

REFRAMING TARBIYYAH IN DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION

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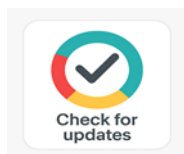
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Abstract

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The rapid movement of Islamic education onto digital platforms has outpaced reflection on what happens to *tarbiyyah*, the holistic nurturing of the learner's intellect, character and soul, when teacher and student no longer share a physical space. Existing research on digital Islamic education concentrates on access, technology acceptance and content delivery, while the relational and spiritual core of the tradition remains under-examined. This interpretive qualitative study explores how educators and students in Malaysian Islamic higher education understand and enact tarbiyyah in digital learning environments, with particular attention to spiritual formation and the teacher–student relationship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected participants (five Islamic education lecturers and four undergraduate students) and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were constructed: (1) tarbiyyah as presence rather than content, where participants described the screen as thinning the companionship (*suhbah*) on which formation depends; (2) adab reconfigured, where markers of respect were renegotiated around cameras, microphones and messaging; (3) the extended murabbi, where instant messaging stretched the teacher's nurturing role beyond class hours at a personal cost; and (4) designed spiritual moments, where formation survived online only when deliberately built into the lesson. The findings suggest that digital environments do not remove tarbiyyah but shift it from an ambient by-product of physical co-presence to an intentional pedagogical act. The study proposes reframing tarbiyyah online as *designed presence* and offers recommendations for educators, institutions and curriculum designers.



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Introduction

Islamic education has never been understood by its own tradition as the transfer of information alone. Its aim is the formation of a whole person, and the vocabulary of the tradition reflects this: *ta'lim* (instruction), *ta'dib* (the disciplining of character and conduct) and *tarbiyyah* (nurturing growth toward maturity) describe overlapping dimensions of a single educational process (Sahin, 2013; Zaman & Memon, 2016). Of the three, *tarbiyyah* carries the most relational meaning. It presupposes a *murabbi*, a teacher who nurtures rather than merely informs, and a learner whose spiritual and moral development unfolds through sustained contact with that teacher (Alkouatli, 2018; Memon, 2011). Formation, in this view, is something that happens between people.

The conditions under which that contact occurs have changed sharply. The COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions worldwide into what Hodges et al. (2020) called emergency remote teaching, a rapid and largely unplanned shift that differed in kind from carefully designed online learning. Islamic education institutions were not exempt. Lectures, *halaqah* study circles, Qur'anic recitation classes and student mentoring all moved onto video-conferencing and messaging platforms (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). When campuses reopened, much of this infrastructure stayed. Hybrid delivery, learning management systems and messaging groups are now ordinary features of Islamic studies programmes, and a generation of students has experienced a substantial part of its religious education through a screen.

This shift raises a problem that is pedagogical before it is technical. Research on online learning has long shown that the sense of another person being "really there", described as social and teaching presence, shapes both satisfaction and learning (Garrison, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). If presence matters for secular subjects, it matters more for a tradition in which the teacher's character is itself part of the curriculum. Islamic pedagogy relies on modelling, companionship and the observation of a teacher's conduct, elements that Alkouatli (2022) identifies as central to how Muslim educators understand their work. The concern voiced by many educators is that digital delivery preserves the *ta'lim* dimension, since content can be recorded, uploaded and assessed, while silently eroding *tarbiyyah*. A student may complete a course on Islamic ethics with high marks without ever having been known by the teacher.

Despite the seriousness of this concern, the research base is thin and unevenly distributed. Three gaps stand out. First, studies of digital Islamic education have largely addressed technology adoption, readiness, access and learner satisfaction, treating the digital environment as a delivery channel and leaving the spiritual and relational dimensions unexamined. Second, the growing body of work on Islamic pedagogy has theorised the *murabbi* role and the relational nature of formation almost entirely in face-to-face settings such as schools, mosques and teacher education programmes (Memon et al., 2021; Memon et al., 2024). Third, scholarship on digital religion has documented how online spaces reshape religious authority and community (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2013), but it focuses on informal and public religious life, not on the formal teacher–student relationship inside an educational programme. What is missing is an account, grounded in the voices of those involved, of how *tarbiyyah* is understood, experienced and practised when the classroom is digital. In the absence of such an account, institutions make decisions about hybrid and online provision using frameworks that have no category for spiritual formation.

This study addresses that gap. It adopts an interpretive stance and asks how Islamic education lecturers and students in Malaysian higher education make sense of *tarbiyyah* in digital learning environments, how they experience the teacher–student relationship there, and what practices they use to sustain spiritual formation. Its contribution is threefold. Conceptually, it offers a reframing of *tarbiyyah* for digital settings that neither dismisses online learning as spiritually empty nor assumes that formation transfers automatically. Empirically, it brings educator and student perspectives into the same analysis. Practically, it identifies concrete practices that institutions and teachers can adopt. The

sections that follow review the relevant literature, set out the research questions and methodology, present the findings, and discuss their implications.

Literature Review

Tarbiyyah as a holistic concept of education. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic education consistently distinguishes the tradition's educational vocabulary from a narrow model of schooling. Sahin (2013, 2018) argues that *tarbiyyah*, derived from a root meaning to grow, increase and nurture, describes a developmental and dialogical process directed at the whole person, and that reducing Islamic education to the transmission of fixed content betrays this meaning. Zaman and Memon (2016) trace how classical and modern Muslim thinkers framed education as the integration of knowledge, character and spiritual awareness. This holistic aim has a parallel in general educational theory. Biesta (2015) cautions that education concerned only with qualification neglects socialisation and the formation of the person as a subject. *Tarbiyyah* can be read as an Islamic articulation of that fuller purpose, with the added orientation of the learner toward God.

The teacher as murabbi. If *tarbiyyah* is nurturing, the teacher is more than an instructor. Memon (2011) found that Islamic school teachers themselves saw their role as spiritual and moral and wanted preparation that reflected this. Alkouatli (2018) draws on Islamic sources to describe pedagogies in which teaching, learning and human development are inseparable, and her later empirical work with thirty-five Muslim educators identifies pedagogies aimed at self, social and spiritual transformation (Alkouatli, 2022). Studies of teacher education report similar findings. Alumni of an Islamic teacher education programme described Islamic pedagogy less as a set of techniques than as a way of being with students (Memon et al., 2021), and educators in an Australian programme described a reorientation toward nurturing mind, body and soul together (Memon et al., 2024). In the Malaysian context, Hussin and Tamuri (2019) showed that excellent Islamic education teachers embed values through personal knowledge of their students, two-way interaction and attention to individual differences. Across these studies, formation is carried by the person of the teacher.

The teacher–student relationship in educational research. The importance of the relationship is not unique to Islamic education. A meta-analysis by Roorda et al. (2011) found that affective teacher–student relationships were associated with student engagement and achievement across a large body of studies. Noddings (2012) describes teaching as a caring relation in which the teacher attends to the expressed needs of the student and the student recognises that care, so that the relation is completed only when both take part. This reciprocity resonates with the Islamic tradition's emphasis on *adab*, the proper conduct of both teacher and learner, and on *suhbah*, the companionship through which knowledge and character are passed on. What the Islamic tradition adds is a spiritual register: the relationship is a means of drawing nearer to God as well as a condition of effective learning.

Presence and relationship in digital learning. Research on online learning offers a vocabulary for what may be lost or kept when teaching moves to a screen. The Community of Inquiry framework identifies social, cognitive and teaching presence as jointly necessary for a meaningful online educational experience (Garrison, 2017). A meta-analysis by Richardson et al. (2017) found social presence to be positively related to both satisfaction and perceived learning. The pandemic added an important caution. Hodges et al. (2020) distinguished hastily assembled emergency remote teaching from well-designed online education, and Rapanta et al. (2020) argued that the central task for university teachers is to refocus on teacher presence and learning activity design, not on technology. These frameworks establish that presence online has to be constructed. They were, however, developed without reference to spiritual formation, and they do not ask whether a teacher's nurturing influence can be sustained through mediated contact.

Digital religion and Islamic learning online. A separate literature examines religion in digital spaces. Campbell (2013) shows that online and offline religious practice are interwoven and that digital media reshape community, identity and authority. Bunt (2018) documents how cyber-Islamic

environments have altered the ways Muslims access knowledge and recognise religious authority, with scholars, preachers and platforms competing for attention. For formal Islamic education this matters because students now arrive with alternative sources of religious knowledge always to hand, and the teacher's authority can no longer rest on control of information. Within Islamic education research, however, studies of digital delivery have concentrated on readiness, acceptance and effectiveness of platforms, and the pandemic literature largely reports logistical challenges (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The formative relationship between a specific teacher and a specific student has received little direct attention.

Synthesis and gap. Taken together, the literature supports three propositions: *tarbiyyah* is holistic and relational; the *murabbi*'s personal presence is its main vehicle; and presence in digital environments does not occur by default but must be built. What the literature does not provide is an account of how these propositions meet in practice. Islamic pedagogy scholarship theorises formation in physical settings. Online learning scholarship theorises presence without spirituality. Digital religion scholarship examines authority outside formal education. No study located in this review examines, through the accounts of both teachers and students, how *tarbiyyah* is reinterpreted when the teacher–student relationship is digitally mediated. The present study is designed to address this gap.

Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions.

1. **RQ1:** How do Islamic education lecturers and students understand *tarbiyyah* in digital learning environments?
2. **RQ2:** How do they experience the teacher–student relationship when teaching and learning are digitally mediated?
3. **RQ3:** What practices do they use, or wish to see used, to sustain spiritual formation in digital learning environments?

Methodology

Research design

The study used a basic interpretive qualitative design. This design is suited to questions about how people interpret their experiences and what meaning they attach to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It rests on a constructivist assumption that *tarbiyyah* in a digital classroom is not a fixed object to be measured but a meaning that teachers and students build through their interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis also borrowed a sensibility from interpretative phenomenological work: close attention to each participant's account before looking across accounts (Smith et al., 2022).

Participants and sampling

Nine participants were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation in role, gender, experience and subject area. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being a lecturer or undergraduate student in an Islamic studies programme at a Malaysian public higher education institution; (b) at least two semesters of teaching or learning Islamic studies courses through online or hybrid delivery; and (c) willingness to reflect on spiritual and relational aspects of that experience. Five lecturers and four students from three institutions took part.

The sample size was guided by the concept of information power, which holds that a smaller sample is sufficient when the aim is narrow, participants are highly specific to the aim, and the interview dialogue is rich (Malterud et al., 2016). It is also consistent with empirical reviews indicating that saturation in relatively homogeneous groups is commonly reached within 9 to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). No substantially new codes were generated after the seventh interview. The final two interviews were completed to confirm this.

Table 1. Participant profiles (simulated)

Code	Role	Gender	Age	Experience	Field or programme	Main digital platforms
P1	Senior lecturer	Female	46	18 years teaching	Aqidah and Islamic thought	Google Meet, LMS, WhatsApp
P2	Lecturer	Male	39	11 years teaching	Fiqh and usul al-fiqh	MS Teams, Telegram
P3	Associate professor	Female	52	24 years teaching	Akhlaq and tasawwuf	Google Meet, WhatsApp
P4	Lecturer	Male	34	6 years teaching	Qur'anic studies and tajwid	Zoom, WhatsApp voice notes
P5	Senior lecturer	Female	41	14 years teaching	Da'wah and Islamic civilisation	MS Teams, LMS, Telegram
P6	Student, Year 3	Female	21	4 semesters online or hybrid	Islamic studies	Google Meet, WhatsApp
P7	Student, Year 3	Male	22	4 semesters online or hybrid	Shariah	MS Teams, Telegram
P8	Student, Year 2	Female	20	2 semesters hybrid	Islamic education	Google Meet, LMS
P9	Student, Year 4	Male	23	5 semesters online or hybrid	Usuluddin	Zoom, WhatsApp

Interview process

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, carried out in five stages.

1. **Protocol development.** An interview guide of ten open questions was drafted from the research questions and the literature. It covered three areas: the meaning of *tarbiyyah*, the experience of the teacher–student relationship online, and practices that support or hinder spiritual formation. Parallel versions were prepared for lecturers and students.
2. **Expert review and piloting.** Two specialists, one in Islamic education and one in qualitative methods, reviewed the guide. It was piloted with one lecturer and one student who were not part of the sample. Two questions were reworded and one probe was added.
3. **Recruitment and consent.** Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee [insert approval reference]. Potential participants received an information sheet by email. Written consent was obtained before each interview, including consent to audio recording. Participants were told they could withdraw at any time without consequence.
4. **Conducting the interviews.** Interviews took place between [month] and [month] [year]. Six were held face to face in a private room on campus and three by video conference at the participant's request, an approach shown to be workable for qualitative interviewing (Archibald et al., 2019). Each lasted 45 to 70 minutes. Interviews were held in Malay with occasional English and Arabic terms, opened with rapport-building questions, and closed by inviting the participant to add anything not yet covered. Field notes were written immediately afterwards.
5. **Transcription and member checking.** Recordings were transcribed verbatim within one week and anonymised using codes P1 to P9. Each participant received their transcript and a one-page summary of the researcher's preliminary interpretation and was invited to correct or comment (Birt et al., 2016). Two participants made minor clarifications. Excerpts quoted in this article were translated into English by the researcher and checked by a bilingual colleague.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). The six phases were followed recursively: familiarisation through repeated reading; systematic coding of the

whole dataset; generating initial themes from clustered codes; reviewing themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; defining and naming themes; and writing up. Coding was mainly inductive, with the concepts of *murabbi*, *adab* and presence used as sensitising ideas. Coding produced 212 coded segments and 47 codes, which were grouped into 11 sub-themes and four themes. In keeping with the reflexive approach, themes are treated as patterns of shared meaning constructed by the researcher, not as categories that emerged on their own.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was supported by member checking, the inclusion of both lecturers and students, and peer debriefing with two colleagues. Transferability is supported by the description of context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail of coding decisions and a reflexive journal. The researcher is an Islamic studies lecturer who has taught online and holds a prior commitment to the value of *tarbiyyah*. This insider position helped with rapport and shared vocabulary. It also carried a risk of hearing only confirmation of the researcher's own concerns, so disconfirming accounts were actively sought and are reported in the findings.

Findings

Note: All participant accounts and verbatim excerpts in this section are simulated for illustration and must be replaced with actual interview data.

The findings are presented in two parts. The first gives an account of each of the nine interviews with verbatim excerpts. The second presents the four themes constructed across the dataset, with summary tables.

Individual interview accounts

P1: Senior lecturer, Aqidah and Islamic thought (18 years). P1 framed *tarbiyyah* as something students absorb from a teacher's manner more than from the syllabus. She described her first online semester as a period of professional grief.

"When I teach aqidah in the lecture hall, I can see the face that is confused, the face that is doubting. I walk to that student. Online, I am talking to a wall of initials. I delivered everything in the syllabus, every single topic, but I went home feeling I had not taught anyone. Ta'lim happened. Tarbiyyah, I am not sure." (P1)

She later changed her practice, and this changed her view.

"I stopped starting with slides. Now the first ten minutes, cameras on, I ask three students by name how they are, how their mother is, whether they prayed Subuh on time today. They laugh, but they wait for it. I realised the tarbiyyah did not disappear. I just had stopped doing it because nobody was physically in front of me to remind me." (P1)

P2: Lecturer, Fiqh and usul al-fiqh (11 years). P2 was the most pragmatic of the lecturers and resisted what he called nostalgia for the physical classroom.

"Let us be honest. In a hall of 120 students, how much tarbiyyah was really happening? I did not know their names either. Online at least I have the chat, I have their messages. Some students who never spoke for two years now message me on Telegram at night asking about hukum that they were too shy to ask in front of friends." (P2)

He was, however, clear about a cost that fell on him.

"The problem is there is no door to close anymore. Questions come at 11 at night, at Subuh, on Friday. I answer because I think, this is amanah, this is my role as murabbi. But my wife asks me, when does the class end? I do not have an answer for her." (P2)

P3: Associate professor, Akhlaq and tasawwuf (24 years). P3 gave the most theologically developed

account. She distinguished information about good character from the transmission of a state of the heart.

"Akhlaq is not taught, it is caught. My own teachers, I remember how they sat, how they lowered their voice when they mentioned the Prophet, peace be upon him. I do not remember their notes. So I ask myself, what do my students catch from me through a screen? They see my head and shoulders. They do not see how I greet the cleaner, how I react when the projector fails." (P3)

She did not conclude that online tarbiyyah is impossible, only that it asks more of the teacher.

"The screen is a filter, it lets through words and blocks hal, the state. So I must be more deliberate. I tell them stories of my own mistakes now. I never did that in class before. If they cannot observe me, I must let them in another way." (P3)

P4: Lecturer, Qur'anic studies and tajwid (6 years). P4 spoke about the limits of the medium for recitation, where teacher and student traditionally sit face to face.

"For tajwid, the delay in the audio kills me. I cannot hear the ghunnah properly, I cannot see the mouth clearly. But what I miss more is something else. When a student recites in front of you and makes a mistake, there is a moment, they look at you, you smile, they try again. That moment is tarbiyyah. It teaches patience and humility. On Zoom they just unmute, recite, mute." (P4)

As the youngest lecturer, he also described using voice notes as a partial solution.

"I ask them to send recitation by WhatsApp voice note and I reply with voice, not text. When they hear my voice saying 'masha-Allah, your mad is better this week', it is different from a tick. A few told me they keep those voice notes." (P4)

P5: Senior lecturer, Da'wah and Islamic civilisation (14 years). P5 focused on adab and on her uncertainty about how to read student behaviour online.

"In the beginning I was offended. Cameras off, someone clearly lying in bed, one student answered me while eating. I thought, where is the adab with ilmu? Then one girl told me privately she shares one room with four siblings and she is ashamed to open the camera. I felt very small. I had judged adab by a picture." (P5)

This led her to negotiate expectations with students directly.

"Now in week one we write together what adab means in our online class. They suggested things themselves: be early in the waiting room, type salam when entering, tell the ustazah if you cannot open camera and why. When it comes from them, they keep it. That discussion itself is tarbiyyah." (P5)

P6: Student, Year 3, Islamic studies. P6 described a clear loss in the move online, centred on being known by the teacher.

"In first year, face to face, my ustazah knew when I was not okay. She would stop me after class and ask. During the online semesters I had a hard time at home and nobody knew. I attended every class. My attendance was 100 percent. But I was absent, if you understand." (P6)

She singled out small gestures as carrying disproportionate weight.

"One lecturer sent a voice message to the group before the exam, just making doa for us, calling us 'anak-anak saya'. I cried, honestly. It was thirty seconds. It made me feel there was a person there who cared whether I became a good person, not just whether I passed." (P6)

P7: Student, Year 3, Shariah. P7 offered the main disconfirming account. He preferred online interaction in some respects.

"I am not a person who puts up my hand. In the hall I never asked anything in two years. Online I can type the question in chat or message the ustaz directly. For me the relationship with my lecturers became closer online, not further. I know that is not what people usually say." (P7)

He nonetheless separated closeness in communication from spiritual influence.

"But I will admit one thing. Online, I can ask the ustaz, but I cannot watch him. In the surau after class I used to see how one of my lecturers prayed, so calm, so long in sujud. That affected me more than any lecture. That one, there is no link for it." (P7)

P8: Student, Year 2, Islamic education. P8, who had experienced only hybrid delivery, spoke about distraction and the absence of a shared atmosphere.

"When you sit in a majlis ilmu, everyone around you is listening, so you also listen. There is a feeling, a barakah in the room. At home, the lecture on tasawwuf is in one tab and Shopee is in the other tab. I am ashamed to say it. The lecturer is talking about zuhud and I am checking out my cart." (P8)

She valued structured small-group work as the nearest equivalent to a study circle.

"The best thing was when ustazah put us in breakout rooms of five, like a small usrah, and she came into each room for a few minutes. In the big meeting I am a number. In the small room she said my name and asked what I thought. I prepared more for that than for anything else." (P8)

P9: Student, Year 4, Usuluddin. P9, the most senior student, reflected on the long-term effect across five semesters and on competing sources of religious knowledge.

"To be honest, during the online period I listened to more YouTube ustaz than my own lecturers. They are more entertaining, shorter. But a YouTube ustaz does not know I exist. He cannot correct me. My lecturer can tell me, 'Hafiz, the way you argue with people online, that is not the adab of a student of knowledge.' One of them did tell me that. I was angry for a week, then I knew he was right." (P9)

He expressed a preference for a blended arrangement.

"If you ask me, the content, put it online, I can replay it. But keep something face to face, even once a month, a halaqah, eat together, pray together. The content gives me knowledge. That meeting gives me a teacher." (P9)

Themes across the dataset

Four themes were constructed from 212 coded segments. Table 2 sets out the themes, sub-themes and their distribution. Table 3 shows which participants contributed to each theme.

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes and coded segments (simulated)

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative codes	Coded segments	Research question
1. Tarbiyyah as presence, not content	1.1 Ta'lim without tarbiyyah; 1.2 The unobservable teacher; 1.3 Loss of shared atmosphere	"wall of initials"; attended but absent; cannot watch the teacher; barakah of the majlis	68	RQ1, RQ2
2. Adab reconfigured	2.1 Misreading the camera; 2.2 Co-negotiated etiquette; 2.3 Divided attention	camera off as disrespect; hidden home circumstances; class adab agreement; second tab	47	RQ1, RQ2
3. The extended murabbi	3.1 New access for quiet students; 3.2 Voice and personal messages as care; 3.3 Boundary erosion and fatigue	private questions at night; kept voice notes; "no door to close"; amanah	52	RQ2, RQ3
4. Designed spiritual moments	4.1 Relational rituals; 4.2 Small circles and periodic face-to-face contact	opening check-in by name; doa by voice; breakout usrah; monthly halaqah	45	RQ3

Table 3. Participant contribution to themes (simulated)

Participant	Theme 1: Presence	Theme 2: Adab	Theme 3: Extended murabbi	Theme 4: Designed moments
P1 (lecturer)	Yes	Yes	–	Yes
P2 (lecturer)	Contrary view	–	Yes	–
P3 (lecturer)	Yes	–	–	Yes
P4 (lecturer)	Yes	–	Yes	–
P5 (lecturer)	–	Yes	–	Yes
P6 (student)	Yes	–	Yes	–
P7 (student)	Partly	–	Yes	–
P8 (student)	Yes	Yes	–	Yes
P9 (student)	Yes	Yes	–	Yes

Theme 1: Tarbiyyah as presence, not content. The most widely shared pattern, present in seven of nine accounts, was a distinction between what was delivered and what was formed. Lecturers reported completing the syllabus while doubting that they had taught anyone (P1). Students reported full attendance alongside a sense of being unknown (P6). Participants located tarbiyyah in things the screen did not carry: the teacher's conduct outside the lesson (P3, P7), the exchange of glances during correction (P4), and the atmosphere of a gathering (P8). P3's phrase, that the screen "*lets through words and blocks hal*", summarises the theme. P2 dissented, arguing that large physical lectures had not been formative either, and P7 reported closer communication online while agreeing that he could no longer "watch" his teacher.

Theme 2: Adab reconfigured. Participants agreed that adab toward teacher and knowledge remained essential but disagreed about how it shows itself online. P5's account of misjudging a student whose camera was off for reasons of poverty and privacy shows the risk of reading adab from visual cues. Students were candid about divided attention (P8) and about habits carried over from social media (P9). Where lecturers and students wrote shared expectations together, both described the process itself as formative. Adab was not abandoned online. It was renegotiated, and the renegotiation became a site of tarbiyyah.

Theme 3: The extended murabbi. Messaging platforms stretched the teacher–student relationship beyond the timetable. For quieter students this opened a door that the lecture hall had kept shut (P2, P7). Voice, more than text, was experienced as carrying care: students kept voice notes (P4) and were moved by a spoken doa (P6). Lecturers interpreted this availability through the religious concept of amanah, which made it meaningful and also hard to limit. P2's remark that "*there is no door to close anymore*" points to an unacknowledged workload and to a blurring of professional boundaries that institutions have not addressed.

Theme 4: Designed spiritual moments. Where participants described *tarbiyyah* succeeding online, it was always the result of a deliberate act. Examples were opening check-ins by name (P1), self-disclosure of the teacher's own struggles (P3), jointly written adab agreements (P5), small breakout circles modelled on the usrah (P8), and periodic face-to-face gatherings (P9). No participant described formation happening online by itself. P1's reflection that she "*had stopped doing it because nobody was physically in front of me*" captures the shift from ambient to intentional formation that runs through the dataset.

Table 4. Summary of findings by research question (simulated)

Research question	Key finding	Supporting themes	Representative excerpt
RQ1: Understanding of tarbiyyah	Tarbiyyah is understood as relational presence that is distinct from, and not guaranteed by, content delivery	1, 2	"Ta'lim happened. Tarbiyyah, I am not sure." (P1)
RQ2: Experience of the relationship	The relationship is thinner in observation and atmosphere but can be closer in private communication, at a cost to lecturers	1, 3	"I can ask the ustaz, but I cannot watch him." (P7)
RQ3: Sustaining practices	Formation is sustained by deliberate relational rituals, voice-based care, small circles and periodic physical gatherings	3, 4	"The content gives me knowledge. That meeting gives me a teacher." (P9)

Discussion

From ambient to intentional formation. The central interpretation offered here is that digital environments change the mode of *tarbiyyah*, not its possibility. In the physical classroom, much formation is ambient. It happens as a by-product of shared space: the student sees how the teacher prays, greets others and handles frustration, and the teacher notices a troubled face. Participants' sense of loss (Theme 1) is the loss of this ambient layer. The practices described in Theme 4 show that formation can be rebuilt online, but only as an intentional act. This matches the insistence in online learning research that presence must be designed (Garrison, 2017; Rapanta et al., 2020) and extends it into the spiritual domain, which those frameworks do not address. The study therefore proposes reframing *tarbiyyah* in digital settings as *designed presence*: the deliberate construction of occasions in which the teacher knows, is known by, and attends to the learner as a whole person.

The murabbi must become visible by choice. Islamic pedagogy scholarship holds that the teacher's character is a primary means of formation (Alkouatli, 2018, 2022; Memon et al., 2021). The findings add a condition. Online, students see only what the teacher chooses to show. P3's decision to narrate her own mistakes and P4's use of voice illustrate teachers compensating for lost observation with deliberate self-disclosure. This places a new demand on the *murabbi* role. It also qualifies the finding of Hussin and Tamuri (2019) that excellent teachers embed values through personal knowledge of students: that knowledge is still possible online, but it has to be actively sought through check-ins and private channels.

Care needs to be received as well as given. Noddings (2012) argues that a caring relation is complete only when the cared-for recognises the care. The accounts of P6 and P4 suggest that online, care is recognised through small and personal signals, especially the teacher's voice and the use of the student's name. A thirty-second spoken doa carried more formative weight for P6 than hours of lectures. This is consistent with evidence that affective teacher–student relationships support engagement (Roorda et al., 2011) and that social presence predicts satisfaction online (Richardson et al., 2017). The practical implication is that modest, low-cost gestures matter more than platform sophistication.

Adab as negotiated practice. Theme 2 challenges a static reading of adab. When lecturers judged respect by camera use, they risked moral misjudgement of students whose circumstances they could not see. When adab was discussed and agreed jointly, it regained meaning. This supports Sahin's (2013, 2018) argument that Islamic education should be dialogical and attentive to learners' actual conditions and should not assume that inherited forms transfer unchanged. It also shows that the ethical principle and its outward form can be separated: the principle of honouring knowledge and teacher persisted while its expression was reworked.

A relationship that is thinner and closer at once. The disconfirming accounts of P2 and P7 guard against a simple narrative of decline. Private messaging gave reserved students a route to their

teachers that the lecture hall had never offered. The relationship became thinner in shared atmosphere and observation and closer in individual communication. Yet P7's distinction, "*I can ask the ustaz, but I cannot watch him*", suggests that communicative closeness and formative influence are different things. P9's comparison with online preachers makes a related point. In a setting where religious content and authority are abundant online (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2013), the distinctive contribution of the formal teacher is no longer information. It is a personal relationship in which the student can be known and corrected.

The hidden cost to teachers. Theme 3 shows that the extended murabbi role is sustained by lecturers' private time and is justified to themselves in religious terms as amanah. Because the motive is devotional, the load is easily overlooked by institutions and difficult for lecturers to limit. If *tarbiyyah* online depends on designed presence, and designed presence depends on unbounded availability, the model is not sustainable. This finding connects to wider concerns that the pandemic shift placed heavy and unplanned demands on educators (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020) and to Biesta's (2015) point that good education depends on room for teacher judgement.

Limitations. The study involved nine participants from three public institutions in one country, and its findings are offered for transfer by readers to comparable settings, not for statistical generalisation. Participants volunteered and may be more reflective about *tarbiyyah* than their peers. The study relied on interviews and did not observe online classes directly. The researcher's insider position shaped the interpretation, as acknowledged above.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how *tarbiyyah* is interpreted and practised when Islamic education takes place in digital environments. The accounts of five lecturers and four students indicate that *tarbiyyah* does not vanish online, and that it does not survive by default. Content travels through the screen with little effort. The teacher's formative presence does not. What participants experienced as loss was the disappearance of the ambient formation that physical co-presence provides without anyone planning it: the chance to observe a teacher's conduct, to be noticed when troubled, and to sit in the atmosphere of a gathering of knowledge.

What participants experienced as success was always something a teacher had chosen to do: a greeting by name, a spoken prayer, a small circle, an honest story, a shared agreement about *adab*. The study therefore reframes *tarbiyyah* in digital learning as designed presence. This reframing keeps the tradition's insistence that formation is relational and accepts that in digital settings the relationship has to be built on purpose. It also carries a caution. Where designed presence depends on lecturers' unlimited availability, it rests on a private sacrifice that institutions have not yet recognised and that cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Recommendations

For educators, the findings point to a set of modest practices that require intention more than technology. Synchronous sessions should begin with a short relational routine, such as a check-in by name and a doa, before any content is delivered. Feedback and encouragement should be given by voice where possible, since students experienced the teacher's voice as carrying personal care in a way that written comments did not. Lecturers are encouraged to co-write an *adab* agreement with each class in the first week and to avoid judging respect from camera use alone, because students' home circumstances are often invisible. Small breakout circles of four to six students, with the lecturer visiting each one, can serve as an online equivalent of the *halaqah* or *usrah*. Appropriate personal reflection allows students to learn from the teacher's character and not only from the slides. Lecturers should also set and communicate clear hours for responding to messages, so that care for students does not come at the cost of their own wellbeing.

Institutions carry an equal share of the responsibility. Mentoring and pastoral contact should be recognised in workload models for online and hybrid courses, since this study shows that such work is currently done in lecturers' private time. Professional development should address relational and spiritual pedagogy online and should not be limited to training on platforms. Hybrid programmes in Islamic studies should protect regular face-to-face formative contact, for example a monthly *halaqah*, because participants consistently identified physical gatherings as the setting in which they gained a teacher and not just knowledge. Institutions should also publish guidance on healthy boundaries for lecturer–student messaging, which would protect both parties.

At the level of curriculum and policy, course design for digital delivery should state formation outcomes alongside knowledge outcomes and match learning activities to each. Participation requirements such as camera use should take account of students' home circumstances. Recorded content and live relational time serve different purposes and should be treated accordingly, with synchronous time given mainly to interaction, discussion and mentoring while explanatory content is made available for replay.

Future research should test the transferability of the designed presence framing with larger and more varied samples, including pondok, tahfiz and school settings. Observational and longitudinal designs are needed to follow students' spiritual development across online, hybrid and face-to-face study, which interviews alone cannot capture. There is scope to develop and validate an instrument for measuring perceived *murabbi* presence in digital learning, and to examine the workload and wellbeing of lecturers who mentor students digitally after hours. Finally, researchers should explore how emerging tools, including artificial intelligence tutors, affect students' reliance on the human teacher for formation, since this may become the next point at which the meaning of *tarbiyyah* has to be renegotiated.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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