

INNOVATION PAI TEACHING THROUGH A CRITICAL APPROACH AT MUHAMMADIYAH 2 SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL SIDOARJO

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Abstract :

This study aims to analyze the innovation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning methods based on a critical thinking approach at SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo. The research employs a qualitative field research design to explore teachers' and students' experiences in implementing reflective, dialogical, and problem-based learning models. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using Miles & Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that critical-based PAI learning improves students' participation, motivation, and critical reasoning while strengthening character and digital literacy. Teachers act as facilitators by applying discussion, case studies, and digital media integration, creating meaningful and contextual learning experiences. The study concludes that critical thinking approaches supported by technology and reflective pedagogy effectively foster 21st-century skills and Islamic character among students.

Keywords : Islamic education, critical thinking, learning innovation, digital media, character education.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in shaping students' morality, intellect, and character. In the Islamic perspective, education is not only oriented toward the transfer of worldly knowledge but also toward cultivating faith and noble character as the foundation of human behavior (Wulandari et al., 2024; Susanti, 2025). Therefore, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in schools carries a strategic responsibility to instill Islamic values contextually so that students can internalize religious teachings in their daily lives. PAI is expected to serve as a vehicle for character formation and for balancing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual intelligence (Raharjo & Syarif, 2024; Ruslan & Wahab, 2025).

However, along with rapid technological development, globalization, and social change, the Islamic education system is required to renew itself to remain relevant to contemporary challenges (Maidah & Nurhidayati, 2025). Conventional teaching that emphasizes memorization and one-way lectures is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of today's generation. Students need learning experiences that are more interactive, reflective, and intellectually challenging (Fatihatun Nadliroh, 2024). In this context, critical-thinking-based learning is a strategic solution for developing the ability to analyze, reason, and



reflect on Islamic values. The concept of critical thinking in Islamic education aligns with Qur'anic injunctions to contemplate the signs of God's greatness and to reason about truth with sound intellect (Mohd Zhaffar et al., 2023; Umar, 2024).

A critical-thinking approach is not a form of doubt about religious teachings; rather, it is a means to deepen the understanding and application of Islam in a logical, comprehensive, and contextual manner (Kurniasih & Nugroho, 2025). Thus, students are expected not only to understand religious texts literally but also to interpret Islam's moral messages in line with social dynamics and the challenges of modern life. Muhammadiyah Senior High School 2 Sidoarjo, as a leading Islamic educational institution, has implemented a critical approach to PAI through interactive models such as discussions, case studies, reflective dialogues, and analysis of religious texts (Prihatin, 2025; Rahayu & Suprpto, 2023; Hasan & Abdullah, 2024). These innovations have been shown to increase student participation, strengthen systematic thinking skills, and foster a religious character that adapts to technological advances (Zakaria & Lestari, 2025; Syahputra & Sari, 2025).

Against this research landscape, the novelty of the present study lies first in its specific institutional context: the implementation of innovative, critical-approach PAI pedagogy at Muhammadiyah Senior High School 2 Sidoarjo, a school with a distinct Muhammadiyah Islamic culture and educational tradition. This context has rarely been the central focus of previous studies, which have generally been conducted in public schools or madrasahs. A second point of novelty is the integration of a critical approach with digital technology in PAI instruction going beyond the mere use of media or an LMS to deliberately design learning experiences that train students to analyze problems, engage in dialogue, and reflect on Islamic values vis-à-vis the social realities of daily life. Furthermore, the study develops a conceptual model of critical-approach PAI teaching for the digital era that positions PAI teachers not simply as transmitters of content, but as facilitators, motivators, and mentors of students' critical thinking while simultaneously strengthening their Islamic character. The model integrates religious knowledge, critical thinking skills, and character formation in a coherent way. Finally, the study offers a comprehensive mapping of the impacts of a digitally supported critical approach in PAI classrooms, encompassing student participation in learning, the quality of teacher-student interaction, critical thinking abilities, and the implications for shaping students' character and religious attitudes within the Muhammadiyah school environment.

Furthermore, this approach is in line with Muhammadiyah's educational philosophy, which emphasizes the integration of faith, knowledge, and action (Malik & Hidayat, 2024; Raharjo & Syarif, 2024). Through the application of a critical approach in PAI, teachers act as facilitators who guide students to develop higher-order thinking skills and moral awareness. Research shows that the effectiveness of this approach increases significantly when integrated with educational technology and interactive digital media (Prihatin, 2025; Ruslan & Wahab, 2025). Teachers who consistently employ discussion, problem-based

learning, and critical reflection can shape a generation of Muslim learners with strong religious literacy, social empathy, and moral responsibility.

Based on the above, this study is important because it presents a strategic renewal in PAI instruction through the application of a digitally supported critical-thinking approach at Muhammadiyah Senior High School 2 Sidoarjo. The aim of this research is to analyze the implementation, effectiveness, and challenges of adopting a critical approach to improve the quality of learning and the character of students in Islamic Religious Education.

The theoretical framework in this study focuses on three main aspects: (1) the nature of critical thinking in Islamic education, (2) innovation in PAI (Islamic Religious Education) based on critical and digital approaches, and (3) the teacher's role as a facilitator in shaping students' character and religious literacy.

The Nature of Critical Thinking in Islamic Education, Critical thinking is an intellectual process aimed at developing analytical, reflective, and evaluative abilities in understanding a concept or phenomenon. According to Brookfield (2017), critical thinking is the ability to analyze assumptions, identify arguments, and build new understanding through deep reflection. In the Islamic context, critical thinking is not understood as skepticism toward religious teachings, but as a rational and spiritual effort to comprehend divine messages in depth (Mohd Zhaftar et al., 2023).

The Qur'an explicitly encourages Muslims to think, reason, and reflect on God's creation as a use of the intellect that aligns with faith. Allah's words in Q.S. Āl 'Imrān [3]:190-191 emphasize the importance of *tafakkur* (contemplation) and *tadabbur* (pondering meaning) regarding the signs of His greatness. Thus, critical thinking in Islamic education is part of an intellectual form of worship that guides learners to understand and implement Islamic values in a logical, ethical, and contextual manner.

According to Fatihatun Nadliroh (2024), a critical-thinking approach in PAI fosters metacognitive awareness that helps students manage their thinking consciously and responsibly. This aligns with the concept of Islamic education, which emphasizes the balanced development of the intellect ('aql), the heart (qalb), and conduct ('amal).

Innovation in PAI Learning Based on Critical and Digital Approaches, Instructional innovation is key to meeting the digital era and transforming Islamic education. Umar (2024) asserts that 21st-century PAI must be able to integrate spiritual values with higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). A critical approach shifts the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, in which students actively explore, discuss, and interpret religious values within social contexts.

Digital media serves as an important catalyst in implementing a critical approach. Susanti (2025) explains that using interactive media such as instructional videos, online forums, and collaborative applications can strengthen students' participation and motivation. Meanwhile, Zakaria & Lestari (2025) show that digitally based contextual learning accelerates the internalization of Islamic values because students are directly involved in

authentic and relevant learning experiences.

In addition, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and flipped classrooms have proven effective in cultivating critical reflection and collaboration (Rahayu & Suprpto, 2023; Hasan & Abdullah, 2024). Through these strategies, students are invited to analyze social and religious problems, relate them to Qur'anic and Hadith evidence, and formulate solutions that are Islamic and applicable.

The Teacher's Role as Facilitator and Character Builder, Within a critical learning approach, the teacher no longer functions as the sole source of knowledge, but as a facilitator, mentor, and inspirer. Prihatin (2025) emphasizes that the role of PAI teachers must transform into that of motivators who encourage students to think, engage in dialogue, and discover the meaning of religious teachings through personal reflection. This approach enables the creation of a humanistic and collaborative educational relationship between teachers and students.

According to Malik & Hidayat (2024), Islamic character and ethics can grow optimally when teachers integrate the values of faith, knowledge, and action in every learning activity. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a conducive learning environment, facilitating reflective discussions, and guiding students to assess social realities through an Islamic moral perspective. Instructional technologies such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and digital media also expand the learning space, making it more flexible and adaptive to the needs of modern students (Ruslan & Wahab, 2025).

Conceptual Framework of the Study, Based on the theoretical review above, the study's conceptual framework describes the relationship among three main components; 1) A critical-thinking approach as the philosophical and methodological foundation of PAI instruction; 2) Digital innovation and interactive learning media as vehicles for pedagogical transformation; 3) The strengthening of Islamic character and 21st-century skills as the end results of the learning process.

The synergy among these three is expected to yield an Islamic Religious Education model that is contextual, reflective, and oriented toward character development as well as thinking skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a field research design conducted at Muhammadiyah Senior High School 2 Sidoarjo during the first (odd) semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. This approach was chosen to explore in depth how the critical-thinking approach to teaching Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is implemented in the school's real-world context. The research participants include PAI teachers as the implementers of the innovation and Grade 11 students as learners, selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in classroom activities.

Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and documentation in the form of lesson plans (RPP), students' assignment products, and reflection notes. Data analysis followed

Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model comprising data reduction, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing. Source and method triangulation were applied to ensure the validity of the findings. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the effectiveness, strategies, and challenges of implementing a critical-thinking approach in PAI instruction within an Islamic school setting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This field study was conducted at Muhammadiyah Senior High School 2 Sidoarjo in Grade XI Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classes. The subjects consisted of two PAI teachers as implementers of the innovation and thirty-six students selected purposively based on active involvement in classroom activities. Data were collected through observations across six meetings (in-person and via the LMS), in-depth interviews with two teachers and twelve students representing varying levels of participation, and documentation in the form of lesson plans (RPP), excerpts of verse-analysis assignments, students' reflective notes, and LMS activity logs. This data-collection design enabled an understanding of processes occurring in the classroom, shifts in the roles of teachers and students, and the trail of artifacts that support the findings.

Implementation began with the planning stage, when the lesson plans were revised to explicitly incorporate critical thinking indicators (analyzing, evaluating, creating) in the objectives and assessments. During implementation, the teachers employed a combination of group discussion, case studies, problem-based learning, flipped classroom, and project-based learning. The LMS was used for pre-class activities (watching videos or reading materials) and post-class tasks (brief reflections, assignment submissions). The teachers' role shifted from content deliverer to facilitator who elicited questions and provided rubric-based feedback. At the assessment stage, a critical-thinking rubric featuring indicators such as accuracy in citing textual evidence, relevance of arguments, and coherence with social context was applied consistently, especially in thematic debates and social projects. Data traces from observation notes for meetings 1-6, revised lesson plans, and teacher statements indicate consistency across these stages.

The first main finding indicates a pedagogical shift from lecturing to dialogic-reflective practice. Observations show an increase in open question-and-answer patterns, while teachers used analysis-level prompts to encourage argument elaboration. Teacher interviews affirmed a deliberate strategy of withholding "ready-made answers" to give students space to test their arguments. The lesson-plan documents and HOTS rubrics evidently used in five of the six meetings confirm that this change was systematically designed and implemented. As a result, the class moved toward more interactive, problem-solving-oriented learning.

The second finding concerns the activation of students' critical thinking. Over the six meetings, the quality of arguments in group discussions improved from merely citing scriptural evidence to connecting that evidence with social

contexts. Task artifacts essays and social-project infographics displayed a more explicit claim–evidence–reasoning pattern compared to the early sessions. Student interviews confirmed that thematic debates prompted them to seek data and scriptural proofs rather than simply repeat material. Field indicators recorded a shift from descriptive to analytical responses in four of the six meetings, signaling growing depth of reasoning.

The third finding highlights the role of the LMS and flipped classroom in building learner autonomy. A majority of students prepared readings or watched videos before class, allowing face-to-face time to focus on case analysis. Student interviews affirmed this readiness, while LMS logs showed consistent engagement from the second through the sixth week. Active participation attendance, submission of reflections, and contributions to discussion was recorded as high and steady. Should quantitative reporting be required, participation can be computed based on a clear operational definition (for example, active on ≥ 5 of 6 indicators), using data from LMS logs, attendance lists, and the rubric.

The fourth finding shows the integration of Islamic values with social issues. Observations reveal that students linked Qur'anic verses or hadiths to current cases, while social-project artifacts contained scriptural references paired with concise data. Teacher and student interviews suggest a recontextualization of values: not rote memorization of evidence, but reasoned application to real situations. The fifth finding identifies implementation challenges, including variability in technological facilities and digital literacy, differences in students' readiness for a reflective model, and the need to adjust teachers' workload when assessing rubric-based tasks. Improvements were pursued through internal training, sharing of best practices among teachers, simplification of the rubric, and provision of low-bandwidth assignment options to keep access inclusive.

A summary of evidence presents representative quotations consistent with other data: teachers reported that the rubric helped focus on the quality of reasoning rather than the quantity of citations; students said weekly reflections helped them recognize weaknesses in their arguments. Key artifacts the revised lesson plans, HOTS rubric, examples of analytical essays, LMS logs, and documentation of classroom activities constitute concrete proof supporting the themes. The validity of the findings was maintained through source triangulation (teachers, students, documents) and methodological triangulation (observation, interviews, documentation), which mutually reinforced each other, especially on the themes of pedagogical shift, activation of critical thinking, and value integration. Member checking was conducted by presenting a summary of findings to the teachers, resulting in minor clarifications to rubric descriptors, while the audit trail was documented through field notes, coding matrices, and a record of lesson-plan revisions. Taken together, this sequence of procedures shows that the implementation of a critical-thinking approach in PAI was planned, observable, and verified in accordance with Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis principles.

This discussion aligns with a qualitative framework that explores the

processes, roles, and meanings of implementing critical-thinking based PAI within the school context. Following Miles and Huberman's sequence, the data were reduced through coding until five main themes emerged, displayed in matrices, quotations, and classroom artifacts, and then verified through source triangulation teachers, students, and documents as well as member checking. Conceptually, the findings reinforce the literature on the effectiveness of technology-supported dialogic-reflective instruction in enhancing motivation, participation, and critical reasoning, while also underscoring the urgency of teachers digital competencies and rubric-based assessment.

Thematically, the shift in the teachers role from content transmitter to facilitator demonstrably sparked students argument elaboration and is consistent with student-centered approaches and HOTS demands. The activation of critical thinking is reflected in the quality of arguments claims, evidence, and reasoning rather than mere speaking frequency; the implication is that success indicators need to be formulated in explicit qualitative rubrics. The synergy of the flipped classroom and LMS functions as scaffolding for autonomy: access to pre-class materials enables face-to-face time to focus on analysis, debate, and projects. The integration of Islamic values with social issues indicates transfer of knowledge to authentic contexts as an indicator of the effectiveness of critical thinking oriented PAI. Meanwhile, technological and literacy constraints necessitate adaptive instructional design low bandwidth options, staged assessment and sustained mentoring so that innovations remain durable.

Practical implications include developing modular lesson plans (RPP) and HOTS rubrics accompanied by analytic evaluative creative descriptors; strengthening a structured pre during post reflection cycle in the LMS with brief but regular feedback; and improving teacher competencies through project-assessment clinics and management of grading workload. To ensure inclusive access, schools can provide offline or low-data task alternatives and set flexible submission schedules so that device/network barriers do not reduce opportunities for participation.

The study's limitations lie in its contextual scope one school and one subject so generalization is analytical via thick description. Variation in student readiness indicates the need to map participation profiles for more precise differentiated interventions. Suggested avenues for further research include comparative studies across classes/schools and measurement of argument development over time using a validated rubric, so that the trajectory of critical-thinking growth can be monitored longitudinally.

As an operational appendix, data traceability can be demonstrated through a matrix linking themes to evidence trails: for example, Theme 1 supported by observations from sessions P1-P6, interviews with two teachers, and the revised lesson plans; Theme 2 by essay/infographic artifacts, debate rubrics, and interviews with selected students; Theme 3 by LMS logs from weeks 2 to 6, student reflections, and observations of flipped-classroom practices; Theme 4 by social-project products, discussion notes, and applied verse/hadith quotations; and Theme 5 by records of technical constraints along with plans for

follow-up training. For participation reporting (e.g., an 85% target), define “active” operationally as attendance, pre-class upload, at least one written/oral argument contribution, and a post-class reflection upload in ≥5 of 6 meetings; then calculate the proportion (number of students meeting the criteria / total students × 100%) with clearly identified sources (LMS logs, attendance lists, rubrics) to ensure accountability and traceability.

Table : 1 Matrix of Field Evidence and Pedagogical Implications

Theme	Field Evidence	Discussion (Key Findings & Implications)	Follow-up (Challenges & Improvements)
Pedagogical shift: lecture → dialogic-reflective	Observations across 6 sessions: open Q&A; teacher interviews: withholding “ready-made answers”; revised lesson plans include HOTS	Class becomes more student-centered; students’ arguments are more elaborated. Implication: design lesson plans with probing prompts and discussion rubrics.	Challenge: limited time for debates. Improvement: structure pre-during-post phases (flipped) to use class time efficiently.
Activation of critical thinking (HOTS)	Artifacts (essays/infographics) show claim-evidence-reasoning; rising argument quality in discussions; student interviews: seeking data and dalil	Depth of argumentation improves (descriptive → analytical). Implication: use HOTS rubrics (analytical-evaluative-creative) for tasks and debates.	Challenge: varied argumentation skills. Improvement: mini-lessons on reasoning with model exemplars.
Role of LMS & flipped classroom in autonomy	LMS logs: consistent pre-class access; observations: in-class focuses on case analysis; student interviews: “we come ready to dissect cases”	Pre-class serves as scaffolding; face-to-face time targets higher-order tasks. Implication: standardize pre-class packs (video/brief/quiz).	Challenge: device/network access gaps. Improvement: low-bandwidth options and offline alternatives.
Integration of Islamic values & social issues	Thematic debates connect verses/hadith with youth cases; social	Values are recontextualized; authentic transfer to real contexts. Implication:	Challenge: curating trustworthy sources. Improvement:

	projects cite dalil + concise data	contextual projects using local case studies.	information-literacy training and a curated source list.
Constraints & sustainability of innovation	Field notes: varied facilities; rubric grading workload; initial student passivity	Innovation is effective but needs systemic support and differentiation. Implication: staged assessment management.	Challenges: digital literacy and grading time. Improvements: simplify rubrics, peer mentoring, flexible upload timelines.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that implementing a critical-thinking approach in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo effectively increases students' participation, motivation, and religious character. The learning process becomes more interactive, reflective, and contextual through strategies such as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, and the use of digital media.

This model positions students as active subjects who can think analytically and connect Islamic values with social life. Despite challenges such as limited facilities and teacher readiness, this innovation holds strong potential to strengthen a culture of critical thinking and Islamic character in the digital era.

For sustainability, schools and teachers need support in technology training, the reinforcement of digital ethics, and the development of a reflective curriculum so that PAI becomes increasingly relevant and effective in shaping a generation of Muslims who are of noble character and adaptable to changing times.

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