

TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC LIFELONG LEARNING INFORMATION SYSTEM: A VISIONARY MODEL OF AN ISLAMIC LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT. Statistics from studies and analysis showed that the Muslim countries are the least democratic, having lowest income, as well as slowest growth income per head. Such are the results from inefficient system and management of education as well as not being able to practice lifelong learning to the upmost. Education has been the answer at the early time of Islam during the prophet's life. Based on the claim, this paper aimed at proposing an alternative educational model in order to implement the need for mass-educating the Muslim community in general. The model, which is based on the Nested Learning Community Concept, takes into account current ICT infrastructure and pervasive computing applications. It consists of five integrated layers, supported by three information system pillars namely content, communication, and self directed assessment performance. The model adopted a non formal education system which does not require students to sit in class and follow instructions to pass exams. It provides a platform for life improvement and wellbeing of oneself. Should the model be implemented in a structured way, it can fulfill all the requirements for an effective educational system in the current lifestyle of the digital age and bring us back to the glory of Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Learning Community, Islamic Study Circle

INTRODUCTION

Islam has never been able to gain its position as an important world political player since the fallen of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 (Muhammad, 2001, p.1). The falling of the empire has affected not only the political map of the Muslim world but also the social and economic health of the Muslim. Many statistics from studies and analysis done have reflected the many maladies befallen the Muslim countries. Muslim countries are known to be the least democratic countries especially the Middle Eastern countries (Pryor, 2007). In terms of economics for example, the Economist Review journal (2002) pointed out that one in five Arabs still live on less than \$2 a day. And, over the past 20 years, growth in income per head, at an annual rate of 0.5%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except sub-Saharan Africa.

The current chaotic situation sweeping across the Arab countries are self telling about the life condition those countries are in now. In Malaysia, the general social and economic condition of Muslim is generally known to be unbecoming the Muslim ummah in general. The situation of Muslim in Malaysia in the midst of other non-muslim population is a reflection of the general Muslim countries situation compared to other countries in the world.

The only way to alleviate the Muslim from the current situation is education. One important fact to be highlighted is that the Muslim must return back to the basics in order to elevate their position in today's complicated and challenging world. All Muslims, regardless of social background must be firmly grounded to the true principles of Islam (Tauhidi, 2001). Education has been the answer at the early time of Islam during the prophet's life; it will again be the answer that will elevate the position of the Muslim today. Approaching the problems in the Muslim community requires us to deliver effective Islamic education to as many members of the Muslim community as possible regardless of age and groups in the community. Besides that the provision of the Islamic education must also be made readily available to the community continuously in the sense that it must be close to the life of the community and easily accessible at their convenience time.

This paper aimed at proposing a model of mass-education of the Muslim community in general. The idea of democratizing Islamic education for the whole ummah requires an appropriate model and proper implementation which can fulfill all the requirements for an effective educational system given the current lifestyle in the digital age. In other words, the system to be proposed must be a non formal education system which requires students to sit in classroom and follow instructions and pass exams. The system proposed must be an informal system which will provide an ongoing environment which is able to continuously improve the life of the 'learners' involved.

The current implementation of lifelong learning and learning community is very much related to the use of modern communication and network technology. As such the paper will introduce a visionary general information system model which will be the glue elsewhere in the implementation of the Islamic learning community model based on the *usrah* system.

WHY LIFELONG LEARNING?

Lifelong learning has been a term very widely discussed and debated. It is an ambiguous term for some with different meaning to different person (Jarvis 2009, p. 9). Nevertheless many efforts have been given to formalize the understanding of the term and furthermore implement it in real life. Although the concept of lifelong learning can be traced back to very old time, the term is given a new life when picked up by major world organizations and given specific meanings. Numbers of literatures discussing concepts on lifelong learning have been published by many institutions such as the Council of Europe, the European Union, UNESCO in 1970, Faure Commission report in 1972, Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1973 (Bittner, 2000; Longworth, 1999, p. 17-18). Lifelong learning concept was rejuvenated in 1996 through the Delors report on Education for the 21st Century which was produced after OECD ministerial conference on lifelong learning. The European Commission furthermore declared 1996 as the 'European Year of Lifelong Learning'.

One form of real implementation of the lifelong learning concept is the formation of spatial learning entities in many countries including in Europe, US, Australia and China. Several terminologies were associated with this entity – among them are learning city, community or region. Faris (2006) pointed out that the virtues of having spatial groupings as oppose to virtual one may seems paradoxical in the midst of the current states of art ICT setup, nevertheless he argues that the arrangement is the most natural setup known to human being besides other logistical advantages. The idea is furthermore supported by several others in their literatures (Longworth, 1999; Jarvis, 2009, p. 163).

Basic Characteristics of Lifelong Learning

Myriad of literatures have listed ideals and special elements pertaining to lifelong learning in order to crystallize the concept and theory of lifelong learning (Morgan-Klein and Osborne, pp. 10-20; Longworth, 1999, p. 105; Wain, 1987, pp. 37 - 39). Summing up the major themes of the concept are

- i. The notion of learning versus education and training
- ii. The active role of learners in learning as opposed to passive role students in a formal classroom setup.
- iii. The use of ICT to facilitate the implementation of lifelong learning ideals.

Understanding Learning Region

Definitions of learning region varies in terms of its focus; Walters as included by Jarvis (2009, p. 165) highlighted economics objectives in defining the term while Longworth (1999) is more open in his definition. He envisions the learning city as entity that provides structural and mental frameworks which helps people to face changes in a positive way. (p. 110)

A detail discussions and practical considerations were given by Longworth (1999) in his book on the concept and implementations of learning region or learning city. One important concept related to our discussion of is the Nested Learning Community Concept of Faris (2006). Figure 1 shows a layer of different learning community nested in a layer forms starting from the learning circles as the smallest scale to the Virtual Global learning communities with several scales of communities in between. This concept is in fact very compatible with the *usrah* system implementation to be discussed in the next section.

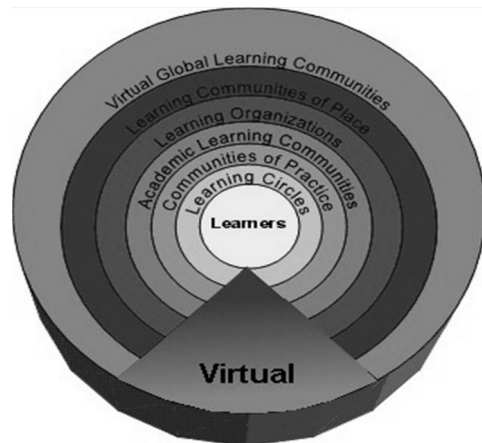


Figure 1: Learning Communities: A Nested Concept of Expanding Scale and Cascade of Social Learning Environments (Faris, 2006)

Faris (2006) pointed out that each layer is subjected to “virtualization” i.e. can be implemented as online activities. Learning in every community also is a two way, social process – in other words, is a lifelong learning process fulfilling all of its characteristics.

USRAH SYSTEM: AN ISLAMIC MODEL OF LEARNING COMMUNITY

The *usrah* system was introduced by the late Hassan Albanna, the founder of the famous Muslim Brotherhood movement in 1943 (Mahmud, 2001). The term *usrah* is an Arabic words meaning family. Indeed Albanna envisioned the *usrah* to be a family unit where an ideal Muslim is produced (Albanna, p.286). The word *usrah* today are very familiar among the Islamists as an Islamic education medium.

Usrah Pillars

Albanna in his booklets on the *usrah* system (*nizam al-usari*) listed down three pillars of the *usrah* system which are *ta'aruf* (Knowing each other), *tafaahum* (understanding each other) and *takaafu* (helping and caring for each other). Regarding this he mentioned that:

“Islam emphasize heavily on the establishment of family units from among its followers which will direct them to great examples, strengthen its brotherhood and changes the meaning of brotherhood from just a mere theory to real implementation.

So prepare yourself my brothers, so that you can be the best building block for this Islamic building.”

(Albanna (2003), p. 543)

Usrah Implementation

Dr. Abdul Halim Mahmud in his book *Wasaa-il attarbiyah 'indal Ikhwan* (The Means of Education for the Muslim Brotherhood) describe the usrah structure as practiced by the Muslim Brotherhood. According to him, *usrah* session is a weekly meeting facilitated by an elected leader which can possibly be alternated among members. There are four basic elements of usrah – *taujih* (instructions), *tarbiyah* (education), *tadrib* (training), *takwin wal mutaba'ah* (development and control). An usrah session usually begins with five minutes instruction or reminders of certain issues. The *tarbiyah* session usually consist of discussion and study of selected books or articles on predetermined topics. Included in this session is reading Quran, memorizing it and explaining the meaning of the verses. The training element might include performing research on certain topics and presenting them. Training can also be in personality development such as endurance training by undergoing a long walk together.

The last element involve usrah targets fulfillment. Each member will provide self evaluation of their performance for the pass week. The detail evaluation will be known only to him/her self. The facilitator will declare the general statistics of the group achievement for the week before departing so that everybody can discuss measure to improve their performance for the week to come. The usrah will themselves set a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) to measure their continuous achievement and improvement especially in performing different deeds such as prayers and non-obligatory fasting. (Mahmud, 2001, pp. 196 – 209).

METHODOLOGY

In order to implement a learning model for the Muslim community, we propose an Islamic learning community model based on the usrah system. As such, the proposed model should support the requirements and operation of the usrah system. It is important to understand that the usrah system was originally in a closed system. In order for it to be a public system, proper tools are needed that will render the usrah system to be a mass usable system. This is where ICT will play a role in helping the democratization of the usrah system.

In order to realize the idea of reviving the Muslim ummah situation, the approach has to be bottom up rather than top down. Utilizing the Nested Learning Community model as the basis, we propose a bottom up learning community model. The theory behind this is that able individuals create able families; strong families bring to strong community while good communities are the seed of a good nation. Figure 2 depicts the bottom up Islamic Learning Community Model (ILCM) based on individual as the seed.

Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007, p. 129) rightly pointed out that one of the important element in a lifelong learning implementation is flexibility. This includes fulfilling learners' needs at different times, places and at their own pace. Several research has been performed for implementations of different aspects of the lifelong learning ideals and characteristics; each of them in general pointed out to the fact that flexibility is the key area where ICT can contribute the most (Wessner M., Haake J.M., Tietze D.A. (2002)), Okada M., Mendori T., Shimizu A. (2002), Kay, J. (2008).

Islamic Learning Community Information System Architecture (ILCIS) will be architected to support the four elements of the usrah system. Table 1 shows the modules needed to support the four elements of usrah system.

Table 1: Modules needed to support the four Usrah elements for the ILCM

Usrah Element	ILCIS Module	Description
Taujih	Communication Module (CM)	Providing Instructions as a top down mechanism
Tarbiyah	Development Resources (DR)	A dynamic database of knowledge and Information Resources for learning linked to outside sources for continuous updates.
Tadrib	Development Resources (DR)	
Takwin walmutaba'ah	Performance Assessment Module (PAM)	Providing self directed Assessment help to facilitate control and performance evaluation

THE ISLAMIC LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL (ICLM)

The nested concept of learning region used as the basis of the Islamic learning community lacked some elements needed in an Islamic learning community setup. One important aspect is the follow-up mechanism. Besides that, religious contents will need verification and authorization to be acceptable to the authority and public. This is to avoid misunderstanding in religion which can prove to be more fatal than in other areas. As such each layer will be monitored by the respective establishments as shown in Figure 2.

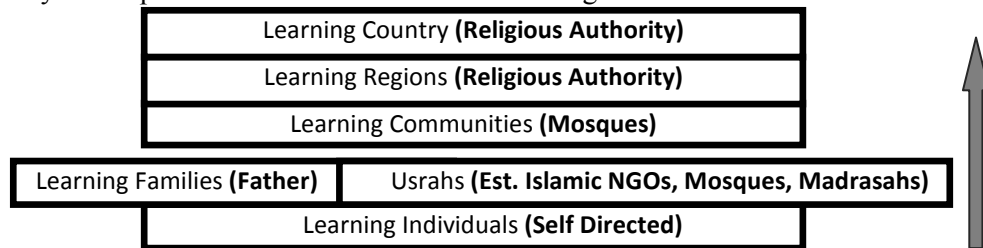


Figure 2: Proposed model of Islamic Learning community model (ILCM)

On the other hand the Islamic learning community model will be filled by different institutions in the layers. A clear different is the inclusion of family as a very important institution where learning should naturally happen. The other element introduced is the usrah system which will act as a peer based learning circle where individual with same objectives will sit down together, learning and performing self and community development activities together.

The lower layer entity of learning community in the model is actually a smaller unit which will construct the higher layer unit. As such, several individuals – optimally maximum of seven will construct an usrah learning circle. Several usrah in a given physical locality will construct a learning community unit. Likewise a learning region consists of several learning communities and a learning country is consisting of active and effective learning regions in it. The learning family is a natural unit of where individual belongs to besides he/she is also a member of an usrah group.

Islamic Learning Community Information System (ILCIS) Architecture

The resulted Information system architecture for supporting the ILCM will be an online system with the three modules interacting with each others as depicted in figure 3.

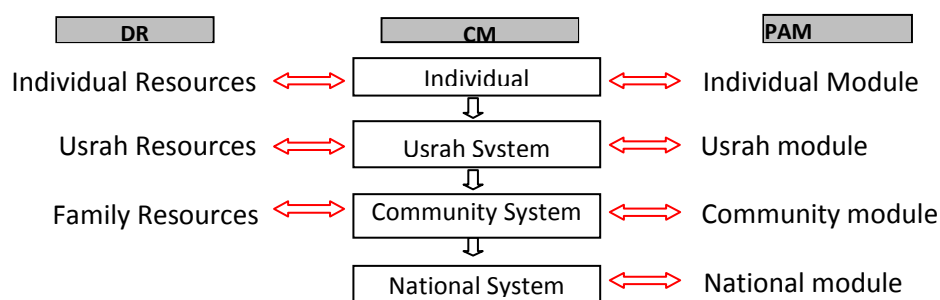


Figure 3: Information System for Supporting the ILCM

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

The new paradigm of learning need to be infused in the Muslim community based on the lifelong learning model to replace the traditional 'education' concept to create a democratized learning environment. The notion of learning community becomes very important in creating a vision of continuously improving learning society. As such, the Islamic learning community model supported by a proper ICT structure is very much needed to realize the idea.

The proposed model (ICLM and ILCS) is a visionary model and in its general form. More work has to be performed in specifying the details of the architecture. However it is hoped that this will be a beginning for more sparks of research in the area of Islamic learning communities or Islamic lifelong learning.

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