forcing a change in the model of pedagogy, from teacher-focused approach based on instruction to a student focused model based on collaboration" in 2009. The changes actually goes well with the more recent discussion on the need for lifelong learning emphasizing more on two ways learning as opposed to the traditional teacher student one way learning setup.

The term Net-generations (Net-gen) was first introduced by Tapscott (2009) while Prensky coined the term Digital Natives in 2001 in his study discussing about the digital natives/digital immigrant divides. Both terms described the group of people who were born and lives their life in the internet era (Tapscott, 2009; Prensky, 2001).

This internet generation were attributed with several unique characteristics. Robben *et al.* (2007) synthesized four characteristics from and Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) describing the Net-gen. The first one is related to their acquiring of new literacies in their learning skills and capabilities. The extensive exposure to working with images has made them more 'screen and image literate's compare to the older generation. Related to the first characteristic is that they are also very capable of performing parallel or multitasking processing due to the habit of always working with multiple windows and screens at the same time. This is actually the result from the introduction of the windows based operating system as opposed to the single tasking environment used by the older generation during the DOS operating system era.

The second characteristics is related to their learning habits. Net-geners prefer self-discovery and 'learn by doing' rather than being ordered by others. The net-geners involved more in self-directed learning in acquiring their knowledge. Most of the time their quest of knowledge comes from internal motivation because their own interest in what they are doing rather than push by others or their elders. The extensive communication infrastructure available at their disposal makes them functions best when there is access to internet. This makes them more of a generation of lifelong learners than a 'schoolers' (Tapscott, 2009).

The third characteristics is related to 'reasoning'. The Net-geners are used to finding parts of information on the internet, gather them and synthesize them for their own need. The net-geners perceive information more as something not to be stuffed in themselves but rather to be searched by surfing or navigating to whenever needed. This is in contrast to the traditional perception that a person who have more knowledge, i.e., facts and information pertaining certain task or job inside or with him is more ready or capable to function in that environment. The digital era's perception associated the capability to function in a given situation more with the skill to find needed knowledge and its application in due time whenever needed.

The fourth characteristics describe the Net-geners as being more action oriented. They like to solve problems by themselves with the help of their peers. The net-geners is said to always maintain a group of peers whom they can always refer to for consultation whenever needed. The new generation learns in collaborative setup, exchanging practical experiences in a group sharing same interest with variety degree of expertise among them.

In a bit different tone, Prensky (2001) mentioned seven characteristics of the digital natives including the liking of parallel processing and multitasking in their work, prefer receiving information in graphics forms rather than text, prefer accessing information in random access mode and likes game more than serious works. Psychologically, they are used to instant reply to their query and thrive for instant gratification and frequent rewards.

LEARNING NEEDS OF MUSLIM IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The discussion about the net-generation give us some clues as to which direction Islamic learning model in the digital era should be heading to. Most of the traits the net-geners posed lead us to looking into the area of lifelong learning or adult learning (Blaschke, 2012). This is due to the fact that many aspects of discussion on the appropriate learning model for the adult learners in the digital era overlap with the net-gener's needs. In addition to that, the research and discussion on the lifelong and adult learning areas started way earlier and are more established.

The requirement for Islamic learning model of the digital era, in terms of the learners need is the same as the requirements for the general net-geners learning model. The requirements for the Net-geners learning model can be summarized to the three C's known as C^3 learning-defined as a technology enhanced environment which enable collaborative, contextual and connected learning (Sims, 2008). Collaborative learning emphasize interactive learner-centric grouping discussion methods. A current e-learning based collaborative learning brings the possibilities of many aspects not achievable via traditional face-to-face collaborative learning setup. Sims (2008) pointed out the major advantages of e-learning based collaborative learning involving the ability to mix formal and informal learnings as well as formal and informal learners which further promotes for a higher quality of participating learners interactions.

A contextual learning is a flexible and adaptable environment which meet the needs of diverse learner's background cultural, experiences, learning styles, media preferences and prior knowledge. One of the net-geners style of learning which goes handy with the contextual learning capabilities is the provision of self-directed learning supports. With contextual learning, learner are provided capability to design their own learning experience according to their context and local needs while having the learning designer providing the learning strategy and activity part (Sims, 2008).

The glue for the first two Cs is provided by the third C which is connectivity. Connectivity needs include communication supports for access to remote experts consultation, remote knowledge repositories, peer supports for collaborative and mentoring exchanges and connection to the virtual communities of practice consultation. The connectivity requirements also should include the ubiquitous support structure for nomadic learners, i.e., learn from anywhere, anybody and anytime while moving (Dede, 2005). The connected and contextual learning emphasized student-centered or self-directed learning where learners bear the main portion of the responsibility to ensure that the deliveries of the learning environment will fulfil their personal learning needs.

One of the great challenges of globalization is the fast changing world with the needs to update skills to face the new technology and job needs (Lang, 2012). The new learning curve is expected to be cut to half while skills and knowledge a person obtained from college time will only be good for one or two years before they have to acquire new set of skills and knowledge. Due to this, the need for lifelong learning is directed more towards the need for retraining employee for jobs needs retraining (Medel *et al.*, 2001). To live as a practicing Muslim would require Muslim employees to learn about the religious rulings related to the new area they are getting into. A Muslim teacher jumping into business area, for example should be prepared with in depth and practical rules

regarding mu'ammalah (Islamic business). In align to this, Umar alKhatab, the second khalif after the prophet has reminded the Muslims on the need to prepare themselves before doing business as he mentioned:

لَا يَبِعُ فِي سُوقِنَا إِلَّا مَنْ قَدْ تَفَقَّهَ فِي الدِّيْنِ

Meaning: "Nobody should buy and sell in our market except when they have learned in detail about its rulings in religion.

The same would be expected for a government officer turn lawyer for example, whereby the in depth and practical knowledge on Islamic justice is needed for him or her to be able to perform his or her new roles in an Islamically correct way. The greater challenge however is for the person to acquire this in a relatively short period of time to enable him to starts his new role in a new life in time. Due to this the need for a self-directed, lifelong learning model is becoming a critical need for Muslim living in this era. This learning requirement is actually exactly in line to what was mentioned by Azzarnouji, the famous Muslim educationist that the most vital knowledge for a Muslim is the knowledge he/she really needs in life. One of the type of religious knowledge a Muslim really needs is the one they will use and practice in their professional life. In this regard it is clear that the traditional learning setup does not takes into account of the 'retraining' of a Muslim to prepare him to enter a new roles in life as a Muslim. Often time the traditional knowledge requirements is for every Muslim to continuously attend learning about general topics in Islam in the masjids or other setups such as the pondok (traditional religious establishment for full time religion learners). The Islamic learning model for the new age must include the provision for such a lifelong learning supports throughout a Muslim life.

DEFINING/REDEFINING THE 'I' PART OF THE ISLAMIC LEARNING NEEDS

The main characteristics of Islamic education which set it aside from the western education is its inherent objectives and scope. The sole objective of Islamic education is to produce ideals Muslim as specified by God so that they can be the agent towards realizing the agenda of Islam in the world. The major principle behind the whole system of Islam is the principle of Divine Unity (Tauhid). Islamic education is holistic in the sense that it integrate the training of the mind and soul together. Any design of Islamic education model must not leave out the holistic components or else it cease to be Islamic (Hashim, 2005).

An Islamic learning model for the digital era must carry the holistic and tauhidic weightage in its design. An integral aspects of Islamic learning is the integrity of the contents. The traditional Islamic education paradigm put strong emphasis on the face-to-face contact with the teacher who ensure the correct understanding is obtained and the student is authorized to spread the knowledge 'collected'. The concept of 'sanad' to ensure the integrity of Islamic knowledge is maintained as it spreads out (Idriz, 2007).

Another important aspect of the holistic nature of the Islamic education is the strong emphasize in the 'complete' human development. Besides ensuring the integrity of the contents, the integrity of the knowledge bearer is also given strong emphasis. Islam gives high regard to a person with personal integrity rather than just what he/she carry with him. In this sense, an important aspect of Islamic education is termed by al-Attas as taadib which bear the meaning of adab signifying the knowledge of the purpose of seeking knowledge which is basically to "inculcate goodness in man as man and individual self", not just to impart the knowledge.

PROPOSING THE ISLAMIC LEARNING MODEL FOR THE DIGITAL ERA

The design of the learning model proposed is a direct mapping of the needs and requirements to the components needed to support the requirements. Figure 1 depicts a three layered mappings. The first layer listed the requirements and needs of the digital era learners aka the net-geners and adult learners. Layer two specify the solution of the current systems which consists from the best practices obtained from the real practices. Layer three is the LLLMS (Lifelong Learning Management System) proposed structure consisting of the elements needed for the system to support the given requirements.

In the first layer, the self-directed-learning support provides all the needed services to enable the self-learners of which the most important ones are the support for self-learning curriculum design guided by expert instructors/tutors. By self-designing the needed curriculum which suits their own learning needs, a contextual learning environment can be provided. The other service needed by the self-directed leaners is the support for developing groups for collaborative learning environment. What is meant by the 'Just-in-time' learning support in the diagram is a kind of support which can suits the descriptions of the Net-geners learning styles, i.e., tends to look at knowledge as content that they can browse to obtained when needed and less as content they
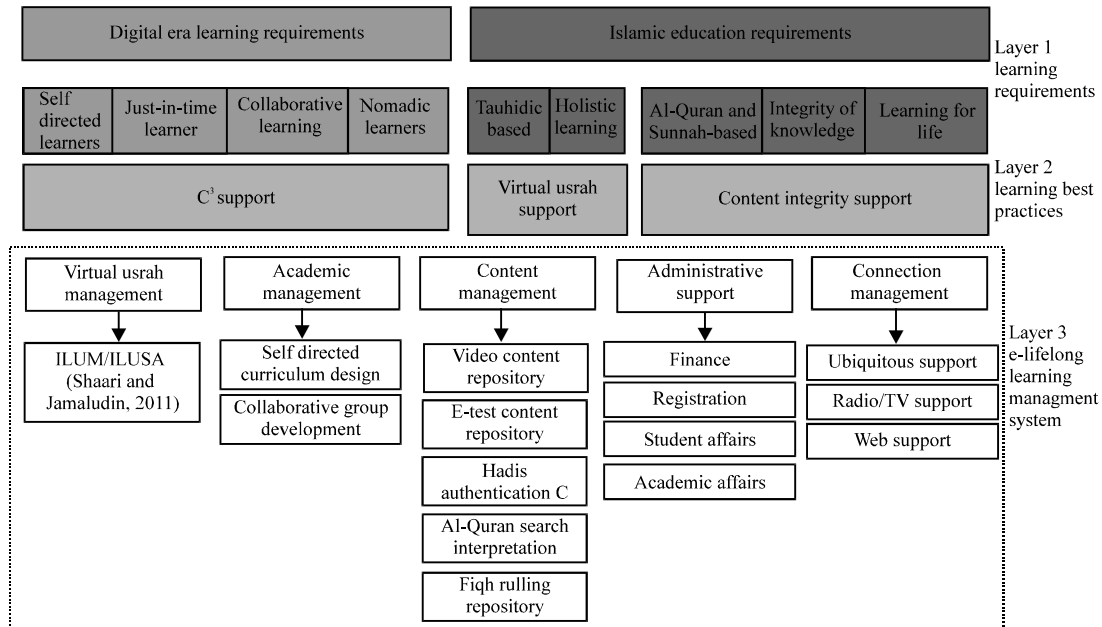
Fig. 1: The three-layered mapping of the proposed learning model

fills themselves with. Another scope of this is it reflects the need of the digital era Muslims to learn new Islamic knowledge scope directly related to their current and changing requirements whenever they entered a new phase in life (e.g., new job, new task descriptions, etc.).

The 'nomadic learning' requirement describes the ubiquitous lifestyles of the digital era learners. The ubiquitous support is needed for two conditions; one is for the continuous need for reference of religious knowledge especially the needs to authenticate hadith as when it is needed in real time. The other needs for the ubiquitous support is for the tutorial session to take place in a religious learning especially one which requires learners to communicate with the tutor for certain subjects the learners are registered to a given time. A practical tool for this purpose could involve the use of the mobile application such as whatsapp or telegram.

Looking at the Islamic education requirements; tauhidic base means the learning should be freed from syirik (associating something to God) (Syadid, 2003) while holistic means it cover all three faculties of human being mind, heart and body. One of the basic requirements of Islamic education as reflected in the Prophet educational model is the central role of the Quran and the Sunnah in the Islamic educational process (Syadid, 2003). In other words it has to be based on the Quran and Sunnah as the core guiding knowledge. Learning for life refers to the objective of learning in Islam. Learning is not for the sake

of knowledge alone but to be practically used in life. Thus the learning process does not stop just after the deliverance of the religious knowledge but it give strong emphasis in the ability of the learners to apply it in life. In many instances, the prophet have apply a very straight forward and practical approaches in teaching Islam rather than dwelling on the detail theoretical aspects especially in the teaching related to worship and aqidah.

In order to ensure the personal development aspect of the learner is taken care of, the virtual usrah management module is provided for the personal development program of the learners. The virtual usrah will involve the creation of small groups acting as a small online collaborative 'family' unit for the learner. The main objective of the usrah implementation is to link between theoretical and practical aspects of the Islamic knowledge learned. The more detail explanation of the structure of usrah is provided by Shaari and Jamaludin (2011).

CONCLUSION

The model presented in this study is a preliminary proposal of a study. Further detail will be supplied along the study process. A proper model for Islamic learning in the modern era which take into consideration of the needs of the current generation of learners is a critical need or else, religious learning will lose its audiences. Furthermore, the model should also prepare the Muslim in facing the global challenges pose by current changes in

life. These practical aspects, couple with fulfilling Islamic education rules and objectives provides for the basis of a conducive Islamic learning model for the digital era.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The future direction of this work is to develop a prototype of a Lifelong Learning Management System, fulfilling all the requirements and ideals obtained from the study. The proposed tools for the development will be using moodle the open source object oriented LMS system development platform. Further direction will involve a comparative study between Islamic learning delivered via the system fulfilling the model proposed with the Islamic learning delivered using the traditional model in terms of their effectiveness. The model will also be presented to experts to ensure its fulfilment of Islamic learning requirements.

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