Practices of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) In Teaching Islamic Studies in Malaysian Public Universities

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The needs of 21st century skills among students are very crucial in facing the demand of the nation and the world. It is also important that these skills align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Malaysian Education Blueprints – Higher Education (MEB-HE) in developing and enhancing students with interpersonal skills focussing on critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaborative and creative and innovative Islamic Studies have always been seen as a discipline that has been preserved and the delivery of the knowledge is also expected to be conventional and traditional. This study was conducted to identify the Problem-Based Learning implementation in selected public universities and the lecturer perceptions on PBL. A total of 298 questionnaires have been filled out by students. A total of 10 lecturers were interviewed to identify their perceptions on PBL implementation. The questionnaires items were analysed descriptively for percentage in identifying students' perceptions and interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify the lecturers' perceptions. Results showed positive perceptions on PBL implementation in Islamic Studies. Suggestions to improve the PBL implementation are also discussed.

Key words: *Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Islamic Studies, Student-centred learning, 21st century skills.*

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the evolution of 21st Century skills have a great demand on future graduates to master communication, technology and social skills. Several initiatives have been introduced at a national level in preparing talents among the Malaysian citizenship.

The Shift 1 of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) or MEB (HE) aims to produce graduates who are holistic, with entrepreneurial skills and balance. Structured outcome-based curriculum, active teaching and learning approaches, and constructively aligned assessment are very important and relevant to produce future graduates.

The implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is not new. It started with the medical programmes more than two decades ago and other academic programmes such as engineering, sciences, economics, and others. The establishment of *Akademi Kepimpinan Pengajian Tinggi* (AKEPT) flourished, leading to accessibility among the HE academician to more than 15 modules of active teaching and learning approaches. PBL is one of them. Since then, many HE academicians have been trained in AKEPT for PBL, including the Islamic Studies lecturers. The current development has placed PBL and other 14 active teaching and learning modules under AKEPT Competency and Enhancement Programme (ACEP) implemented by the six zones assigned by AKEPT.

Problem Statement

PBL was introduced to provide authentic experiences that foster active learning, support knowledge construction, and naturally integrate learning and real life. PBL is an innovative teaching method based on learning principles, aimed at supporting active participation to enable the acquisition of new knowledge and skills for use in practical and real life situations (Mohd. Najid et al., (2019). Smith et al., (1995) explain that PBL enables students to gain knowledge through collaboration; this is achieved by exposing them in small groups to a problem relevant to their course of study.

There have been critiques of methodologies of teaching and learning in Islamic studies, in particular, towards the failure to effectively respond to the challenges brought by contemporary needs in this modern world (Muhamad Faisal *et al*., 2012). Teaching Islamic studies in the traditional way is still prevailing. In addition, technology-based teaching methods are hardly practiced in teaching of Islamic knowledge (Ashraf *et al*., 2015). Thus, the teaching of Islamic knowledge in HEIs is limited to conceptualization and memorization (Asyafah, 2014). The majority of Islamic education departments in HEIs are restricting themselves by the method of memorization and rote learning in their teaching process (Pohl, 2009). In some institutions, discussion and comprehension through various innovative methods of teaching is not encouraged by the lecturers (Ashraf *et al*., 2015).

Moulton (2008) argued that the intellectual climate in Islamic educational institutions did not encourage students to question the Islamic traditions and exercise independent and critical thinking, but simply transmitted rules and norms. In addition, teachers discouraged students

from asking questions or offering ideas in discussions or in writing. Rote learning, authoritative teaching, and the absence of debate and dissent were common phenomena in traditional Islamic teaching (Madmarn, 1999 and Tan, 2009). The pedagogy used in Islamic Studies was a traditional and passive approach that did not allow the development of critical inquiry (Tan, 2011). This has led to rigidity, a lack of imagination, and an overemphasis on memorization. These teaching methods hindered the development of critical thinking skills (Barazangi, 2001).

There were also negative perceptions towards graduates of Islamic education institutions. They were seen as narrow-minded, not creative, passive, and unable to socialize with others in society. Furthermore, they were not prepared to enter the job market (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). Islamic education institutions seem to have failed to provide their students with the relevant skills they need in the fast changing world (Pohl, 2009).

Muslim scholars such as Hashim (2007) and Ramadan (2004) asserted that the failure of Islamic education was due to the void of nurturing critical thinking in its teaching pedagogy. The common traditional pedagogy employed in teaching Islamic education was subject-centred and lecture-based (Tan, 2009).

There was also criticism that the teaching styles are out-dated and the teaching of Islamic religious education was knowledge-based rather than meaning-based (Almatari, 2012; Anderson *et al*., 2011).Thus new teaching styles that incorporates different methods of teaching besides the traditional ones should be encouraged among the Islamic studies educators to create more exciting and meaningful learning.

The PBL approach is one of the popular curriculum innovations in education nowadays. This is because this approach encourages students to be transparent, flexible, having diversified ways of thinking and is considered as a paradigm of multidisciplinary studies (Johari, 2013). Currently, PBL is used in teaching different academic fields including Islamic Studies. However, the perceptions, implementation, challenges and the benefit of PBL among the Islamic studies lecturers and students are not known. Therefore, there is a need to study the practices of PBL among the Islamic Studies lecturers and how it effects on students' learning.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the practices of PBL practitioners in teaching Islamic Studies in HEIs. The study also identified the preparedness among the lecturers and students in PBL implementation as well as the scaffolding in conducting PBL among Islamic Studies lecturers. This study also determines students' satisfaction towards the implementation of PBL, analyses the effect of PBL in enhancing students' soft skills and finally examine the challenges of implementing PBL in Islamic Studies courses.

Research Methodology

This study chose two research methods which were questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires alone may not be able to discover some of the pertinent research problems. Therefore, other methods are required to obtain the relevant information, such as interviews. Thus, it is important to employ multiple methods in the study in order to obtain the sufficient data. Using different methods can produce mutually supporting ways of collecting data. Additionally, Denscombe (2008) argued that the obvious benefit of using multi-methods was that they will produce more and different kinds of data, and will thus be likely improve the quality of the research.

There were two main populations for sampling in this study. These consisted of Islamic Studies students as respondents who were directly using PBL in their teaching and learning activities. More specifically, they were the students from two public universities.

This study also included interviews with ten lecturers who were implementing PBL in their teaching of Islamic Studies courses in five public universities. The selection of samples for the interviews was made using principles of purposive sampling (Patton, 1987). The researcher's choice of respondents for interviews was based on the purpose of the study rather than by random sampling or the selection of a large number of participants. The idea behind using purposeful sampling was that it would best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions. This study used semi structured interviews with the characteristics that are common in qualitative methods.

This study involved 298 respondents from different backgrounds and experience in terms of age, gender, programme of study, semester of study, academic qualification and their involvement in PBL.

In this study, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred at several stages of the research including data collection, data analysis, and discussion. For example, the study mixed both types of data in data collection by combining open-ended questions with close-ended questions in a survey. The study also integrated data from questionnaires and interviews in the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Respondents Background

A total of 298 respondents aged between 19 to 24 years old had answered the questionnaires. The questionnaires were divided into 45% male and 55% female. A total of 64.8% of the

respondents were from Islamic Studies programs, while 33.2% were from non-Islamic Studies programs. The students were from various semesters from semester one to semester eight (except semesters five and seven). A total of 56.7% have experienced PBL several times and 41.3% had at least one experience learning through PBL.

The quantitative data was complemented by the qualitative data through interviews conducted with university lecturers. The interviews specifically explore the view of universities' lecturers regarding the implementation of PBL in their respective Islamic studies courses.

Ten respondents were interviewed and each of them had voluntarily participated in this study. It is important to note that all the interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves in the Malay language.

Implementation of PBL in Islamic Studies Courses

Five items in the questionnaire were related to the preparedness of lecturers and students in conducting PBL.

Preparedness in Conducting PBL

Respondents were asked about their view regarding the preparedness of their lecturers in implementing PBL. For the item, lecturers/facilitators give clear explanation on PBL. The mean score was 4.27 and 4.42 for the item; *Lecturers/facilitators have sufficient knowledge on the subject matter*. The total mean for the preparation of the lecturers was 4.35.

Regarding the students' preparedness in PBL implementation, the mean of 4.15 agreed with the statement, *I understand the rational of the implementation on PBL*. For the item, *I make preparation in every PBL session,* the mean was 4.03 and 4.05 for the item, *I understand the process in PBL implementation*. The total mean for the students' preparedness was 4.08.

Students' Satisfaction with PBL Facilitation

Respondents were asked about their views regarding the satisfaction towards PBL facilitation. The total mean for students' satisfaction with PBL facilitation was 4.31. A mean of 4.30 was recorded for the item *Lecturers act as facilitators to PBL process* and 4.31 for the item *Lecturers always give feedbacks to group's assignments*.

Satisfaction with the Implementation of PBL in Islamic Studies' Courses

A total of 10 items was used to determine students' satisfaction with the implementation of PBL in Islamic Studies courses with the total mean of 4.167. The details of mean score for each item are as in Table 1.

Table 1: Satisfaction with the implementation of PBL

No	Item	Mean	S.D
1.	Easy to arrange group discussion.	4.10	.718
2.	I find that PBL helps me in learning this course.	4.22	.698
3.	I actively involved in group discussion.	4.22	.675
4.	PBL can help me in examination.	4.15	.719
5.	PBL is useful when I work later on.	4.30	.707
6.	I learn new topic faster through PBL.	4.16	.671
7.	My group members help each other.	4.22	.711
8.	Time for implementing PBL is sufficient.	3.95	.831
9.	Each group member contributes their ideas in discussion.	4.13	.735
10.	I like to share knowledge with PBL's group members.	4.22	.697
	Total Mean	**4.167**	**.716**

The respondents agreed that PBL could help them in learning Islamic Studies subjects. Therefore, this result suggested that the Islamic Studies' students were satisfied with the implementation of PBL in their learning.

The information on the implementation of PBL also sought by having interview with the university's lecturers who have implemented PBL in their teaching of Islamic Studies courses. The respondents were asked on how they implemented PBL in their teaching. Some of them mentioned that the students were asked to identify the problems or topics by themselves. There are also lecturers who provide the triggers or list of assignments for their students. After that, the students were required to prepare reports and videos based on their findings. The students will present their findings and the students will have discussion regarding the findings. (R1 and R2)

Pertaining to the PBL facilitation, the respondents agreed that the lecturer plays role as the facilitator for discussion. The students do discussions in their own groups to find out problem solutions and the lecturers will do facilitation and guide them.

They also indicated that during the PBL process, students will be involved in the discussion. There are also outdoor activities during PBL session as mentioned by one respondent (R1):

"Some parts (of the course) are face to face, another part is outdoor activity that is PBL in which it becomes students' assignment".

Some respondents used FILA as their scaffolding where they ask students to fill up FILA's table consist of F= facts, I= ideas, L= learning issues, and A= Action Plans. Another respondent said he asks students to produce a video presentation as their PBL's assignments.

In terms of assessment, the lecturers prepare assessment rubrics. (R2) The assessment is based on their participation in discussion, presentation, and video or written assignment. Some of them also conduct peer assessment but they find out that it was not effective because of biasness of the students to their own course mates. A respondent mentioned that in PBL we will use formative assessment rather than summative. (R9) Another respondent said he asks students to produce video presentation as their PBL's assignments. These assignments will be assessed based on provided rubric.

Regarding the scaffolding used to facilitate PBL, the interview results indicate that only few respondents have scaffolding to guide the students to plan their PBL. One of them (R9) uses 'five ladders'. Another respondent said she asks the students to find a topic, problem statement, objectives, and methodology of the study and results as the framework of designing PBL. While the rest of respondents use FILA as their PBL scaffolding where they ask students to fill up FILA's table consist of F= facts, I= ideas, L= learning issues, and A= Action Plans.

Students' Satisfaction towards the Implementation of PBL

In terms of students' satisfaction with PBL implementation, all of the respondents stated that students are positive with the implementation of PBL. One of the respondents responded by saying:

"Based on our experience, certainly the students like this one (PBL) because they could use their creativities…students actually enjoy, they are not too stressful." (GR2)

According to one respondent, "students like PBL because (it is) not bored, (they) like outdoor (activities)." (R10)

Enhancement of students' soft skills through PBL

Table below shows the results of the survey on the enhancement of students' soft skills through PBL.

Table 2: Enhancement of students' soft skills through PBL

No	Item	Mean	S.D
1	PBL makes me confident to deliver my ideas	4.21	.703
2	PBL enhances my ability to solve problem.	4.21	.657
3	PBL trains me to respect ideas of others.	4.31	.613
4	PBL accelerates my ability to manage information from various sources.	4.22	.639
5	PBL inculcates entrepreneurial skill.	3.84	.867
6	PBL helps me to practice ethical attitude.	4.17	.686
7	PBL helps me to think critically.	4.22	.616
8	PBL stimulates thinking process.	4.32	.648
9	PBL enhances my communication skill.	4.24	.693
10	I have opportunity to utilize various sources of knowledge through PBL.	4.35	.645
11	PBL enhances my solving problem skill.	4.26	.635
12	PBL enhances team work skill.	4.28	.652
13	PBL gives me the opportunity to explore knowledge by myself.	4.24	.660
14	PBL trains me to be a responsible person.	4.31	.645
	Total Mean	**4.96**	**.669**

From the interviews' results, none of the respondents denied the important role of PBL in developing students' soft skills such as critical thinking, problem solving communication, teamwork, social, and leadership skills.

One lecturer fully agreed with the role of PBL in strengthening students' soft skills by responding that: '(PBL) is good to develop social aspect of students because they are not merely in lecture hall' (R2). Then she continued by saying:

'PBL helps (students to develop) their soft skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication skill, work in group, information management and long life learning, really helps'. (R2)

Table below presents data on the students' opinion concerning the effectiveness of the implementation of PBL.

Table 3: Effectiveness of implementing PBL by lecturer

No.	Item	Mean	S.D
1.	Method of selecting PBL's group members is suitable.	4.09	.744
2.	I understand clearly the implementation of PBL.	4.02	.786
3.	I can communicate with my group members effectively.	4.19	.611
4.	I am able to work effectively with my group members.	4.25	.624
5.	Lecturer makes sure discussion group is built.	4.32	.638
6.	Lecturer explains guideline in group.	4.19	.885
7.	Lecturer encourages students to vary their source of information.	4.29	.897
8.	Lecturer encourages the students to share what they know.	4.22	.930
	Total Mean	**4.20**	**.764**

A significant majority of lecturers (m. 4.20) believed that the implementation of PBL in Islamic Studies is effective.

Suitability of PBL in teaching Islamic Studies

The respondents were requested to rate their views in seven items specifically asking about the suitability of using PBL in teaching Islamic Studies courses. Table below reveals the results of the survey.

Table 4: Suitability of implementing PBL in Islamic Studies

No	Item	Mean	S.D
1.	I like PBL more than lecture for this course.	3.85	.875
2.	PBL makes this course interesting.	4.15	.733
3.	I believe PBL is suitable for Islamic Studies.	4.24	.673
4.	PBL makes learning Islamic Studies course interesting.	4.29	.664
5.	I think the usage of PBL should be expanded in the university.	4.13	.925
6.	PBL is enjoyable.	4.06	.883
7.	PBL makes me understand the lesson better.	4.20	.904
	Total Mean	**4.12**	**.808**

A large percentage of the respondents (82.62%, m. 4.13) believed that PBL is suitable for teaching Islamic Studies courses. This result suggests that the Islamic Studies students believed that PBL is one of the suitable approaches to teach Islamic Studies subjects.

When the interview's respondents were asked to give their opinions on the suitability of PBL in teaching Islamic Studies, all of them believed that PBL is good for teaching Islamic Studies courses. A respondent said that 'lecturer should increase the use of PBL in Islamic Studies in order to make theory and practices are not separated during learning session' (R1). She also insisted that by conducting PBL, we could relate lesson in class with daily life as well as theory and practice can be learned together.

The respondents stated that the suitable courses for PBL are the courses which have practical aspects, activities and issue oriented such as *falak* (astronomy), Islamic laws, and Islamic leadership.

A respondent believed that PBL should be conducted in teaching Islamic Studies effectively by stressing that:

"Lecturers should increase (the using of) PBL in Islamic Studies to make the learning of theory and practice is not divided. (PBL) could relate knowledge in the classroom with daily life. (PBL) is good to be implemented in Islamic Studies to enable knowledge (`ilm) and practice (`amal) can be applied together." (R1)

Table 5: Challenges in implementing PBL

No.	Item	Mean	S.D
1.	I do not have problem in getting reference materials for PBL.	3.55	.920
2.	I have no time constrain to implement PBL.	3.73	.950
3.	I find that PBL makes learning more challenging.	4.12	.753
	Total Min	**3.80**	**.874**

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In addition to the quantitative data, the information from interviews indicates that the lecturers encountered some problems in conducting PBL. For instance, some students were not prepared to participate in PBL, negative perception of academic peers towards PBL, time consuming, bureaucracy to get approval and budget for PBL project and lack of appropriate facilities to run PBL session.

Suggestions to Improve PBL

At the end of the interview sessions, all the respondents were asked for their suggestions to improve the implementation of PBL in Islamic Studies. A respondent suggested that the Faculty should have a vision and mission towards PBL implementation. The Faculty's management also need to ease and simplify the procedure of implementation of PBL projects.

Other respondents emphasised on the important of training for lecturers who conduct PBL by stating:

"PBL is about real world. PBL requires training and training. We have to update (the information on PBL). Now people talk about e-PBL in which web 2.0 is used… usage of flipped learning, blended learning, (and we) cannot merely depend on face to face…" (R9)

Conclusion

PBL helps students to effectively develop soft skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, teamwork, social, and leadership skills. Students learned to collaborate and assign different team roles between themselves in PBL group discussion. In the PBL approach, problem-solving is the main process through which students acquire knowledge of a subject, alongside teamwork and independent learning. These elements were absent in the conventional teaching approach, in which students waited to be directed and guided by the teachers. In this regard, PBL could contribute significantly to the teaching and learning of Islamic Studies. Therefore, it is recommended to the lecturers of Islamic studies to use PBL as an option to make teaching and learning more meaningful.

Acknowledgements

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