

Transforming Islamic Religious Education Learning through the Integration of Face-to-Face and Online Instruction

Arisyah Fadhilah¹, Bagus Harianda²

^{1,2}Department of Islamic Religious Education, Islamic Religious Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to describe the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning through the integration of limited face-to-face and online learning, identify the challenges encountered during implementation, and examine efforts to support students' learning interest and understanding.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative field research approach at SMP IT Ibnu Halim Tanjung Mulia Medan. Data were collected in April–May 2021 through observation, interviews, and documentation involving the principal, Islamic Religious Education teacher, and students. Data were analyzed through data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, with source and technique triangulation used to ensure data credibility.

Main Findings: The findings indicate that the integration of Rotational Learning and online learning helped overcome the limitations of face-to-face learning during the pandemic. Face-to-face sessions supported direct explanation, interaction, clarification, and guidance, while Google Form and WhatsApp facilitated assignments and communication. Students demonstrated greater enthusiasm and better understanding of online tasks after receiving direct explanations from the teacher, indicating that the two learning modes could complement each other.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The originality of this study lies in describing Islamic Religious Education learning transformation as a functional integration of limited face-to-face and online learning rather than replacing one mode with another. The study demonstrates how each learning mode can perform complementary functions according to pedagogical needs, particularly by connecting direct instruction with digital learning activities to sustain learning continuity.

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Corresponding Author:

Arisyah Fadhilah,

Department of Islamic Religious Education, Islamic Religious Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Medan Estate, Percut Sei Tuan, Deli Serdang, 20371, Indonesia

Email: arisyahfadhilahn1@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays an important role in shaping students' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior based on Islamic values [1]. Islamic Religious Education learning is not only directed toward mastering religious knowledge but also toward developing students' ability to understand, internalize, and apply religious values in their daily lives [2]. Therefore, the Islamic Religious Education learning process requires effective interaction between teachers and students so that knowledge, practical skills, and character

development can be delivered optimally. Effective learning conditions become increasingly important when changes in the educational environment require schools and teachers to adjust learning strategies to students' needs.

Changes in the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic created particular challenges for the implementation of Islamic Religious Education learning [3], [4]. Learning that had previously been conducted face-to-face had to be adapted to distance learning and the use of various digital media [5], [6]. Under these conditions, teachers were required to adjust learning materials, methods, media, and instructional time so that learning activities could continue. The thesis underlying this research indicates that online learning encountered various challenges, including students' difficulties in understanding the learning materials, limited learning devices, unstable internet connectivity, as well as boredom and declining learning interest. These conditions indicate that changes in the mode of learning do not automatically guarantee the achievement of Islamic Religious Education learning objectives.

As an effort to adapt to these conditions, Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, Medan implemented Rotational Learning, or rotational learning [7]. This model enabled students to return to face-to-face learning in smaller groups with limited instructional time. Based on the research findings, the implementation of Rotational Learning provided students with opportunities to interact directly with teachers again; however, it also encountered the problem of very limited instructional time, which meant that Islamic Religious Education materials could not be delivered optimally [8]. This limitation is important because Islamic Religious Education learning requires not only the delivery of learning materials but also explanation, interaction, and practice, all of which require adequate instructional time.

These conditions indicate a gap between the needs of Islamic Religious Education learning, which requires interaction and guidance, and the limitations of face-to-face learning during the pandemic. On the other hand, online learning had the potential to extend opportunities for interaction and assignment activities, but in practice it continued to face challenges related to students' understanding of the materials, learning facilities, internet connectivity, and concentration [9], [10]. Previous studies reviewed in the thesis have extensively discussed strategies and innovations in Islamic Religious Education learning, e-learning-based learning, and problems associated with online learning. However, these studies have not specifically described the process of adapting Islamic Religious Education learning through the combination of limited face-to-face learning and online learning activities as a response to the limitations of each learning mode.

Based on this gap, this study views the integration of face-to-face and online learning as a form of transformation in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education learning during the pandemic. The integration was implemented by maintaining rotational face-to-face learning, while online learning activities were used to support assignments and communication after classroom learning [11]. In its implementation, assignments were prepared through Google Forms, while communication and opportunities for students to ask questions were facilitated through a WhatsApp group [12]. Thus, the limited face-to-face instructional time did not become an absolute obstacle because some learning activities could be continued through online media.

The novelty of this study lies in describing the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning from the use of a single learning pattern toward the integration of two complementary forms of learning, namely limited face-to-face and online learning. This approach was not positioned as a replacement for face-to-face learning with online learning, but rather as an effort to optimize the function of each learning mode according to the conditions encountered [13], [14]. The observations in this study indicate that following the implementation of integrated face-to-face and online learning, students demonstrated increased learning interest, as reflected in their responses during learning activities and their enthusiasm in completing assignments. Students also demonstrated a better understanding of online assignments because the learning materials had previously been explained through face-to-face learning.

Based on these conditions, research on the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning through the integration of face-to-face and online learning is important to understand how schools and teachers responded to learning limitations during the pandemic and how such integration was used to support the continuity of learning. This study aims to describe the process of transforming Islamic Religious Education learning through the integration of face-to-face and online learning, identify the challenges that emerged during its implementation, and describe teachers' efforts to support students' learning interest and understanding through this learning pattern [15], [16]. This study is expected to provide empirical insights into strategies for adapting Islamic Religious Education learning when learning conditions require a combination of direct interaction and the use of online media.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a field research design. The qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformation process of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning through the integration of face-to-face and online learning at Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, Medan [17]. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focused on understanding learning phenomena in their natural setting, as well as the experiences and perspectives of the individuals involved in the learning process. In this study, the researcher served as the primary research instrument and was directly involved in collecting data in the field.

The research was conducted at Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, , located at Jalan Kawat 3 No. 42, Tanjung Mulia Hilir Village, Medan Deli District, Medan City, North Sumatra. Data collection was carried out from April to May 2021. The research site was selected because the school had implemented adaptations to Islamic Religious Education learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the use of Rotational Learning as a form of rotational face-to-face instruction, which was subsequently integrated with online learning.

2.2 Research Subjects and Focus

Research subjects consisted of individuals who were involved in and had information regarding the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, namely the principal, Islamic Religious Education subject teacher, and students [18]. The research also involved Grade VIII students, consisting of 60 students during the 2020/2021 academic year.

Research focus concerned the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning through the integration of face-to-face and online learning. The focus included: (1) the conditions of Islamic Religious Education learning during the pandemic; (2) the implementation of Rotational Learning as a form of limited face-to-face learning; (3) challenges encountered during the learning process; (4) the implementation of online learning as a support for face-to-face learning; and (5) changes in students' learning interest and understanding following the integration of the two learning modes.

2.3 Data and Data Sources

Research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from informants through interviews and observations of the learning process. Research informants included the principal, Islamic Religious Education teacher, and students [19], [20]. Primary data were used to obtain information regarding learning conditions, challenges encountered, the implementation of Rotational Learning, the implementation of online learning, and students' responses to changes in the learning pattern.

Secondary data were obtained from documents related to school conditions and learning activities. These documents included the school profile, student information, teacher information, teaching and learning activities, facilities and infrastructure, and documents related to students' learning achievement.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. These three techniques were used complementarily to obtain a comprehensive description of the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning.

1. Observation

Observation was conducted by directly examining the school conditions and learning processes relevant to the research focus. The researcher acted as an observer to obtain information regarding the implementation of Islamic Religious Education learning, teacher student interaction, rotational face-to-face learning, and online learning activities. Observation was also used to examine students' responses throughout the learning process.

2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information regarding the experiences and perspectives of informants concerning the Islamic Religious Education Islamic Religious Education learning process. Interviews were conducted with the principal, Islamic Religious Education teacher, and students. Interview questions focused on learning conditions during the pandemic, learning challenges, the implementation of Rotational Learning, the use of online learning, and students' responses to the integration of face-to-face and online learning.

3. Documentation

Documentation was used as supporting data to complement the findings from observations and interviews. Documents collected included the school profile, student data, teacher data, learning activities, facilities and infrastructure, and documents related to students' learning activities and outcomes.

2.5 Research Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation [21]. To support systematic data collection, supporting instruments included observation

guidelines, interview guidelines, and documentation sheets. These instruments were developed based on the research focus and were used to ensure that the data collected were relevant to the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning through the integration of face-to-face and online learning.

Table 1. Research Instruments

No.	Instrument	Data/Indicator Observed	Data Source
1	Observation guide	Conditions of Islamic Religious Education instruction, teacher-student interaction, alternating face-to-face learning, online learning activities, and student responses.	Teachers and students
2	Interview guide	Learning challenges, the implementation of Rotational Learning, the integration of in-person and online learning, and changes in students' interests and understanding.	School principal, Islamic Religious Education teacher, students
3	Documentation guide	School profile, student data, teacher data, learning activities, facilities and infrastructure, and instructional documents.	School documents

6 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed qualitatively during and after the data collection process. The analysis was conducted systematically through four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification.

The first stage was data collection, which involved gathering information from observations, interviews, and documentation. The collected data were then examined and categorized according to the research focus.

The second stage was data reduction, which involved selecting, summarizing, and focusing the data on information related to the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning, learning challenges, the integration of face-to-face and online learning, and students' responses.

The third stage was data reduction, which involved organizing the reduced data into narrative descriptions so that relationships among the findings could be systematically understood.

The fourth stage was conclusion drawing and verification. Conclusions were developed based on patterns and relationships identified in the field data. Initial conclusions were verified by comparing the data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation to obtain credible findings.

2.7 Research Procedure

The research procedure consisted of three main stages: the pre-field stage, fieldwork, and data analysis. The pre-field stage included developing the research design, selecting the research site, obtaining research permission, conducting preliminary field visits, selecting informants, and preparing research equipment. The fieldwork stage included entering the research site, conducting observations, carrying out interviews, and collecting documentation. The final stage involved data analysis through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification.

More specifically, the research process concerning the integration of learning began by first identifying the challenges in the instructional pattern being implemented. Findings from observations and interviews indicated that Rotational Learning was constrained by limited instructional time, resulting in the incomplete delivery of Islamic Religious Education materials. Based on these conditions, face-to-face and online learning were integrated. Face-to-face learning continued to be conducted rotationally in two study groups, while assignments were provided through Google Forms and subsequent communication was conducted through a WhatsApp group. This process was then observed for two weeks, followed by additional interviews with the Islamic Religious Education teacher and students to obtain information regarding changes that occurred after the integrated learning approach was implemented.

2.8 Data Validity

Data validity was established through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the principal, Islamic Religious Education teacher, and students. Technique triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained through observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, persistent observation and prolonged engagement were employed as part of the efforts to ensure data credibility..

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research findings indicate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, Medan underwent changes in its learning pattern in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the adjustment was implemented, online learning created several challenges in the Islamic Religious Education learning process. Based on observations and interviews with the Islamic Religious Education teacher, principal, and students, online learning was not fully able to replace the function of direct instructional interaction. Students experienced difficulties in understanding several Islamic Religious Education materials that required further explanation from the teacher, particularly when the materials involved understanding religious concepts, applying Islamic values, or activities requiring examples and guidance. In addition, limited learning devices, internet connectivity, students' concentration, and boredom while learning from home also affected the continuity of the learning process. These findings indicate that the main challenges were not limited to the use of technology but also involved limitations in pedagogical interaction during online learning.

As an adaptation to these conditions, Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School implemented Rotational Learning as a form of limited face-to-face learning. The findings show that this model provided students with opportunities to interact directly with teachers again through learning activities conducted rotationally in smaller groups. The direct presence of teachers helped students obtain explanations of materials that had previously been difficult to understand through online learning. Face-to-face interaction also provided teachers with opportunities to observe students' responses, clarify learning materials, and provide more direct guidance throughout the learning process. Nevertheless, the implementation of Rotational Learning did not completely resolve the learning challenges because limited face-to-face instructional time meant that Islamic Religious Education materials could not always be delivered comprehensively within a single meeting. Teachers therefore had to determine which materials were considered most important to be delivered directly, while other learning activities had to be continued through online learning.

Further findings indicate that limited face-to-face instructional time became one of the factors that encouraged teachers to integrate online activities into the learning process. This integration was implemented by assigning complementary functions to face-to-face and online learning. Face-to-face learning was used to explain learning materials, establish direct interaction, provide examples, and ensure students' understanding of the main learning points. Meanwhile, online activities were used to continue learning after classroom sessions, particularly for assignments and communication between teachers and students. Google Forms was used as a medium for distributing and collecting assignments, while the WhatsApp group was used for communication, information sharing, and providing students with opportunities to ask questions. Through this approach, limitations in face-to-face instructional time could be supplemented through learning activities conducted online.

The implementation of integrated learning also demonstrated changes in students' responses to Islamic Religious Education learning activities. Based on observations and interviews, students showed greater enthusiasm when face-to-face and online learning were implemented in an integrated manner compared with learning conducted exclusively online. Students found it easier to understand the assignments provided online because they had previously received explanations from the teacher during face-to-face learning. Direct interaction also provided students with opportunities to communicate the difficulties they encountered and receive immediate explanations. Following face-to-face learning activities, students continued their learning by completing assignments through Google Forms and communicating through WhatsApp. Thus, the integration of the two learning modes functioned not only as a technical solution to limited instructional time but also as a means of establishing continuity between classroom learning activities and learning activities conducted after class.

Discussion

Research findings indicate that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at SMP IT Ibnu Halim occurred as an adaptive process in response to changing learning conditions, rather than merely a shift from conventional learning to digital learning. During the early stages of the pandemic, online learning became an important alternative for maintaining educational continuity. However, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education learning could not be determined solely by the availability of digital platforms. The characteristics of Islamic Religious Education, which encompass religious knowledge, understanding, internalization, and application of Islamic values, require pedagogical interactions that enable teachers to provide explanations, examples, guidance, and feedback. This finding is consistent with various studies on learning during the pandemic, which indicate that online learning provides flexibility in accessing learning resources while simultaneously encountering limitations related to facilities, connectivity, motivation, and teacher-student interaction. Accordingly, the findings reinforce the view that learning digitalization should not be understood as a complete replacement for face-to-face instruction, but rather as a means of extending and supporting learning processes according to students' educational needs.

Implementation of Rotational Learning in this study demonstrates that face-to-face instruction continued to perform an important pedagogical function in Islamic Religious Education learning [22]. Through

direct interaction, teachers were able to explain learning materials more responsively, identify students' difficulties, and provide guidance that was not always easily delivered through online communication. This finding is consistent with previous studies of learning during the pandemic, which emphasize that direct interaction remained necessary because students required not only learning materials but also teacher assistance, clarification, and feedback. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal a gap between the need for direct interaction and the conditions of limited face-to-face instruction [23], [24]. Short learning durations prevented teachers from relying on classroom meetings as the sole learning environment. Consequently, Rotational Learning appeared to be more effective when positioned as part of a broader learning system rather than implemented as an independent instructional model.

Integration of face-to-face and online learning emerged as an important finding because the two modes served different but complementary functions [25]. Face-to-face learning was primarily used for activities requiring direct explanation and intensive interaction, whereas online learning extended the learning process through assignments, communication, and follow-up activities. The use of Google Forms and WhatsApp demonstrates that learning transformation does not necessarily require sophisticated technological systems. Simple technologies that were already familiar to teachers and students could be utilized to maintain learning continuity [26]. This finding supports previous studies showing that digital platforms during the pandemic helped teachers manage assignments and learning communication, although their effectiveness depended considerably on teachers' ability to integrate technology with instructional objectives. Accordingly, the identified gap was not primarily associated with the lack of technological resources, but rather with how technology was positioned within an instructional design appropriate to the characteristics of Islamic Religious Education content and students' learning conditions.

From the students' perspective, integration of learning modes also demonstrated a positive tendency in terms of interest and understanding in Islamic Religious Education learning. Students showed greater enthusiasm when they had opportunities to meet teachers directly, while online activities provided flexibility for completing assignments after classroom sessions [27], [28]. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that blended learning can provide more flexible learning experiences by combining the advantages of direct interaction with the accessibility of digital learning. However, this study provides a different perspective because the integration did not emerge solely as an instructional innovation intentionally designed from the outset, but rather as an adaptive response to learning limitations during the pandemic [29], [30]. Consequently, a gap can be identified between the concept of blended learning, which is often designed under normal educational conditions, and the form of integration observed in this study, which developed from the practical needs of the school to address limited face-to-face instructional time and various challenges associated with online learning.

Successful integration of learning was also strongly influenced by the teacher's role in managing the relationship between face-to-face and online activities. Teachers did not merely function as transmitters of learning materials but also as designers of the learning sequence who determined which materials needed to be delivered directly and which activities could be continued online. Explanations provided during face-to-face sessions became an important foundation for students to understand assignments distributed through Google Forms while WhatsApp functioned as a communication space when students encountered difficulties after classroom instruction. This pattern indicates that technology functioned as a reinforcement of the pedagogical process rather than a substitute for the teacher. The finding extends previous studies that have generally examined digital media based on platform effectiveness or accessibility by demonstrating that successful integration was more strongly determined by teachers' ability to connect learning activities before, during, and after classroom sessions. Within this context, teachers' pedagogical competence and adaptive capacity constituted important components of Islamic Religious Education learning transformation.

Originality of this study lies in portraying Islamic Religious Education learning transformation as a functional integration between limited face-to-face instruction and online learning. Online learning was not positioned as a replacement for face-to-face instruction, while face-to-face instruction was not regarded as the only ideal form of learning. Instead, both modes were assigned complementary functions according to the learning limitations encountered during the pandemic. Face-to-face instruction provided opportunities for explanation, interaction, clarification, and direct guidance, whereas online learning expanded opportunities for students to complete assignments and communicate with teachers. This perspective distinguishes the present study from previous research that has predominantly focused either on the problems of online learning or on the implementation of educational technology as separate issues. Accordingly, this study contributes conceptually by demonstrating that Islamic Religious Education learning transformation can be understood as a redistribution of instructional functions between physical and digital learning spaces based on pedagogical needs, school conditions, and student characteristics.

Practical implications of the findings can be identified for teachers, schools, and Islamic Religious Education learning managers. For teachers, integration of learning modes emphasizes the importance of designing continuous learning sequences in which face-to-face activities do not function independently but are connected to clearly structured online follow-up activities. For schools, the findings highlight the need to support

digital facilities, internet access, teacher competencies, and learning communication systems that enable consistent integration. For students, combining the two learning modes can provide a more flexible learning experience while maintaining opportunities for direct interaction with teachers. From a theoretical perspective, the findings strengthen the understanding that learning transformation involves not only the adoption of technology but also changes in instructional strategies, interaction patterns, time management, and the distribution of functions among teachers, students, and learning media. Such implications are relevant to the development of adaptive Islamic Religious Education learning, particularly when schools encounter conditions requiring flexibility in educational delivery.

Several limitations should nevertheless be considered when interpreting these findings. The study was conducted at a single institution, Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, Medan, within the specific context of pandemic-era learning and the implementation of *Rotational Learning*. Consequently, the findings cannot be directly generalized to all schools or different Islamic Religious Education learning contexts. In addition, the qualitative approach relied on observations, interviews, and documentation, meaning that changes in students' learning interest and understanding were primarily identified through participants' experiences and responses rather than through quantitative measurements conducted before and after the implementation. Future studies could involve a broader range of schools and participants and employ mixed-method approaches to examine changes in students' learning interest, understanding, engagement, and achievement through more measurable indicators. Such research could further develop the findings of this study into a more systematic model of Islamic Religious Education learning that integrates direct interaction and digital technology in both normal educational settings and emergency learning situations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Ibnu Halim Integrated Islamic Junior High School, Tanjung Mulia, Medan was implemented through the integration of limited face-to-face learning using the Rotational Learning model and online learning. Face-to-face learning provided opportunities for direct explanation, interaction, clarification, and guidance, while online learning through Google Form and WhatsApp supported assignments, communication, and learning follow-up. This integration helped overcome the limited duration of face-to-face learning and supported students' understanding and learning engagement. The findings indicate that integrating direct and digital learning can serve as an adaptive strategy for maintaining the continuity of Islamic Religious Education learning under constrained learning conditions. Future research is expected to examine the effectiveness of this integrated model using broader participants and quantitative indicators of learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement.

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