

Islamic Dialogic-Ethical Activation in Islamic Religious Education Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in Indonesian universities is expected to move beyond the transmission of material to a learning experience that allows students to ask questions, weigh arguments, feel dialogic safety, and capture the ethical relevance of religion in academic life. This research aimed to explain how students interpret active, critical, and joyful PAI learning and how lecturers organize pedagogical practices that maintain a balance among critical reasoning, dialogue manners, and an encouraging learning atmosphere. This article used a multi-case qualitative case study design in three undergraduate PAI classes in three types of Indonesian universities. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with 24 students, six PAI lecturers, and three general course coordinators; three focus group discussions (FGDs); nine classroom observations; and nine learning documents. The analysis was carried out through cross-case reflective thematic analysis with initial coding, category development, theme mapping, reflective memos, and information adequacy assessment. The research findings yielded three main themes: voice safety as a prerequisite for participation, problem-based religious reasoning as a critical bridge, and joyful belonging as affective energy for intellectual courage. This article formulates an ethical dialogic activation model that explains the transformation of the student experience from passive obedience to reflective participation. The implications emphasize a PAI design that is dialogical, contextual, case-based, and sensitive to students' academic emotions.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesian universities is at a critical juncture among the formation of religious identity, the strengthening of academic reasoning, and the need for students to experience religious classes as a safe and meaningful dialogue space (Chanifah et al., 2021; Mujahid, 2021a; Rahman et al., 2022). The urgency of this issue lies not only in curricular obligations, but also in the question of how religious education can help students respond to plurality, differences in interpretation, digital dynamics, and contemporary ethical issues without losing spiritual depth (Chanifah et al., 2021; Mujahid, 2021a). When PAI is positioned only as the

transmission of norms, students risk understanding religion as a collection of final answers that are far removed from their social and intellectual struggles. When PAI places too much emphasis on affective appeal without conceptual depth, the class can lose the critical power necessary to establish moral responsibility. When PAI is too critical without a supportive affective climate, students may feel that asking questions is a dangerous or disrespectful act. This condition indicates that active, critical, and joyful learning is not just a choice of method, but a pedagogical need to maintain the quality of the religious learning experience in higher education. Wong and Liem (2022) emphasized that student engagement needs to be understood as a configuration of behavior, emotions, cognition, and agency that moves in the context of learning. In the context of PAI, the configuration becomes more complex because student participation is always in contact with adab, scholarly authority, belief sensitivity, and social relations in the classroom (Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Rahman et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of active, critical, and joyful PAI learning can be analyzed through two interconnected layers of problems: a theoretical layer of how critical participation is formed, and a contextual layer of how Indonesian students negotiate their voices in campus religious spaces (Rahman et al., 2022; Wong & Liem, 2022). Theoretically, active learning requires students not only to listen, but also to connect information, ask questions, formulate reasons, and evaluate alternative meanings (Børte et al., 2023; Rossi et al., 2021). Contextually, PAI classes often contain normative expectations that students respect the authority of lecturers and do not debate religious teachings without adequate grounding (Mujahid, 2021b; Rahman et al., 2022). This tension should not be seen as an obstacle, because it can actually be a source of learning if lecturers consciously manage the boundaries of dialogue, evidence, language, and classroom atmosphere. Ostendorf and Thoma (2022) showed that the development of critical thinking in higher education requires didactic designs that recognize the diversity of viewpoints and productively open up spaces for intellectual tension. In PAI, intellectual tension needs to be maintained so that it does not turn into superficial relativism or identity confrontation. Therefore, this study places student experiences and lecturers' practices as analytical entry points to understand how critical participation can go hand in hand with an encouraging learning atmosphere. This focus is important because the quality of PAI cannot be judged only by the completeness of the material, but also by the way students experience religion as living knowledge that can be academically justified and is relevant to their social life.

Previous research has provided an important foundation, but has not yet fully explained the micro-pedagogical dynamics of active, critical, and joyful PAI learning from student voices. Chanifah et al. (2021) developed a spirituality-based Islamic education framework at two Indonesian universities and found the importance of integrating spiritual values in learning, but the study did not focus its analysis on students' affective experiences when they were asked to think critically in PAI classes. Mujahid (2021a) showed that interfaith literacy can be a counter-radicalization strategy in Islamic higher education, but the focus is stronger on literacy orientation

and tolerance rather than a classroom pedagogical process that enables students to feel safe to express different opinions. Nasir and Rijal (2021) reviewed the mainstream of religious moderation in Islamic higher education institutions, but the level of analysis is more concerned with policies and institutions than with concrete learning experiences in the classroom. Mujahid (2021b) explained that character education is based on Islamic orthodoxy in modern Islamic boarding schools, but the context of pesantren has a different cultural structure and authority relations from PAI classes in public universities. Rahman et al. (2022) showed the relationship between teaching Islamic philosophy and cultivating moderation and critical thinking, but did not elaborate on how the joy of learning, sense of security, and lecturer-student relationships contribute to the courage to ask questions. Mulyana (2023) examined religious moderation in PAI textbooks and its implementation, but document analysis is not always able to capture the students' classroom experiences. Chanifah et al. (2021) also showed the importance of the context of Indonesian universities, but did not place the dialogic safety of students as an analytical focus. Nasir and Rijal (2021) and Rahman et al. (2022) provide a solid foundation on moderation and critical reasoning, but both still need to be complemented by a pedagogical analysis of how these values are brought to life through everyday PAI classroom interactions.

The limitations of the research draw attention to the part that is still insufficiently understood, namely how students construct the meanings of "active", "critical", and "joyful" in a holistic PAI experience, rather than as three separate categories. The higher education engagement literature has indeed explained that student participation is closely related to emotions, lecturer support, technology, collaboration, and agency (Kahu et al., 2022). However, the engagement literature still predominantly examines the general dimensions of student involvement, while the context of PAI brings with it distinctive epistemic and normative issues (Wong & Liem, 2022; Rahman et al., 2022). Børte et al. (2023) suggested that barriers to active learning can arise from classroom design, institutional culture, and actor readiness, but the research did not examine the context of religious education that involves doctrinal sensitivities. Nkomo et al. (2021) identified a disagreement in understanding digital engagement, but the study did not ask how digital or dialogical engagement is intertwined with academic-religious manners. Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of online and blended learning designs to maintain student engagement, but the PAI experience that requires value dialogue cannot be reduced to a technological medium. Luo et al. (2021) explained the role of lecturer support and positive academic emotions, but the context of EFL does not fully answer the issue of student courage when the material touches on beliefs and identity. Thus, qualitative research is needed that listens to students' language, examines lecturers' practices, and interprets the classroom process as an arena for the formation of religious, intellectual, and affective meanings simultaneously.

This research proposes the proposition that active, critical, and joyful PAI learning is formed through ethical dialogic activation, namely classroom design that enables students to speak, reason,

and maintain adab amid differences. The research questions asked are: how do Indonesian students interpret the active, critical, and joyful PAI learning experience? In what ways do PAI lecturers organize dialogues, assignments, and the classroom atmosphere to foster civilized critical reasoning? What process patterns explain the shift in the student experience from passive compliance to reflective participation? Methodologically, this article shows how multi-case qualitative case studies can examine PAI learning as a bounded pedagogical case that contains actors, practices, artifacts, and contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Conceptually, this article offers an ethical dialogic activation model to explain how voice safety, problem-based reasoning, and joyful belonging work together. This argument is important because Indonesian students study PAI in a plural national space, not in a homogeneous social space (Mujahid, 2021a; Pajarianto et al., 2023). With this focus, this article is intended to enrich the global discussion about active learning in religious education through a plural, religious, and pedagogical Indonesian context simultaneously.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. PAI in Higher Education as a Space for the Formation of Religious Meaning

The study of PAI in higher education has begun to shift from the orientation of doctrinal transmission to learning that places students as active interpreters of the relationship among religion, self, and social life (Mujahid, 2021a; Chanifah et al., 2021; Mulyana, 2023). PAI can be defined as a religious education process that connects Islamic teachings, character building, moral literacy, and student social responsibility in an academic context (Mulyana, 2023; Chanifah et al., 2021). This definition emphasizes that PAI is not only the delivery of material, but a pedagogical process that shapes the way students understand themselves, others, and public life. Relevant PAI indicators for this study include understanding of Islamic teachings (Mujahid, 2021a), spiritual reflection (Chanifah et al., 2021), religious moderation (Nasir & Rijal, 2021), social responsibility (Mujahid, 2021b), sensitivity to differences (Pajarianto et al., 2022), and connection to student life issues (Børte et al., 2023; Rossi et al., 2021). From the point of view of constructivist and dialogical educational theory, religious learning in higher education can be understood as a process of negotiating meaning among texts, experiences, authority, and community. This framework guides this research because students' experiences are not seen as passive responses, but as constructed meanings shaped by social relations and classroom practices. Thus, active-critical-joyful PAI needs to be placed as a pedagogical configuration that connects knowledge, emotions, and ethics. This placement makes the research not fall into a false separation between piety, intelligence, and the joy of learning.

This change in perspective also demands a more careful study of moderation, spirituality, and criticism in PAI classes. Nasir and Rijal (2021) showed that the mainstream of religious moderation in Islamic higher education institutions is related to academic policies, curriculum, and culture. The findings help this study see that PAI classes do not stand alone, but are influenced by institutional

language about tolerance, nationality, and religious authority. Rahman et al. (2022) showed that religious moderation becomes more pedagogical when students are involved in weighing arguments, not just accepting normative slogans. This insight is relevant because learning that seems active does not necessarily produce critical reasoning if the activity does not require students to interpret, compare, and justify their reasoning. Mulyana (2023) added that PAI material on moderation needs to be seen along with its implementation so that it does not stop at textbook content. In this study, this concern is translated into attention to student voices, lecturer practices, and learning artifacts. Rahman et al. (2022) showed that the teaching of Islamic philosophy can foster moderation when students are trained to weigh arguments and traditions of thought. However, PAI in general classes requires strategies that can simplify the complexity of arguments without losing depth. It is at this point that the need for active, critical, and joyful learning becomes a pedagogical agenda that cannot be separated from the quality of religious education on campus.

2. Active Learning and Student Engagement in Higher Education

The latest higher education literature shifts engagement from mere attendance or visible participation to multidimensional experiences involving student behavior, emotions, cognition, and agency (Wong & Liem, 2022). Active learning can be defined as a pedagogical design that requires students to engage in meaningful activities such as asking questions, discussing, solving problems, generating arguments, and reflecting on knowledge, rather than just receiving information from lecturers (Børte et al., 2023). This definition shows that physical or technical activity is insufficient to constitute active learning if it is not accompanied by cognitive demand and meaning-making relations. Indicators of active learning include verbal participation (Wong & Liem, 2022), peer collaboration (Gamlath, 2022), problem-solving (Rossi et al., 2021), use of evidence in argumentation (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022), dialogical feedback (Gravett et al., 2021), and self-reflection (Kahu et al., 2022). In the context of PAI, these indicators need to be translated sensitively so that students do not feel that critical thinking means attacking beliefs. Børte et al. (2023) asserted that barriers to active learning often arise when lecturers, students, and classroom cultures do not have the same expectations about participation. Therefore, PAI lecturers need a design that turns participation into a safe experience, not a performative obligation. Active learning in PAI must help students move from listening to interpreting, from memorizing to weighing reason, and from being polite to speaking with manners.

Student engagement is increasingly complex when learning takes place in a digital, mixed, and post-pandemic ecosystem. Nkomo et al. (2021) showed that engagement with digital technology does not yet have a uniform conceptual understanding, so the use of technology does not automatically improve the quality of engagement. In PAI classes, technology can open access to cases, videos, polls, and reflection forums, but its pedagogical value depends on the lecturer's questions and facilitation. Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) found that online engagement in higher education requires complementary pedagogical, social, and technological support. The findings

confirm that pleasurable experiences cannot be built with visual media alone, but need to be supported by interactions that make room for positive academic emotions. Rapanta et al. (2020) added that university teaching needs to refocus lecturer presence and learning activities when the learning medium changes. Heilporn et al. (2021) showed that lecturers' strategies in blended learning can maintain engagement when synchronous and asynchronous activities are connected. Noetel et al. (2021) showed that video can enhance learning in higher education when used as part of active design, rather than a substitute for interaction. Chiu (2022) explained online engagement through self-determination theory, especially the need for autonomy, competence, and connectedness. In PAI, autonomy means that students are given space to ask questions; competence means that students are assisted in using textual evidence, contexts, and arguments; connectedness means that students feel valued when their voices are different. Thus, strong PAI engagement relies on activity structure, emotional support, and dialogical relationships that maintain the dignity of learning participants. As a quantitative comparison, Hoi (2021) modeled the structure of online engagement, so that this resource is positioned only as general digital engagement literature, rather than as a direct basis for the PAI experience.

3. Critical Reasoning, Dialogue Manners, and Religious Reasoning

The critical thinking discourse in higher education has moved from an understanding of universal skills to a more contextual, dialogical, and culturally sensitive understanding (Giacomazzi et al., 2022). Critical thinking can be defined as the process of assessing reasons, evidence, assumptions, alternative perspectives, and consequences of a claim in a reflective and responsible manner (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022). In this study, the definition is not used to measure individual ability, but to interpret how PAI classes shape courage and how students reason through religious issues. Dimensions of critical thinking include clarification of problems (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022), examination of evidence (Rossi et al., 2021), recognition of assumptions (Giacomazzi et al., 2022), evaluation of alternative perspectives (Sajidin, 2026), and reflection on ethical consequences (Rahman et al., 2022). Each of these dimensions needs to be given a pedagogical language that is in accordance with PAI so that critical reasoning is not perceived as unlimited freedom. Pagán Castaño et al. (2023) showed that critical thinking is becoming an increasingly important competency in global higher education. However, the importance of this competency does not mean that all contexts can use the same pedagogical pattern. In PAI, critical thinking must be accompanied by dialogic etiquette so that students can distinguish between testing arguments and undermining beliefs.

Critical religious reasoning in PAI requires a framework that connects textual authority, historical interpretation, social reality, and student ethical responsibility. Rahman et al. (2022) showed that the teaching of Islamic philosophy can foster moderation when students are invited to understand the diversity of arguments in the tradition of Islamic thought. The interpretation of this study is that religious critique does not have to come from outside the tradition, because the Islamic

tradition itself has a rich set of dialogue, ikhtilaf, and argumentation. Mujahid (2021a) showed that interfaith literacy can strengthen students' ability to understand differences without losing identity commitment. The findings help position PAI as a learning space that does not close down differences, but manages them through academic language and encounter ethics. Pajariantio et al. (2022) emphasized the role of local wisdom in strengthening tolerance, while Pajariantio et al. (2023) highlighted the relevance of intercultural education in the Indonesian context. These two contributions show that religious reasoning does not only occur at the textual level, but also in the social experiences that are close to students. Giacomazzi et al. (2022) reminded that critical thinking always has a cultural context, so lecturers need to avoid claiming that one style of argument applies universally. Therefore, this study positions adab not as a barrier to criticism, but as an ethical condition that allows critique to proceed without damaging the collective sense of security.

4. Joyful Learning, Academic Emotions, and Psychological Safety in PAI Classrooms

The study of emotions in higher education shows that meaningful learning does not only depend on cognitive structure, but also on the affective atmosphere that encourages students to engage (Luo et al., 2021). Joyful learning can be defined as a learning experience that brings a sense of security, interest, connectedness, manageable challenges, and reflective satisfaction without detracting from academic seriousness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this study, joyful learning is not understood as classroom entertainment, but as an affective climate that reduces students' anxiety when entering sensitive religious discussions. Indicators of joyful learning include positive academic emotions (Luo et al., 2021), learning autonomy (Chiu, 2022), social connectedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020), lecturer support (Kahu et al., 2022), peer collaboration (Al-Rahmi et al., 2021), and a sense of competence in facing tasks (Heo et al., 2021). These indicators show that the joy of learning is not the opposite of depth, but rather the psychological energy that sustains intellectual courage. Barrot et al. (2021) showed that learning challenges can be managed when students have coping strategies and environmental support. In PAI, this support is important because students may bring different religious experiences to their families, organizations, and social media. Therefore, a joyful PAI class should be designed as a safe space to explore differences in experience, not a space that avoids difficult problems.

Psychological safety in religious learning needs to be distinguished from an atmosphere that is simply friendly or conflict-free. Gravett et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of relationships in feedback literacy, which showed that students can better accept challenges when their pedagogical relationships are trusted. In PAI, criticism of students' arguments will be more productive if framed as an invitation to improve the way of thinking, not an assessment of personal piety. Oyerinde (2022) showed that collaborative learning can strengthen engagement in the acquisition of practical skills, while Gamlath (2022) showed peer learning as a framework for student success. The two findings are relevant to PAI because group discussions can help students test their understanding before speaking in larger classroom forums. Donald (2023) linked peer

learning with social mobility and employability, but in PAI its contribution can be extended to the formation of social courage and dialogue ethics. Chen et al. (2022) showed that social analytics tools can encourage collaborative engagement, but this study views technology only as a support, not a center of experience. Thus, joyful PAI learning is born from a combination of supportive lecturer relationships, challenging assignments, safe peer interaction, and opportunities for students to find personal meaning. This interconnection forms the basis for building an analytical framework that blends active participation, critical reasoning, and an encouraging learning climate.

5. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this research was developed to examine the PAI class as a pedagogical case that involves actors, contexts, practices, artifacts, and processes of meaning. The framework does not construct a path of influence among variables, but shows how the Indonesian higher education context interacts with active participation, critical reasoning, and a joyful learning climate. Conceptually, student engagement helps explain forms of behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agency engagement (Wong & Liem, 2022). Pedagogically, active learning shows the importance of meaningful activities and institutional barriers that need to be managed (Børte et al., 2023). Epistemically, critical thinking provides a tool for analyzing the processes of clarification, evaluation of evidence, and reflection on ethical consequences (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022). Affectively, self-determination theory helps interpret the need for autonomy, competence, and connectedness in learning experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Such conceptual relationships are visualized in Figure 1 as an interpretive model that guides data collection and analysis.

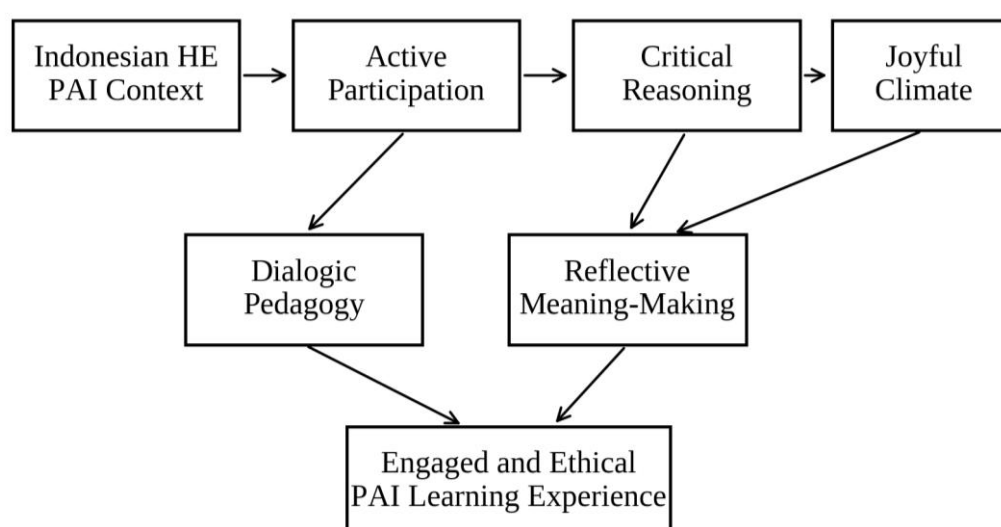


Fig 1. Active, critical, and joyful PAI learning analytical framework

Figure 1 shows that active, critical, and joyful PAI learning is not treated as three stand-alone elements, but as mutually constitutive dynamics in a particular learning case. The context of Indonesian higher education provides institutional and cultural boundaries for classroom practice. Active participation opens up the space of student voice; critical reasoning directs the voice to the assessment of arguments and evidence, while the joyful climate provides emotional energy so that students are willing to enter the discussion. Dialogic pedagogy serves as a mechanism that connects classroom activities with meaning-making reflection. The interpretive outcome sought is not an engagement score, but rather a PAI learning experience structure that shows how students move from passive obedience to reflective participation. Thus, this framework aligns with a qualitative case study design because it focuses on context, processes, actors, and meaning.

To clarify the position of the research, Table 1 summarizes the previous research that forms the basis of the conceptual review and shows the contributory space of this article.

Table 1. Map of previous research and position of this research

Focus	Source	Major contributions	The space in which this research continues
PAI and spirituality	(Chanifah et al., 2021)	Developing a spirituality-based Islamic education framework at two Indonesian universities.	Has not focused on active-critical-joyful experiences in the classroom.
Interfaith literacy	(Mujahid, 2021a)	Showing interreligious literacy as a counter-radicalization strategy in Islamic higher education.	It has not yet unraveled the micro-pedagogical mechanism that enables students to speak safely.
Institutional religious moderation	(Nasir & Rijal, 2021)	Explains the mainstream of moderation in Islamic higher education institutions.	The institutional focus is not enough to examine the experience of students in the PAI class.
Islamic philosophy and criticism	(Rahman et al., 2022)	Connects the teaching of Islamic philosophy with moderation and critical reasoning.	It has not connected criticism with the climate of joyful learning.
PAI textbook	(Mulyana, 2023)	Analyzes religious moderation in textbooks and implementation.	Document analysis needs to be complemented by class interaction data.
Intercultural education and local wisdom	(Pajariantio et al., 2023)	Explains the relationship among religious moderation, local wisdom, and intercultural education in Indonesian higher education.	It needs to be equipped with an analysis of PAI classroom interaction and students' affective-cognitive experiences.

Active learning	(Børte et al., 2023)	Identifies barriers to active learning in higher education.	It is not yet specific to religious education that has normative sensitivity.
Student Engagement	(Wong & Liem, 2022)	Refines the engagement construct in a multidimensional way.	It needs to be translated into the context of PAI with the dimension of manners and religious meaning.
Critical thinking	(Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022)	Formulates didactic principles for critical thinking in higher education.	Has not examined critical reasoning within the limits of the ethics of religious learning.
Joyful learning and emotions	(Luo et al., 2021)	Shows lecturer support and positive emotions in engagement.	It is necessary to examine the question of the courage to speak in religious discussions.

Table 1 shows that previous research corroborates important foundations about PAI, moderation, engagement, active learning, critical thinking, and academic emotions. However, few studies have integrated these dimensions coherently in the PAI classroom experience in Indonesian universities. The position of this research is to connect the conceptual and experiential levels so that the quality of PAI learning can be understood as a social-pedagogical process, not just material design or curriculum policy.

METHODS

This study used a multi-case qualitative case study design because the focus is on understanding the dynamics of PAI learning as a phenomenon tied to specific classes, actors, institutions, time, and pedagogical artifacts. Yin (2018) described case studies as an appropriate design when researchers want to understand contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts. Stake (1995) emphasized that cases need to be understood through the particularities, complexities, and relationships among their parts. On this basis, the bounded cases in this study are three undergraduate PAI classes that each took place for one academic semester in three types of Indonesian universities: public universities, Islamic religious universities, and private universities. The main unit of analysis is student experience and lecturers' pedagogical practices in activating critical reasoning and the joy of learning. A multi-case design was chosen so that researchers could examine repetitive patterns as well as differences in context between classes. This approach is more appropriate than pure phenomenology because the research not only pursues the essence of individual experience, but also pays attention to classroom structures, documents, lecturer strategies, and institutional culture. This approach is also more appropriate than grounded theory because the purpose of the research is not to build a formal theory, but to produce a substantive

interpretive model that departs from the dynamics of the case being studied. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also emphasized the importance of conformity between qualitative design, context, and unit of analysis, so that this reference is used as a supporting methodological basis.

The context of this research is a mandatory PAI course for undergraduate students across study programs. Participants consisted of 24 students, six PAI lecturers, and three general course coordinators or PAI coordinators. Student inclusion criteria include status as an active student, attending a minimum of eight PAI meetings, willing to be interviewed, and having experience participating in discussion, case study, reflection, or problem-based assignments. The exclusion criteria include students who have not attended classes adequately or have a direct power relationship with the researcher. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling with maximum variation because the research requires diversity of experience, not statistical representation. Participant recruitment was conducted through class announcements, email invitations, and voluntary confirmations after prospective participants had read the research information sheet. The number of 33 participants was considered adequate for a multi-case study because the combination of actors, techniques, and data sources provided sufficient information power to develop an initial thematic pattern. Data adequacy was determined through the thickness of the information, the repetition of the pattern, and the ability of the data to answer the research question.

Data collection in this study was carried out through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), non-participatory classroom observations, learning document analysis, and reflective field notes (Busetto et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). Busetto et al. (2020) affirmed that qualitative research can use a combination of techniques to understand social experiences and practices in depth. Interviews were used to explore students' personal experiences and lecturers' pedagogical rationales (Busetto et al., 2020). FGDs were used to understand the students' collective language about a safe, active, critical, and joyful PAI class (Busetto et al., 2020). Observations were used to record interaction patterns, dialogue management, use of questions, responses to differences, and the emotional atmosphere of the class (Yin, 2018). Learning documents were used to assess the suitability among plans, activities, tasks, and actual practices (Yin, 2018). Field notes functioned to record situations, reflexive impressions, and potential biases of researchers (Tracy, 2020). The combination was chosen so that the data relied not only on retrospective narratives, but also on observed practices and artifacts used in the classroom.

Data analysis used cross-case reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasized that the quality of thematic analysis does not lie in mechanical procedures, but in conceptual acuity, decision transparency, and researcher reflexivity. Braun and Clarke (2022) added that thematic analysis requires design thinking from the beginning so that themes are not merely summaries of the topic. The analysis process started with data familiarization, initial coding, grouping of codes into categories, subtheme development, formation of cross-case themes, and development of interpretive models (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and

Clarke (2021) showed that thematic analysis can be used systematically when researchers maintain the relationship between raw data, code, themes, and analytical claims. The analysis involved reflexive memos, cross-case comparison matrices, and discussions among researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Yin, 2018). The final codes needed to be tested through a review of quotations, observations, and documents so that themes were not separated from the data evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The findings model was then developed to explain the process of changing student experience within the limits of the case studied. Kiger and Varpio (2020) were used as supporting methodological references on the traceability of relationships between raw data, codes, themes, and analytical claims, while the primary decision of analysis remained to follow Braun and Clarke.

Data trustworthiness was maintained through credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, reflexivity, and an audit trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained trustworthiness as a framework for assessing the quality of naturalistic research through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Tracy (2020) added that the quality of qualitative research also depends on the transparency of the procedure, reflective sincerity, and the meaningfulness of the contribution. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, technique triangulation, limited member checking, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2020). Dependability was maintained through research decision records, interview guideline versions, coding logs, and theme change matrices. Transferability was reinforced through thick descriptions of the classroom context, participant profiles, and pedagogical practices. Confirmability was maintained with reflexive memos and audit trails so that readers can trace the relationship among data, code, interpretation, and claims. The researcher's reflexivity was explicitly noted, especially related to the researcher's position on PAI, higher education, and pedagogical preferences.

Research ethics were addressed through institutional ethical approval, informed consent, identity confidentiality, data anonymization, and secure data storage. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, their answers did not affect grades, and they could withdraw without academic consequences. The codes P01-P24 were used for students, D01-D06 for lecturers, K01-K03 for coordinators, OBS for observation, DOC for documents, and FGD for group discussions. The study's digital data were stored in an encrypted folder with restricted access to the research team (Tracy, 2020). Quotations that had the potential to reveal the identity of an institution, lecturer, or student were carefully paraphrased without changing the analytical meaning (Tracy, 2020). These ethical procedures are the basis for ensuring traceability of research decisions and participant protection during data collection and analysis. Thus, data integrity becomes part of the research design, not an administrative attachment after the data is collected.

The procedural flow of the research is summarized in Figure 2 so that the relationship among case selection, data collection, cross-case analysis, and trustworthiness procedures is clear.

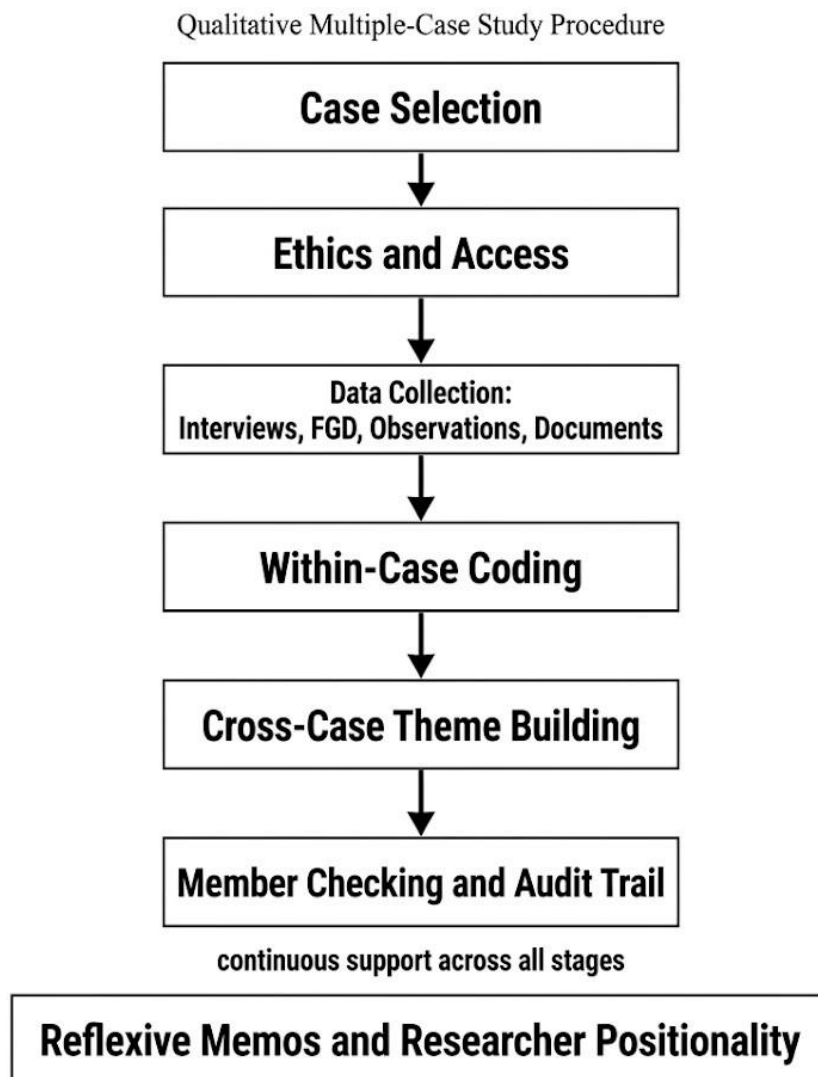


Fig 2. Flow of multi-case qualitative case study procedure

Figure 2 shows that the research started with the selection of clearly limited cases, followed by ethical access and data collection through several techniques. The analysis was conducted gradually from within-case coding to the formation of cross-case themes. Reflective memos and the researcher's positionality were not placed as final addenda, but as processes that accompanied decision-making from data collection to the writing of the findings. With this structure, the case study did not stop at class descriptions, but rather moved toward an interpretive model that describes the process of student learning experience.

Participant profiles are presented in Table 2 to clarify the diversity of data sources in this study.

Table 2. Participant profiles

Groups	Code	Quantity	Main criteria	Analytical function
Students	P01–P24	24	Semesters 2–6; cross-study programs; participating in PAI for at least 8 meetings	Experience active-critical-joyful PAI learning firsthand
PAI Lecturer	D01–D06	6	Teaching PAI; using a discussion, case study, reflection, or project	Explain pedagogical rationale and classroom management strategies
MKU/PAI Coordinator	K01–K03	3	Managing general course policies or PAI	Provide context for the institution's curriculum, policies, and culture

Table 2 shows that this study involved 33 participants with the largest composition of students because the research questions centered on their learning experiences. Lecturers and coordinators were included so that the interpretation of students' experiences can be read along with pedagogical rationale and institutional context. The composition shows that the adequacy of the data is supported by the variety of actors, collection techniques, and depth of information, not by the size of the statistical sample.

Data sources, techniques, and analytical functions are summarized in Table 3 so that each data collection technique has a different role and does not overlap with each other.

Table 3. Data sources and analytical functions

Technique	Number of data sources/participants	Data focus	Analytical function
Student interviews	24 transcripts	The meaning of active, critical, and joyful experiences	Exploring personal experiences and changing learning attitudes
Lecturer interviews	6 transcripts	Pedagogical strategies, design reasons, dialogue management	Examine practice from the perspective of a classroom designer
Coordinator interviews	3 transcripts	Context of curriculum and institutional policies	Understanding the structural boundaries of the case

Student FGD	3 FGDs	A collective language of security and participation	Observing negotiation among students
Classroom observation	9 observation notes	Interaction patterns, classroom atmosphere, lecturer responses	Examining actual practice and classroom atmosphere
Learning documents	9 Documents	semester learning plans, assignments, rubrics, case materials	Examining alignment between plans and practices

Table 3 shows that interviews, FGDs, observations, and documents have mutually reinforcing analytical functions. Interviews provide narrative depth, FGDs reveal collective language, observations examine visible practices, while documents show the formal structure of learning. This combination helps reduce the risk of interpretations that rely solely on participant statements.

The research instrument grid is presented in Table 4 as an initial guide refined after the readability testing and adjustment of the field context.

Table 4. Data collection instrument grid

Instruments	Primary domain	Examples of focuses/questions
Student interviews	Experience following PAI (Chanifah et al., 2021); the moment of daring to ask (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022); a sense of security (Gravett et al., 2021); meaningful tasks (Børte et al., 2023); joyful experience (Luo et al., 2021)	How would you describe the PAI class that keeps you active?
Lecturer interviews	Pedagogical objectives (Børte et al., 2023); discussion design (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022); the boundaries of manners (Rahman et al., 2022); case selection (Rossi et al., 2021); classroom emotional strategies (Luo et al., 2021)	How do you keep critical discussions civilized?
FGD	Group norms (Gamlath, 2022); experiences of difference of opinion (Mujahid, 2021a); the language of joy (Luo et al., 2021); social pressure (Kahu et al., 2022)	What enables students to feel safe or unsafe to speak?
Observations	Question and answer pattern (Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022); voice distribution (Wong & Liem, 2022); response to differences (Pajarianto et al., 2023); humor (Luo et al., 2021); final reflection (Kahu et al., 2022)	Record who is speaking, how the lecturer is responding, and the atmosphere of the classroom
Documents	Semester learning plans (RPS) (Mulyana, 2023); modules (Mulyana, 2023); duties	Assess whether the document provides room

(Børte et al., 2023); rubric (Gravett et al., for dialogue, reflection, 2021); case study material (Rossi et al., 2021) and reasoning

Table 4 shows that the instrument not only asks whether the class is joyful but also traces the moments, conditions, and practices that make the joy of learning support intellectual courage. Each question is structured openly, non-directing, and allows participants to give concrete examples of their learning experiences.

The flow of cross-case thematic analysis is shown in Table 5 to show the relationship among the stages of analysis, the researchers' activities, and the expected output.

Table 5. Qualitative data analysis flow

Stages	Analytical activities	Expected output
Familiarization	Review transcripts, observation notes, and documents multiple times	Initial memo about moments of participation and a sense of security
Open coding	Code data-near segments in important sentences	Initial code list such as "fear of being wrong", "life-relevant example", "lecturer withholding assessment"
Categorization	Group codes based on similarity in meaning	Categories such as voice safety, contextual cases, peer support
Analysis in the case	Examine the pattern of each class in its entirety	Case profiles A, B, and C
Cross-case analysis	Compare repeated and divergent patterns	Cross-case main themes and subthemes
Interpretive model	Connect themes with analytical framework	Ethical dialogic activation model

Table 5 confirms that themes do not arise directly from the initial code, but through repeated review, categorization, and cross-case comparisons (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This flow helps keep the final themes rooted in the data, but conceptual enough to answer the research question.

RESULTS

The research findings were organized based on three research questions and yielded three main interrelated themes: voice safety, problem-based religious reasoning, and joyful belonging. The themes are not treated as separate category lists, but as processes that explain the changing student experience in PAI classrooms. Table 6 presents the codification of the data so that the relationships among the initial code, categories, subthemes, key themes, data sources, and analytical meanings are clearly visible. The thematic description is then deepened through narratives and representative quotes from different data collection techniques. This presentation shows how raw

data are interpreted into conceptual meaning through the interconnectedness among codes, categories, subthemes, and key themes.

Table 6. Qualitative data codification

Initial code	Categories	Subtheme	Main themes	Data source	Analytical meaning
"Fear of being perceived as challenging religion"	Speaking anxiety	Voice safety	Safe voice and adab	P03 Interview	Participation arises after students are convinced that asking questions is not equated with doubting faith.
"The lecturer asked us to explain the reason before mentioning the law"	Gradual argumentation	Problem-based religious reasoning	Ethical dialogic activation	OBS02 Observation	Lecturers shift the discussion from quick answers to traceable reasoning.
"The case is close to the life of the boarding house and the campus organization"	Proximity of context	Problem-based religious reasoning	Ethical dialogic activation	FGD02	The close context makes the PAI material feel contextual rather than abstract.
"Serious class, but not stressful"	Positive affective climate	Joyful belonging	Joyful climate	P14 Interview	The joy of learning emerges as a sense of security, not just humor.
"Reflection rubrics ask for evidence, reason, and experience"	Reflective artifacts	Meaningful assessment	Reflective participation	DOC04	The task organizes the relationship among religious knowledge, argument, and personal experience.
"Friends first responded, then the lecturer straightened out"	Peer mediation	Joyful belonging	Ethical dialogic activation	OBS07	Peer interaction reduces the psychological burden in sensitive discussions.

Table 6 shows that the initial codes close to participants' language move into categories and subthemes through an interpretive process. Codes about fear, reason, case context, classroom atmosphere, rubrics, and peer responses are then interpreted as part of an ethical dialogic activation process. Thus, the final themes not only summarize the content of participants' statements, but explain the pedagogical function of the experience.

1. Voice Safety as a Prerequisite for Critical Participation

The first theme answers the question of how students interpret active, critical, and joyful PAI learning. Research data indicated that students did not necessarily interpret activities as the courage to speak. They first assessed whether the class provided a safe space to question, doubt, be wrong, and change opinions. Voice safety in these findings differs from unlimited freedom of speech, because students still associate it with manners, the way of choosing words, and respect for religious sources. A lecturer who is considered successful is one who does not humiliate students for their answers, but also does not allow weak arguments to run without clarification. Voice safety emerges through verbal cues, acceptance gestures, follow-up questions, and agreed discussion rules. In such conditions, classes feel engaging not because they are light, but because students feel able to enter complex topics without fear of being attacked. The following excerpt illustrates how students interpret this sense of security.

In an interview, a student explained the change in their attitude when the lecturer distinguished critical questions from demeaning attitudes.

"At first I was afraid to ask questions because I was worried that it would be considered challenging religion. But the lecturer always said, 'what we test is the reason, not the faith of the person.' After that, I was braver to convey my confusion, especially when discussing tolerance and social boundaries." (P03)

This excerpt shows that student courage is shaped by the language of lecturers who separate criticism of arguments from moral judgments of the individual. With this separation, students can see asking questions as part of learning, not as a violation of manners.

Observation notes show a similar pattern when lecturers respond to students' answers that are not correct.

"When P11 gave too quick an answer about the ruling on a case, the lecturer did not immediately blame. The lecturer asked the class to write down a clarification question, then chose the two questions that were most helpful to improve the argument." (OBS03)

This observation excerpt shows that voice safety is built through classroom procedures, not just through friendly attitudes. Students are trained to sharpen arguments through peer questions so that mistakes become learning material together.

In the FGD, students said that a safe atmosphere emerged when differences were not immediately closed with a final answer.

"When discussing PAI, we are usually afraid of saying the wrong thing. In this class, the lecturer gives time for some opinions first. After that, it will be arranged which ones have strong textual evidence, which ones are still assumptions." (FGD01)

This FGD excerpt confirms that students feel the difference between a class that simply provides an opportunity to talk and a class that actually structures the conversation. Speaking opportunities are productive because lecturers help students distinguish among textual evidence, experiences, and assumptions.

The learning document also shows the existence of dialogue rules that support this theme.

"The learning contract writes down four principles of discussion: respecting the speaker, asking for clarification, distinguishing between criticism of ideas and criticism of people, and ending the discussion with personal reflection." (DOC02)

This document excerpt shows that voice safety can be designed from the outset through pedagogical artifacts. Dialogue rules give students a common language to manage differences before the discussion becomes emotional.

2. Problem-Based Religious Reasoning as a Critical Bridge

The second theme answers questions about how lecturers organize dialogue, activities, and affective atmosphere so that critical reasoning remains in harmony with academic-religious manners. Research data indicated that lecturers did not start learning from normative definitions alone, but from cases from students' lives that demanded reasoning. These cases can be in the form of social media ethics, differences in religious organizations, halal consumption practices, interfaith friendship relationships, or academic dilemmas such as plagiarism. Students were then asked to identify problems, distinguish facts and opinions, seek references, consider alternative attitudes, and compile reflections. This activity frames critique not as unbounded debate, but as a gradual process bound by sources, contexts, and ethics. Lecturers act as facilitators who slow hasty answers so that students see the complexity. The joy of learning arises when students feel that PAI is discussing realities close to their lives. The following excerpt shows the mechanism.

In the interview, the lecturer explained the reason for using cases close to campus life.

"I deliberately started from the case they experienced: abusive comments on social media, invitations from organizations, or dishonest group work. From there, they realized that PAI is not just memorizing concepts, but a way to weigh attitudes." (D02)

This excerpt shows that lecturers use the proximity of context to open up the need for reasoning. The case is not an additional illustration, but an entry point for students to see the ethical relevance of PAI.

Observations show that lecturers organize the reasoning process through explicit steps.

"The lecturer wrote four columns on the board: case facts, relevant Islamic values, possible attitudes, and social risks. Students work in pairs before presenting arguments." (OBS05)

This observation excerpt shows that critical reasoning requires scaffolding. The four columns help students avoid prescriptive answers that are too quick and encourage consideration of consequences.

In the FGD, students assessed that the case study made PAI feel more relevant and engaging.

"We are more enthusiastic if the case is close. For example, about joking in WhatsApp groups, we can have different opinions, but in the end we know how to look at the evidence, manners, and the impact on friends." (FGD02)

This excerpt shows that the proximity of issues creates the energy of participation. The class feels meaningful because students can connect daily experiences with religious reasoning tools.

The task document reinforces the pattern through reflective rubrics.

"The final project rubric asks students to write an ethical case, explain religious references, compare two possible decisions, and reflect on the consequences for themselves and the community." (DOC04)

This document excerpt shows that critical reasoning does not only appear in oral discussions, but is also reinforced through assessments. The rubric requires students to connect textual evidence, reasons, alternatives, and reflections.

3. Joyful Belonging as Affective Energy for Reflective Participation

The third theme answers questions about process patterns that explain the change in student learning experience from passive obedience to reflective participation. Research data indicated that joyfulness in PAI classes was not primarily generated by games or humour, but by a sense of acceptance as part of the learning community. Students find the class enjoyable when the lecturer knows their names, makes room for personal experience, uses non-judgmental language, and closes the discussion with a calming reflection. This sense of belonging makes students more willing to read the material, discuss, and revise opinions. Joyful belonging also emerges through small group work that allows students to try out arguments before speaking in large forums. This pattern shows that the joy of learning has a serious pedagogical function, namely lowering social threats and strengthening reflective courage. Thus, the change from passive to reflective takes place through a combination of security, meaningful issues, and social connectedness. The following excerpt illustrates the process.

In interviews, students described a serious yet not stressful PAI class.

"The class is still serious, but it does not make us stiff. Lecturers sometimes give funny examples from boarding house life, then relate them to verses or hadiths. So we laughed, but after that we thought." (P14)

This excerpt shows that humor functions as an affective bridge, not a diversion from the material. Excitement arises when light examples lead students to more serious reflection.

Observations show that small group work helps students who are usually silent.

"In the group discussion, P18, who rarely speaks, began to explain his experience of campus organization. After a group friend gave support, he was willing to present a summary of the argument in front of the class." (OBS07)

This observation excerpt shows that belonging is formed gradually through peer support. The courage to speak in a large forum does not appear suddenly, but is mediated by small, safer spaces.

In the FGD, students emphasized the importance of classmate response.

"What makes it comfortable is not only the lecturer. Friends also do not immediately laugh if there is an unusual answer. Usually, we help arrange the sentences to make them clearer." (FGD03)

This excerpt expands the meaning of joyful learning from lecturers' strategies toward classroom culture. Students become part of an ecosystem of support that makes reflective participation more likely.

The reflection document shows that students are asked to close the learning with self-evaluation.

"The weekly reflection question reads: what ideas changed this week, what reasons influenced that change the most, and how would you practice them with manners?" (DOC07)

This document excerpt shows that joyful belonging is directed at conscious self-change. Weekly reflection prevents the joyful experience from stopping as a classroom atmosphere, but moves into the formation of PAI learning identity.

A summary of the themes and subthemes of the research results is shown in Table 7 so that the relationship among the research question, the main theme, and the interpretive meaning can be read succinctly.

Table 7. Summary of themes, subthemes, and interpretive meanings

Research questions	Main themes	Subtheme	Interpretive meaning
How do students interpret active-critical-joyful PAI?	Voice safety as a prerequisite for critical participation	Security in asking; mistakes as learning materials; criticism of ideas is not personal criticism	Students are active when they feel that their dignity is maintained and the manners of dialogue are arranged.
In what ways do lecturers organize dialogues and activities?	Problem-based religious reasoning	Life-relevant cases; scaffolding arguments; reflective rubrics	Lecturers change PAI from a quick normative answer to a process of weighing reasons.
What process explain the change in experience?	Joyful belonging as affective energy	Lecturer support; peer support; reflective humour; weekly reflection	The joy of learning lowers social threats and strengthens reflective participation.

Table 7 confirms that the three themes do not stand alone, but form a layered process. Voice safety allows students to engage in discussions; problem-based reasoning provides critical structure, while joyful belonging maintains affective energy so that participation continues. This pattern is then formulated as a qualitative finding model in Figure 3.

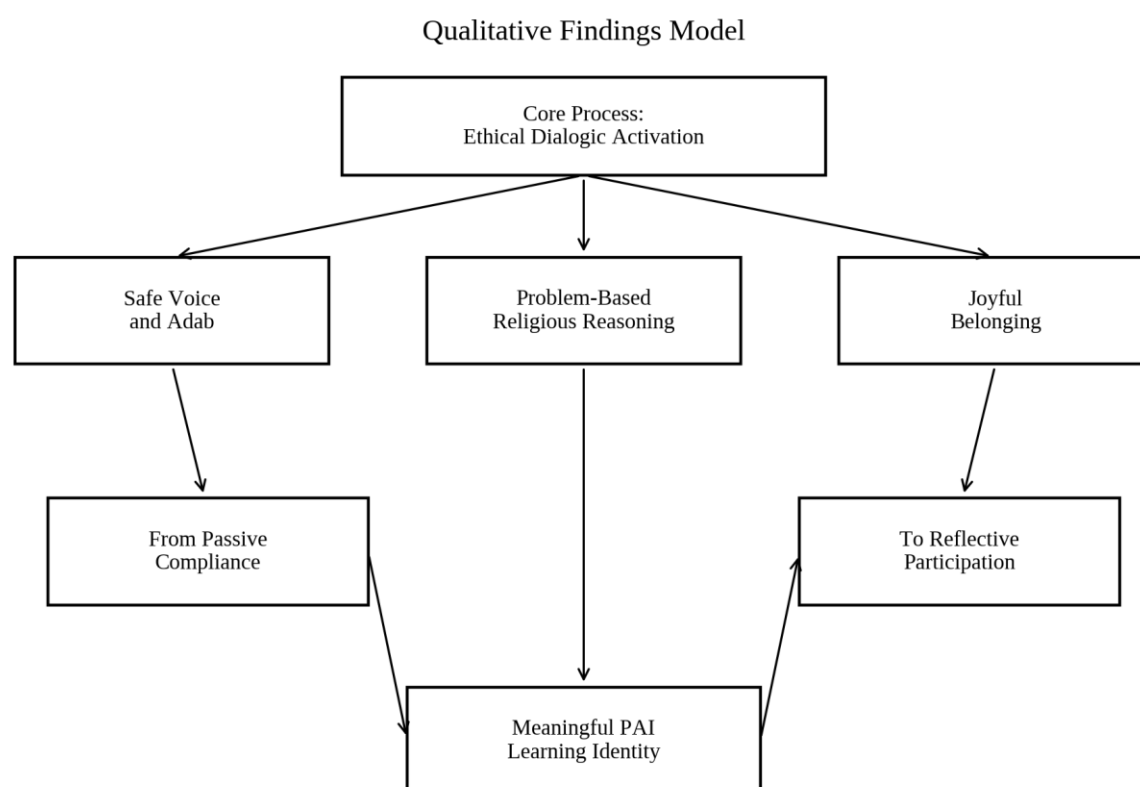


Figure 3. Qualitative findings model: ethical dialogic activation

Figure 3 shows the findings model in which changes in students' experiences occur through the ethical dialogic activation process. This core process connects voice safety and adab, problem-based religious reasoning, and joyful belonging. These three elements move students from passive compliance to reflective participation. This model does not claim quantitative cause-and-effect relationships, but offers an interpretation of how the PAI learning experience can change when the classroom is designed as a space for safe, reasoned, and encouraging dialogue.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explain how students interpret active, critical, and joyful PAI learning and how lecturers organize pedagogical practices that maintain a balance among critical reasoning, dialogue manners, and an encouraging learning atmosphere. The first finding indicates that voice

safety is a prerequisite for critical participation because students need to ensure that their questions are not equated with religious disobedience. Theoretically, these findings align with an understanding of engagement as a multidimensional construct involving emotions, cognition, behavior, and agency (Wong & Liem, 2022). Kahu et al. (2022) supported this interpretation by showing that engagement is formed at the interface between students and the learning context. Luo et al. (2021) reinforced this through the finding that lecturer support and positive academic emotions are associated with student engagement. Gravett et al. (2021) added that pedagogical relationships affect the way students receive feedback and challenges. Chiu (2022) helped explain why autonomy and connectedness are important in learning that requires the courage to speak. However, these findings also show a distinctive nuance from general active learning studies. Børte et al. (2023) emphasized structural and cultural barriers in active learning, but the context of PAI shows that these barriers are also normative because students think about religious manners and authority. Nkomo et al. (2021) highlighted the ambiguity of digital engagement, while these findings show that PAI engagement does not only depend on the medium, but on the interpretive safety. Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) emphasized online and blended support, but PAI classes need more than technical support because differences of opinion can touch on personal identity. Gravett et al. (2021) and Kahu et al. (2022) helped explain that social coping in the classroom is more accurately understood as the result of pedagogical relationships, dialogue contracts, and a sense of security, rather than a mere response to the challenges of online learning. This difference arises because PAI brings a dimension of belief that enables students to assess the risk of speaking more carefully than general courses.

The second finding confirms that problem-based religious reasoning is a bridge that keeps critical reasoning tied to academic-religious manners. This interpretation is supported by Ostendorf and Thoma (2022), who emphasized the need for didactic designs to develop critical thinking contextually. Rossi et al. (2021) showed that active learning tools can improve scientific attitudes and critical thinking in higher education, while Rahman et al. (2022) provided a closer basis for understanding criticism within Indonesian Islamic educational traditions. Giacomazzi et al. (2022) emphasized that critical thinking needs to be culturally contextualized, so that PAI learning cannot simply copy Western argumentation models. Ostendorf and Thoma (2022) also helped position pedagogical strategies as designs that structure intellectual tension productively, rather than as value-free debate exercises. Rahman et al. (2022) more closely showed that Islamic philosophy can strengthen moderation and critical reason. However, these findings also differ from some studies that are more focused on content moderation. Nasir and Rijal (2021) read moderation at the institutional level, while these findings show that moderation lives in the details of questions, lecturer responses, and reflective rubrics. Mulyana (2023) emphasized the role of textbooks, but these findings suggest that documents are only effective when activated through classroom interactions. Nasir and Rijal (2021) and Rahman et al. (2022) pointed out the importance of

moderation and critical reasoning, while this model emphasizes the daily pedagogical process that makes these values feel meaningful to students. Mulyana (2023) helped remind that the values in the learning document need to be translated into problem-based reasoning tasks so that they do not remain merely normative messages. Thus, these results contribute to the PAI discussion by showing that criticism does not necessarily diminish academic piety; criticism can be a form of intellectual etiquette when lecturers organize evidence, language, and ethical consequences.

The third findings show that joyful belonging is an affective energy that helps students move from passive obedience to reflective participation. This finding is supported by Ryan and Deci (2020), who explained that autonomy, competence, and connectedness are important psychological needs in learning motivation. Heo et al. (2021) showed that self-efficacy in time management, technology use, and online learning environments is related to engagement. Heilporn et al. (2021) showed that lecturers' strategies in blended learning can maintain engagement when activities are designed to be interconnected. Luo et al. (2021) reinforced the relationship between lecturer support, positive academic emotions, and learning engagement. Al-Rahmi et al. (2021) emphasized that collaborative learning and engagement play a role in learning performance. However, these findings reveal nuances that do not always emerge in technology-focused or collaboration-focused studies. Chen et al. (2022) emphasized social analytics tools in online collaboration, while joyful belonging in PAI relies more on relationship quality and secure language than digital instruments. Wong and Liem (2022) modeled engagement as a multidimensional construct, but these qualitative findings suggest that the structure of religious engagement needs to be interpreted through the experience of meaning. Gamlath (2022) placed peer learning as a framework for student success, but in PAI peer learning also functions as an ethical intermediary before students enter more sensitive class discussions. Gamlath (2022) and Mujahid (2021a) helped clarify that the benefits of peer learning in PAI are not only academic, but also dialogical and religious identity-related. This difference arises because joyful PAI learning is not only about enjoyment, but also about a sense of acceptance in a community that is able to accommodate different religious experiences.

In a broader interpretation, all three findings suggest that active, critical, and joyful PAI learning cannot be designed through a single method. Mujahid (2021a) showed the importance of interfaith literacy in dealing with radicalization, but this study adds that literacy needs to take the form of safe classroom dialogue practices. Chanifah et al. (2021) emphasized spirituality as the basis of Islamic education, while these findings suggest that students' spirituality can flourish when they are given space to ask questions and reflect on experiences. Pajarianto et al. (2022) and Pajarianto et al. (2023) showed the importance of local wisdom and intercultural education, and these findings show that such wisdom can be present through close cases of student life. Mujahid (2021b) emphasized the formation of moderate Muslim characters in the context of pesantren, while these findings show how dialogical character can be developed in a more heterogeneous university PAI class. Mujahid (2021a) and Chanifah et al. (2021) reinforced Indonesia's plural and higher

education-based context, so that comparisons with Islamic boarding schools are not treated as direct generalizations. The perspective of the case study helps explain why the same learning design can mean different things in different institutions (Yin, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that qualitative design needs to be chosen based on the research problem and the type of understanding sought. Therefore, the main contribution of this discussion is not to formulate a universal recipe, but to offer a design logic: building a sense of security, structuring reasoning, and maintaining affective connectedness. This design logic can be tested, revised, or extended in more diverse institutional contexts.

The novelty of this research lies in the formulation of the ethical dialogic activation model as a way to interpret active, critical, and joyful PAI learning in a conceptual-interpretive process. The conceptual novelty does not merely state that PAI needs to be active or interesting, but shows that student activeness in the context of religious education becomes critical when it is built through voice safety, reasoning structure, and dialogue manners. The methodological novelty lies in the use of multi-case qualitative case studies to examine PAI classes as a bounded pedagogical case that contains student experiences, lecturer practices, document artifacts, and interaction atmospheres. The contextual novelty lies in the placement of Indonesian students as actors who negotiate faith, identity, campus culture, and academic courage in PAI classes. The theoretical novelty is the integration of engagement, critical thinking, joyful learning, and religious moderation without reducing PAI to general skills training. This model expands the global conversation about active learning because it shows that critical participation in religious education requires more explicit relational ethics. This model also expands the discussion of PAI because it places the joy of learning as an affective condition for reasoning courage, rather than as a decorative addition. This novelty is positioned as a conceptual-empirical contribution that remains open to refinement through further study in a broader institutional context.

Theoretically, this study implies that engagement in the PAI class needs to be understood as an experience that is simultaneously cognitive, affective, ethical, and social. A general engagement framework can explain student participation, but the context of PAI demands additional categories such as dialogue manners, belief sensitivity, and courage to ask questions. Methodologically, multi-case qualitative case studies provide a way to capture details of classroom practice that are not always seen in surveys or curriculum evaluations. Researchers can then use this model as a sensitizing framework, rather than as a closed category that forces data. Practically, PAI lecturers need to design dialogue contracts, cases close to student life, gradual questions, reflective rubrics, and small group discussion spaces with reference to the principles of active learning, critical thinking design, and relational feedback literacy (Børte et al., 2023; Ostendorf & Thoma, 2022; Gravett et al., 2021). This practice can help students understand that critical thinking is not an act against religion, but rather an exercise in accountability for understanding. In terms of policy, general course managers need to assess the quality of PAI not only from the suitability of the RPS,

but from evidence of learning experiences that show safe participation, structured reasoning, and meaningful reflection. These implications still need to be tested in field research with a broader institutional context.

The main limitation of this study concerns the multi-case coverage of the three types of institutions, so the transferability of the findings depends on the thickness of the context description, the characteristics of the participants, and the variety of pedagogical practices studied. The second limitation lies in the potential positionality of the researcher, especially if the researcher has PAI teaching experience or a certain preference for dialogical pedagogy. The third limitation relates to the duration of one-semester observations, so long-term changes in the courage to ask questions and reflective participation were not fully traceable. However, these limitations do not weaken the contribution of the research, because the ethical dialogic activation model is built from triangulation of interviews, observations, FGDs, documents, and field notes. These limitations actually open up space for longitudinal studies, broader institutional comparisons, and more detailed analysis of classroom conversations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the qualitative data analysis, this study concludes that active, critical, and joyful PAI learning needs to be understood as an ethical dialogic activation process. Students interpret activeness not only as the frequency of speaking, but as the courage to convey questions and experiences when their dignity is maintained. Lecturers organize critical reasoning through life-relevant cases, scaffolding arguments, clarifying questions, and reflective rubrics that connect textual evidence, reasons, alternative attitudes, and ethical consequences. The joy of learning emerges as a sense of belonging to a safe classroom community, not as an entertainment separate from academic seriousness. Three key themes—voice safety, problem-based reasoning, and joyful belonging—explain the shift in student experience from passive obedience to reflective participation. The ethical dialogic activation model provides a conceptual tool to explain the process. With these findings, this research has the potential to contribute to the development of PAI in Indonesian universities that are more dialogical, reasoned, and meaningful.

Future research should expand the institutional context to several types of Indonesian universities so that the model offered can be tested and sharpened. Data collection should include repeated classroom observations, in-depth interviews, FGDs, learning documents, and student reflection journals. Researchers may also broaden their focus to differences in study programs, students' religious organizational backgrounds, previous religious education experiences, and blended forms of learning. Longitudinal studies are needed to see whether the courage to ask questions and reflective participation persist after one semester has ended. Conversation analysis or critical discourse analysis can be used to analyze in more detail the language of lecturers and students when facing sensitive issues. Participatory research can also be conducted by involving

lecturers and students as co-designers of PAI learning. In addition, the evaluation of PAI curriculum policies needs to include learning experience indicators, not just the completeness of the material. Thus, future research can expand this model into a more robust comparative contribution that is ready to be communicated in reputable journals.

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