

Empowering Students: Integrating Moderate Values in Islamic Education through Project-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to highlight the important role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping moderate religious character among students, as well as to explore the integration of moderate religious values and the application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum at Bhinneka PGRI University, Indonesia.

Methodology: The methodology used was a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving 50 students from various study programmes who took Islamic Religious Education courses. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, which were then comprehensively analysed.

Main Findings: The results showed that the implementation of PjBL significantly improved the understanding and application of moderation values through collaborative interaction and practical involvement in social projects. In addition, PjBL also served as an effective tool in strengthening attitudes of tolerance and inclusiveness among students.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study offers an innovative approach to the development of the IRE curriculum, integrating religious moderation values through the PjBL methodology. These findings make an important contribution to educational institutions in creating a moderate and socially responsible younger generation in the digital age.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the realm of higher education serves a crucial function by serving as a platform for cultivating students' moral compass towards moderation, piety, and ethical conduct. Islamic Religious Education not only serves as a source of religious knowledge but also as an important platform for fostering tolerant and inclusive attitudes, which are greatly needed in Indonesia's diverse society [1]. Islamic Religious Education at the higher education level often relies on traditional teaching methods emphasizing lectures and cognitive techniques. This approach prioritizes the transmission of knowledge from instructors to students, neglecting opportunities for students to cultivate practical skills and attitudes of religious moderation [2], [3]. This condition poses a serious challenge in developing Islamic education that is not only effective in academic terms but also applicable in shaping students' character comprehensively, especially in facing social dynamics and diversity [4]. Numerous studies have highlighted the significance of modernizing the Islamic Religious Education curriculum and teaching approach to better incorporate and emphasize the principles of religious moderation within relevant contexts [5]–[7].

The conventional learning model that dominates Islamic Religious Education typically relies on lectures as the primary method of knowledge transfer. Although this method is effective in conveying theoretical and normative material, it often fails to develop students' practical skills in internalising religious values in their daily social lives [8]. The constraints are highlighted when examining the principles of religious moderation, which emphasize the importance of tolerance, fairness, and inclusivity, best conveyed through hands-on learning and engagement [9]. The overly textual approach and lack of contextualisation in this learning method do not provide sufficient space for students to think critically and creatively, resulting in a shallow understanding of the values of moderation [8].

As a result of these shortcomings, the potential for radical or exclusive attitudes to emerge becomes more likely, due to the lack of dialogue and opportunities for critical reflection in Islamic Religious Education learning [10]. This discovery is consistent with studies showing that the lack of opportunities for religious moderation practices and dialogue in educational settings can greatly influence students' comprehension of religious and cultural diversity [11]. As a solution, it is essential to develop more interactive and collaborative methodologies in religious education to create space for students to engage in dialogue and reflection, such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) or Project-Based Learning (PjBL) [12], [13]. The integration of moderate values into holistic learning can enhance students' knowledge and attitudes in navigating complex social dynamics [13]–[15]. This initiative signifies a deliberate progression towards nurturing a cohort characterized by both erudition and a balanced sociocultural demeanor, capable of fostering constructive impacts within a diversified communal framework [14].

Utilizing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Islamic Religious Education enhances character education by offering practical relevance to students' everyday experiences, fostering innovation to address their educational requirements effectively [12], [16], [17]. This method is designed to integrate the values of religious moderation through projects that encourage students to practise tolerant, fair, and inclusive attitudes in the context of daily life. In its implementation, the role of lecturers shifts from teachers who provide information to facilitators who help students explore religious values within diverse social contexts [18], [19]. This creates an environment conducive to critical dialogue and deep reflection, which is essential for strengthening a balanced and contextual character of religious moderation [19], [20].

Through the PjBL approach, students are not only academically engaged but also emotionally and socially involved, which contributes to their understanding of social responsibility and principles of justice. Research indicates that this method has been proven effective in developing interpersonal and critical thinking skills, which are essential in diverse societies [21]. Furthermore, the application of PjBL is also able to facilitate learning experiences that are relevant to real life, making Islamic Religious Education education more impactful in shaping students' character [22]. This educational advancement holds significant promise for cultivating students who possess not only a theoretical comprehension of religion but also the ability to apply these principles in their daily lives. This prepares them to make constructive contributions to society.

Previous studies on strengthening moderate values through a project-based approach have demonstrated that this approach enables the integration of various disciplines while fostering a spirit of cooperation [23], [24]. Through interaction and collaboration in joint projects, students will gain a deeper understanding that is relevant to the social challenges faced. This experience is expected to shape individuals who not only possess strong religious knowledge but also the interpersonal skills necessary to live in society [12]. Therefore, developing innovative and contextually responsive learning methods in the contemporary era is essential to ensure that religious moderation character education can be effectively realised.

Although project-based learning is recognised as having benefits in improving tolerance and social skills, there is still a significant gap in its systematic integration with the Islamic Religious Education curriculum to strengthen religious moderation among university students [25]. This gap lies in the integration of religious moderation values into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in higher education. According to research conducted, conventional teaching methods often fail to meaningfully engage students in developing moderate character [26], [27]. This is evident from the fact that many current Islamic Religious Education curricula do not fully reflect the expected values of religious moderation, which can contribute to increasing intolerance among students [28].

To address this gap, this study integrates Project-Based Learning (PjBL) into Islamic Religious Education learning as an innovative strategy to equip students with religious moderation skills relevant to the digital age. Through the PjBL approach, students not only learn religious values but also have the opportunity to apply these values in digital projects focused on tolerance and the prevention of extremism [29]. The main goal of this study is to explore how integrating values of religious moderation into Islamic Religious Education's teaching, along with utilizing PjBL in relevant courses, can foster a strong ethos of religious moderation. This approach aims to address the increasing issues of online intolerance effectively.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Types of Research

Research in this study adopts a qualitative approach utilizing an exploratory case study design to delve deeply into the integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) into Islamic Religious Education courses and its influence on enhancing students' religious moderation. This method was specifically selected to allow researchers the flexibility to explore the meanings, experiences, and viewpoints of both students and lecturers within the realm of project-based Islamic religious education.

2.2 Population and Research Sample

The study's population consisted of all students enrolled in Islamic Religious Education courses at Bhinneka PGRI Tulungagung University during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. A purposive sampling method was employed to select a sample of 50 students across three study programs; Architecture, Industrial Engineering, and Automotive Engineering Vocational Education. Additionally, two lecturers and one head of the study program were included in the sample due to their active involvement in implementing project-based learning models within the context of Islamic Religious Education.

2.3 Research Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher assumes a pivotal role as the primary instrument, engaging directly in the design, collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in the field. In this study, the researcher actively participated as a facilitator and observer in the PjBL process within the IRE course, engaging directly with both lecturers and students to comprehend how values associated with religious moderation, such as tolerance, justice, and balance, were integrated into the social projects conducted by students. Apart from the researcher serving as the principal instrument, auxiliary instruments were also deployed to systematically and comprehensively gather data:

1. Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines: Developed to explore informants' perspectives and experiences regarding the implementation of PjBL and its impact on fostering religious moderation character.
2. Participatory Observation Sheet: Used to document student behavior, interactions, and dynamics during the project-based learning process, focusing on indicators of religious moderation character.
3. Format of Documentation and Analysis of Student Products: Involves compiling academic artifacts like semester learning plans, project reports, and reflection notes to evaluate the reflection of moderation values in student outputs.
4. Researcher's Reflective Journal: Utilized to record field findings and insights during the research process to aid in interpreting student actions within the context of enhancing religious moderation character.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques encompassed interviews with lecturers and students to gather qualitative insights on project-based learning experiences, observations of student interactions during IRE classes, and analysis of IRE curriculum and learning materials.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis employed an interactive analytical paradigm involving condensation, presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification stages following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [30]. Data from interviews, observations, and documentation were sifted and organized around the theme of religious moderation in IRE.

2.6 Research Procedures

Research procedures unfolded across five stages: proposal preparation and initial observations, data collection through interviews, observation, and documentation, initial data categorization based on religious moderation themes, verification and reflection with informants, and culmination in findings compilation, discussion, and research recommendations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Integration of Moderate Values in Islamic Religious Education Courses

At Bhinneka PGRI University, before starting lectures, lecturers teaching Islamic Religious Education courses developed Semester Lecture Plans (RPS) through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) facilitated by the university. This forum aimed to ensure that the material taught in lectures aligned with the university's vision and mission, and was relevant to the current needs. In addition, lecturers also develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to facilitate the learning process, implement the RPS, and evaluate the effectiveness of the Islamic Religious Education course over 16 meetings in one semester. This approach ensures that the Islamic Religious Education curriculum at Bhinneka PGRI University not only complies with existing regulations but also provides a quality learning experience that is relevant to social and technological developments.

The supervision of Islamic Religious Education in higher education is governed by a set of regulatory directives, including Minister of National Education Decree Number 232/U/2000, Minister of National Education Decree Number 045/U/2002, Decree of the Director General of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture Number 43/Dikti/Kep/2006, and Law Number 12 of 2012. These mandates mandate the inclusion of Islamic Religious Education as a compulsory element in the Compulsory General Subjects (MKWU) across all fields of study. Each institution of higher learning, such as Bhinneka PGRI University, has the authority to develop its own criteria for the General Curriculum Education (GCE) to suit its specific needs. As a public tertiary institution (PTU), Bhinneka PGRI University aims to produce graduates who exemplify the values of religious moderation in a diverse society, facilitated by a curriculum that is flexible and attuned to current demands [1].

Information obtained through interviews, observations, and records was categorized based on the core theme of moderate viewpoints within Islamic Religious Education. Moderate values are incorporated into the learning material for each meeting, to disseminate these values evenly throughout the material without compromising the depth of the subject matter [9]. Engage in lively post-presentation dialogues to skillfully impart the essence of religious moderation. Encouraging interactive discussions post-lecture empowers learners to explore this concept vibrantly, all while upholding the fundamental teachings of Islamic Religious Education intact. Through these forums, learners are not only exposed to theoretical teachings but also encouraged to apply the principle of moderation within the framework of their daily interactions and societal roles [5]–[7].

Table 1. Integration of Moderate Religious Values into Islamic Religious Education Course Materials

Islamic Education Material	The Value of Moderation
The Importance of Islam in Fostering the Integration of Faith, Islam, and Ihsan	National commitment, Tolerance
Implementation of religious teachings on faith (tauhid), religious worship, and ethics	Anti-violence, Tolerance
Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin	Tolerance, Accommodation of local culture
The Role of Mosques in Building Human Civilisation	National commitment, tolerance
Islamic Law in the Indonesian Context	National commitment, Anti-violence

Incorporating moderate religious principles into Islamic Religious Education programs is essential for cultivating a well-rounded comprehension of Islam in students. Islamic Religious Education plays a key role in instilling moderate values such as tolerance, justice, and balance, which help develop students' character as devout and participatory intellectuals in interfaith cooperation. Studies suggest that introducing a balanced Islamic Education program is vital in preventing the radicalization of Islam [2], [29]. By placing emphasis on moderate Islamic principles, such as the concept of ummatan wasathan found in the Quran, organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia embody a practice of Islam rooted in tolerance, equilibrium, and fairness. This approach is vital in cultivating a balanced understanding of the faith and promoting peaceful coexistence [31].

Additionally, Islamic Religious Education lecturers at Bhinneka PGRI University encourage students to actively participate in open discussions during their lectures. Lecturers provide space for students to express their opinions, ask questions, and discuss various religious issues, with an emphasis on the principles of moderation and balance. This approach not only enriches students' perspectives but also teaches the importance of respecting differences and finding common ground in diversity of views [32]. This promotes the cultivation of a generation with robust religious understanding and a balanced demeanor, fostering the development of a cohesive, tranquil, and cooperative community.

At Bhinneka PGRI University, the Islamic Religious Education program goes beyond the surface, subtly weaving in crucial lessons about finding balance and harmony. It doesn't just touch on patriotism, tolerance, peace, justice, and stability; it embodies them. This commitment to nurturing a culture of moderation is not just a mere statement in the university's documents but a living, breathing part of its essence, reflected in its Strategic Plan and diverse academic offerings. By infusing these moderate values into the fabric of Islamic Religious Education, the university not only shapes the students' ethical growth but also establishes a scholarly atmosphere promoting togetherness and acceptance among its members [33].

3.2. Project-Based Learning in Strengthening Religious Moderation Values through Islamic Religious Education Courses

Bhinneka PGRI University is set to introduce Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the Islamic Religious Education course during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year to enhance learning effectiveness. This initiative aims to create a more dynamic and innovative learning environment that addresses current educational challenges by providing students with practical exposure to moderate Islamic principles. As mandated by the Minister of Education and Culture's Decree Number 3/M/2021 on Key Performance Indicators

(IKU) for higher education institutions, the use of case studies or team-based project-based learning in Compulsory General Courses (MKWU), including Islamic Religious Education, is obligatory, accounting for 50% of the overall assessment. This directive underscores the significance of adopting a project-based instructional approach in higher education to meet the demand for contextualized and pertinent teaching methods while reinforcing the nation's commitment to moderate values [34].

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) requires careful preparation before the class begins. One of the key aspects of successful PjBL is the readiness of lecturers as mentors who guide students through each stage of the project, as well as the students' readiness to conduct direct observations in the field to prepare project outputs [35]. Based on key performance indicators (IKU), the stages in implementing team-based projects can be divided into several steps, including dividing students into groups, providing real-world problems relevant to society, and creating work plans and collaboration models. Students are then asked to prepare presentations or final projects to be presented in front of lecturers, classes, or other audiences who can provide constructive feedback. During the project implementation period, lecturers play an active role in mentoring each group, encouraging students to think critically and creatively in their collaborative work [36], [37].

To ensure the success of team-based project classes, lecturers need to make several important preparations. First, lecturers must prepare a selection of social project themes that are relevant to the course material and appropriate to the context of religious and cultural diversity. Second, lecturers should provide guidance on the various types of social projects that students can undertake in the field. In addition, lecturers must also provide the necessary instruments for students to prepare for these social projects, as well as information about objects or places that can be used as case studies in the project. Finally, lecturers need to prepare assessment forms and assessment rubrics to measure the results and processes achieved by students in the project.

In preparation for participating in team-based project classes, students must also take several important steps. First, students form groups based on the type and theme of the social project they will be working on. Next, students select a project theme, prepare a scenario for activities to be carried out in the field, and determine the desired outcomes. Students then prepare the necessary instruments for field visits, including tools and materials to support the creation of project outputs. After the project is implemented, students compile project outputs with their team and report weekly progress to the lecturer. Finally, students present the project's output results to the class, allowing them to share their work and receive constructive feedback.

Project-Based Learning offers students a platform for skill development and imparts important values like moderation in religion, including tolerance, justice, and equilibrium, across its various phases. This approach allows students to learn first-hand about the importance of moderation in daily life, both through interfaith interactions and cross-cultural collaboration, which ultimately supports the formation of a moderate character in line with the teachings of Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin.

Table 2. Project-based learning approach

Stages	Activities Carried Out	Role of Lecturers	Role of Students
Preparation	Developing a relevant social project theme aligned with Islamic Religious Education and providing preparatory sessions related to the social project.	Preparing the theme and providing orientation.	Forming groups, selecting themes, and planning field activities.
Group Division	Divide the class into several groups.	Ensuring that the group division is in accordance with the project topic.	Joining groups and discussing tasks.
Project Assignment	Defining real-world problems, providing time to develop work plans and collaboration models.	Provide guidance and facilitate group discussions.	Analysing problems and developing project plans.
Project Output Preparation	Students prepare final projects or project presentations.	Monitoring project progress and providing guidance.	Developing project deliverables with the team and reporting progress.
Presentation and Feedback	Students present their project results to an audience.	Providing constructive feedback on the presentations.	Presenting project deliverables and receiving feedback.
Evaluation and Assessment	Final evaluation of project results and student presentations.	Assessing project outcomes based on the prepared assessment rubric.	Participating in evaluations and developing understanding based on feedback.

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The results of this study demonstrate that the integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Islamic Religious Education significantly strengthens students' religious moderation by fostering collaborative engagement, critical thinking, and practical social awareness. These findings are consistent with the results of Mazumi [16]; Lillah [12]; Ulum [17], who emphasized that PjBL creates authentic learning experiences that help students internalize Islamic values through direct involvement in real-life projects. Similarly, Firdaus [13]; Lillah [12]; Ela Komala [15] found that problem- and project-based learning models enhance students' moderate attitudes and moral reasoning in higher education settings. This alignment underscores that active, experiential learning is effective in shaping students' spiritual and civic character, especially when grounded in contextual social realities.

However, this study extends the literature by situating PjBL not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as an integrative framework for embedding wasathiyyah (Islamic moderation) into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum at the university level. Unlike Imamah [26] or Ela Komala [15], which primarily discuss curriculum design, this research emphasizes practical application — how moderation values are enacted and observed through students' collaborative social projects. The findings also differ from Muhayati [10], who noted the limited success of integrating moderation into classroom theory; this study provides empirical evidence that direct, team-based projects effectively nurture tolerance, justice, and inclusiveness.

This study's novelty lies in its empirical verification of the transformative role of PjBL within Islamic Religious Education as a behavioral model, not just an instructional one. While prior studies discussed theoretical alignment between religion and moderation, this research demonstrates concrete behavioral outcomes (improved interaction, empathy, and interfaith cooperation) as indicators of students' internalization of

moderation. In this regard, the study bridges the gap between curriculum design and pedagogical execution, offering an adaptable model for higher education institutions seeking to cultivate moderate Islamic values through experiential learning.

In general, these findings confirm that integrating moderate values within project-based frameworks contributes to the holistic formation of students' religious character. It provides a replicable pedagogical model for Islamic higher education, where learning is not limited to knowledge acquisition but extended toward character embodiment and social responsibility. Hence, the integration of PjBL into Islamic Religious Education can be generalized as an effective and innovative strategy for promoting religious moderation among students in diverse and pluralistic academic environments.

The findings of this research carry profound implications, both in theory and practice, for the evolution of Islamic Religious Education teaching models within higher education. Theoretically, the study bolsters the idea of blending Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with the principles of religious moderation to foster a transformative educational approach. It underscores that religious instruction should not solely focus on imparting knowledge but should also aim at molding students' personalities through immersive and collaborative learning encounters. On a practical level, the study reveals that utilizing PjBL techniques can heighten students' recognition of virtues like tolerance, fairness, and equilibrium in societal contexts, paving the way for a welcoming and harmonious academic environment. These revelations point towards a fresh avenue for educators and curriculum planners to craft project-based learning experiences that encompass not only cognitive elements but also emotional and social dimensions, as a tangible realization of religious education that resonates with the complexities of multiculturalism in contemporary times.

Nevertheless, this study is not without its constraints, necessitating caution in future investigations. Firstly, its scope was confined to a single university with a restricted participant pool, thus limiting the breadth of its applicability. Secondly, the study's timeframe, spanning just one semester, was inadequate for gauging longitudinal shifts in students' religious moderation traits. Hence, it is advisable for forthcoming research endeavors to adopt a mixed-method strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative assessments, broaden the study's reach to encompass diverse universities with distinct profiles, and integrate digital tools in PjBL implementation to cater to the realm of online learning. By taking these measures, future studies can deepen our comprehension of the efficacy of integrating project-based Islamic religious education in cultivating resilient, adaptive, and enduring moderate religious personas in higher education.

4. CONCLUSION

This research indicates that infusing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) into the realm of Islamic Religious Education is a potent catalyst for enriching students' comprehension and application of religious balance. Through immersive projects set in authentic societal settings, PjBL fosters the assimilation of fundamental moderation principles; like tolerance, fairness, and equilibrium into both academic pursuits and social affiliations. These outcomes align closely with the study's central goal: to assess how PjBL practically molds students' moderate religious ethos within the university landscape.

Despite certain limitations, such as brief study duration and narrow sample size, the research underscores PjBL's capacity to metamorphose Islamic Religious Education from a mere theoretical discourse into a vibrant educational journey. It is suggested that forthcoming studies employ a multi-faceted methodology, incorporating broader participant pools and digital PjBL exercises across various academic institutions. In a pragmatic sense, educators and policymakers are urged to establish PjBL as a foundational framework for instilling moderation in higher education syllabi, ensuring that learners not only grasp the concept but also embody it in their demeanor and communal involvement.

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