Philosophies of Islamic Education

Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses

Edited by
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5 “Your Educational Achievements Shall Not Stop Your Efforts to Seek Beyond”

Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings[1]

Sebastian Günther

Scholarly discussions on theoretical and practical issues in teaching and learning are essential components in a large variety of Arabic writings from the classical period of Islam, covering the time between the 8th and the 15th century CE.[2] Muslim scholars addressing pedagogical and didactic issues included philosophers, theologians, jurists, hadith scholars, littérateurs, and natural scientists. They came from various backgrounds and scholarly disciplines, each with his own theological and juridical stance, ethnic origin, or geographical affiliation. Although many of these intellectuals taught, none of them were exclusively specialized in education or its theories.

Generally speaking, classical Arabic texts devoted to issues in Islamic education are characterized by their fundamental grounding in principles expressed in the Quran and the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*). No less important, however, is that a great number of these educational considerations are deeply shaped by paradigms of the ancient Greek *paideia* (‘rearing,’ ‘education’), as well as elements of ancient Arabian and Persian culture, which Muslim scholars had creatively adapted to their educational views and further developed, mostly during the 9th and 10th centuries. It should be noted, however, that whereas educational thought in antiquity was almost exclusively philosophical in nature, in Islam it was to a great extent informed and shaped by religion. In addition, Islamic education in medieval times correlated—partly in mutually beneficial exchanges—with medieval Jewish and Christian views and practices of learning significant to the world of Islam at the time.

Among Arabic texts explicitly dealing with Islamic education, the genre called *ādāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* (“Rules of Conduct for Teachers and Students”) stands out. This category of Arabic works, both short treatises and larger compendia, explains and analyses—in an erudite and often literary manner—the objectives, ideals, and methods of teaching and learning, including the ways in which teachers and students act and behave, their (moral) characteristics, and their relationships with one another in the educational process. This included didactic issues such as the organization and content of learning and the curriculum, as well as the means and methods

of imparting and absorbing knowledge. Therefore, the *ādāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* literature is rightly called 'pedagogical,' even though there was no scholarly discipline in premodern Islam expressly known as *ʿilm al-tarbiya*, 'pedagogy.'[3]

On these premises, this chapter offers insights into certain Arabic pedagogical writings from the classical period of Islam, which, due to their scholarly originality and/or special authoritative character, are true landmarks in the history of Islam's educational thought. Whereas these classical texts provide us with valuable information on the early beginnings and the dynamic advancement of educational theory and curriculum development in Islam, they also demonstrate that certain problems encountered in medieval times continue to concern us today.

ABŪ ḤANĪFA AND AL-SAMARQANDĪ: CRITICAL THINKING PROMOTES LEARNING

The earliest treatise in Islam with an explicit pedagogical approach is the *Kitāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* ("The Book of the One Who Knows and the One Who Wants to Know"). This work has traditionally been ascribed to the Kufan jurist and theologian Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān ibn Thābit (d. 148/767 AD), eponym of the largest of the four Sunni schools of law. However, the person who actually drafted this, one of the most popular among Hanafi's works, was Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī (d. 208/823 AD), who apparently was one of Abū Ḥanīfa's students. Not much is known about Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī. The sources indicate, however, that he was a pious and almost ascetic scholar. While he seems not to have been particularly reliable as a transmitter of prophetic traditions, he was well recognized among his peers as a specialist in the field of Islamic jurisprudence.[4]

Basically, the *Kitāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* consists of the *quaestiones* a disciple asks his master, and the *responsa* the master offers to his student. In this regard, this early Arabic manual is very close to the genre of Socratic dialogue, as the following passages demonstrate:

> *THE MASTER STATED: What a great decision of yours to search for what is of benefit to you. Know that actions follow knowledge like the body parts comply with the eyesight. Therefore, learning knowledge with little action is better than ignorance with much action . . . . This is why God stated [in the Quran]: "Say, 'How can those who know be equal to those who do not know?' Only those who have understanding will take heed."*
>
> (Q 39:9, tr. Abdel Haleem)
>
> *THE DISCIPLEDI REPLIED: You have motivated me to seek knowledge even more! . . . So instruct me about the proofs against*

them (i.e., people who would advise learners to follow the tradition without any thoughts of their own).

[THE MASTER STATED:] I saw people saying, "Do not engage yourself with these arguments, for the Companions of the Messenger of God—peace be upon him and grant him salvation—did not engage themselves in anything related to these matters. Perhaps, what was sufficient for them should also be sufficient for you." But these people only increased my sadness. I have come to see them like someone telling a man who is drowning in a huge, water-rich river and seeking a ford to cross, "Stay where you are and, by no means attempt to find a ford!"

THE MASTER—MAY HE REST IN PEACE—SAID [FURTHERMORE]: [By now,] I think you understand not only some of the deficiencies of these people, but also the proof against them [and their arguments]. However, if they tell you, "Should not suffice you what had sufficed the Companions of the Prophet?"—peace be upon him and grant him salvation—, then respond to them, "It certainly should, had I been in their rank and position. But I have not witnessed what they witnessed. [Moreover,] we [today] have to deal with people who vilify us and permit that our blood is shed. Therefore, we will not make progress, if we do not know who amongst us is right and who is wrong. [Hence, we must use our own minds and understanding in order to assess matters and make decisions.]"

(Abū Ḥanīfa/al-Samarqandī 1964, 9)

The treatise's overall thematic focus is on Islamic "creeds and advice concerning the way a student asks a question and how a teacher responds," as the great Ottoman historian and geographer Ḥajjī Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657 AD) observed.[5] In addition to a number of dogmatic instructions, this book offers important pedagogical advice: It promotes the question-and-answer pattern as a key method of active learning, stresses the need for making creative use of the intellect and of reasoning even in religious matters, highlights the importance of always identifying 'true' and 'false' by cognitive investigation; and emphasizes the obligation of those striving for knowledge to concentrate on the essence of things.

AL-JĀḤIẒ: AN OPEN MIND MAKES KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION VIRTUOUS

Perhaps the earliest literary-philosophical essay dedicated to 'the teachers' was composed by ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, the celebrated philosophical theologian. Al-Jāḥiẓ was born in about 160/776 in Basra and died there in 255/868–9. He was probably of Ethiopian origin and received his sobriquet due to an ocular malformation (al-Jāḥiẓ means 'the pop-eyed'). From an early age, al-Jāḥiẓ dedicated himself to learning. He took

a special interest in the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, available in Arabic because of the great translation movement under Caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833), and participated frequently in the intellectual discussions that took place in the literary salons of the upper class.

The working conditions and often unfair treatment of professional teachers that al-Jāḥiẓ witnessed may have prompted him to compose a *Kitāb al-Muʿallimīn* ("The Book of the Teachers") in which he not only defends but champions schoolteachers by stressing their superiority over all other types of educators and tutors.[6] He also expressed clear pedagogical advice in this treatise: He highlights the importance of instructing students in the techniques of logical argumentation and deduction, as well as in good written expression; advocates the reading of books for the purpose of instruction, as it is said to promote creative thinking; advises teachers to organize schooling in a way that takes the mental abilities of the students into due account; and states that students always need to be treated with special care and kindness.

Remarkably, in stark contrast to the majority opinion of traditional medieval Muslim scholarship, al-Jāḥiẓ questions both the supremacy of memorization in Islamic learning and the view that only firmly established knowledge should be transmitted. Such an approach, al-Jāḥiẓ observes, would make "the mind disregard distinction" and prevent learners from reaching conclusions on their own. Yet, as a dialectical intellectual, al-Jāḥiẓ expresses his criticism in balanced words when he states:

> *The leading sages, masters of the art of deductive reasoning and [independent] thinking, were averse to excellence in memorization, because of [one's] dependence on it and [its rendering] the mind negligent of rational judgment . . . .*
>
> *[They were averse to memorization] because a student engaged in memorizing is only an imitator, whereas deductive reasoning brings the student to deliberate certainty and great confidence.*
>
> *The true proposition and the praiseworthy judgment is that, when [a student] learns only by memorization, this harms his deductive reasoning. But conversely, when he uses only deductive reasoning, this harms his learning by memorization—even if memorization has a more honorable rank than [deductive reasoning]. So, when he neglects rational reflection, ideas do not come quickly to him, and when he neglects memorization, [such ideas] do not stick in his mind or remain long in his heart. [Although] the nature of memorization is different to that of deductive reasoning, both are concerned with and support the same thing: to free the mind and [make the student] desire only one thing [that is, learning]. By means of these two [approaches] (i.e., freeing the mind and desiring only to learn), perfection comes to be and virtue appears.*
>
> (Günther 2005b, 122)

As for the curriculum, al-Jāḥiẓ lists compulsory disciplines in the following order: writing, arithmetic, law, the pillars of religion, the Quran, grammar, prosody, and poetry. Optional topics of instruction would include polo, archery, horsemanship, and music, as well as chess and other games. Interestingly, al-Jāḥiẓ makes another significant point regarding education in stressing the fundamental impact that writing has had on human civilization. Writing and recording, along with calculation, he calls 'the pillars' on which the present and the future of civilization and "the welfare of this world" rest. Writing and calculation are God-given, as are the teachers themselves, for God "made them available to us." (Günther 2005b, 144).

IBN SAḤNŪN: MODESTY AND PASSION ARE INDISPENSABLE IN TEACHING

The first real handbook for Muslim teachers was compiled in the 3rd/9th century by Muḥammad ibn Saḥnūn al-Tanūkhī, a Maliki jurist, hadith scholar, historian, and biographer from a region in what today is Tunisia. Ibn Saḥnūn was born in 202/817 in Kairouan, a city that, at the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, was a nucleus of the Maliki school of law in the western lands of Islam. Ibn Saḥnūn was of Arab descent. After his father's death, Ibn Saḥnūn became chief judge of the Malikites in the Maghreb. He died in Kairouan in 256/870 at the age of only fifty-four. Ibn Saḥnūn was a prolific scholar and is reported to have written nearly two hundred books and treatises, but only three texts have been preserved.

Ibn Saḥnūn's best-known work is his treatise *Ādāb al-muʿallimīn* ("Rules of Conduct for Teachers").[7] In this book, he offers legal and practical advice for elementary schoolteachers regarding such issues as hiring and paying teachers, organization of teaching units and curriculum, working with students in class, permissibility of punishment, classroom equipment and teaching materials, examination, and graduation (Günther 2006, 369–71). More specifically, Ibn Saḥnūn stresses the following:

- Modesty, patience, and a passion for working with children are indispensable qualifications for teachers.
- A classroom atmosphere, which motivates pupils to learn and challenges their minds, makes teaching more effective and generally facilitates learning.
- Teamwork should be encouraged, along with fair competition among pupils, because both help advance character formation and intellectual development in children.

Ibn Saḥnūn also advises against teaching the Quran to the children of Christians. This seems to indicate that Muslim and Christian children were attending classes together in Ibn Saḥnūn's day. It also suggests that the

author took the Quranic injunction "There is no compulsion in matters of faith" (Q 2:256) to mean that faith is a matter of individual concern and commitment and not something to be enforced. Furthermore, quoting his famous father, Saḥnūn states:

> *The teacher must be committed to working hard. He must devote himself to the pupils, . . . because he is a salaried employee; he cannot leave his work [for no reason].*
>
> *[Also, the teacher] must schedule a fixed time to review [the children's knowledge] of the Quran, such as Thursdays or Wednesday evenings. Yet, he must give them a day off on Fridays. This has been the practice since there have been teachers, and they have never been criticized for that.*
>
> (Günther 2005a, 105–108)

The curriculum that Ibn Saḥnūn outlines is to a degree representative of medieval Islamic elementary schooling (beginning at six or seven years of age). It includes obligatory teaching subjects such as the precise articulation and memorization of the Quran, or parts of it; the duties of worship; reading and writing; and good manners, because these are obligations toward God. It also recommended instructing pupils in the basics of the Arabic language and grammar, good handwriting, mathematics, poetry (as long as the verses are morally decent), proverbs, and speeches, as well as Arab history.

AL-FĀRĀBĪ: A COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION LEADS TO HUMAN PERFECTION

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950 AD) is considered the most important political philosopher in classical Islam and probably the first truly eminent Muslim logician. Interestingly, he was also a noted metaphysician and a brilliant musical theorist. Born in Turkestan, he lived most of his life in Baghdad, Iraq, and, for a short period, in Aleppo, Syria. Al-Fārābī studied with the leading philosophers and logicians of his day, including certain prominent scholars in the Baghdad school of Christian Aristotelians. Al-Fārābī died in Damascus at the age of eighty years or more.

Concerning al-Fārābī's principal views on learning, it is important to note that he assigns ethics a key role in education, asserting that both the intention and conduct of learning need to be virtuous. Thus, for al-Fārābī, a perfect human being (*insān kāmil*) is

> *the one who has obtained theoretical virtue—thus completing his intellectual knowledge—and has acquired practical moral virtues—thus becoming perfect in his moral behavior. Only when these theoretical*

> *and moral virtues support effective power, do they become anchored in the souls of individual members of the community who come to assume the responsibility of political leadership.*
>
> ('Al-Fārābī 1993, 355)

Al-Fārābī further maintains that, whereas every human possesses certain inborn aptitudes or natural abilities on which an education must be built, teachers are still responsible for bringing out the best in their students, regardless of whether a student is slow in learning or intelligent. Yet a student's excellence deserves support under all circumstances. In a similar vein, al-Fārābī suggests that students ought to cherish and honor their teacher, but not to the extent that they prefer their teacher's opinion to the truth. With this in mind, al-Fārābī specifically recommends:

> *As for the teacher's measured approach (qiyās) [to instructing students], he should be neither too controlling nor too humble. Too much dominance drives the student to hate his teacher. [However,] if the student sees too much humility in his teacher, this leads him to belittle him and become slothful towards him and his teaching.*
>
> (Günther 2010, 18)

In his *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm* ("The Enumeration of the Sciences"), al-Fārābī makes a strong case for an integrated curriculum, covering both the 'indigenous' and the 'foreign' branches of knowledge (i.e., the religious subjects based on the Quran and its interpretation on the one hand, and the subjects based on Greek philosophy and other, more secular disciplines on the other) (Günther 2006, 373–376). This inclusive approach to education was adopted and developed further by Muslim sages, such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037 AD) and the Brethren of Purity (in the second half of the 4th/10th century). It influenced the studies of the philosophers (and the physicians) who largely followed this curriculum in their informal study and discussion circles. It did not, however, become established in formalized higher education in Islam.[8]

JAʿFAR IBN MANṢŪR AL-YAMAN: TRUE SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE IS ATTAINABLE

Another early educational manual was written by the mid-4th/10th century Ismaʿili author Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman. Very little is known about his life. Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman was born in about 218/883 into a devout and learned Shiʿi family. His father, Ibn Hawshab, of Kufan background, had converted from Twelver Shiʿism to Ismaʿilism before moving to Yemen, where he became the leader and cofounder of the Yemeni Ismaʿili community. Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, the son, actively worked for the Ismaʿili community and wrote books on Shiʿi theology and doctrine. It is this scholarly work,

which earned him, from early Fatimid times onward, high prestige among Yemeni Ismaʿilis as a teacher of Ismaʿili scriptural interpretation (*taʾwīl*).[9]

In his *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām* ("The Master and the Disciple"), Ibn Manṣur al-Yaman offers a full-scale narrated dramatic dialogue of spiritual initiation. Relating the quest for and the gradual realization of spiritual knowledge, the author artfully instructs in both "the proper behaviour of those who are seeking the truth (*ādāb al-ṭālibīn*) and the 'ways of proceeding'—through appropriate action, teaching and belief—of 'the righteous,' of those who are spiritually receptive, prepared and suited for those ways (*madhāhib al-ṣāliḥīn*)" (Morris 2002, 3).

Among Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman's many pieces of pedagogical advice, two stand out: The first is the message that each intellectually qualified person may aspire to—and can eventually attain—the highest degree of true spiritual knowledge, and this may achieve insight provided he or she observes a certain degree of inner discipline, makes spiritual intention his or her guide, and accepts that divine grace and support is an essential prerequisite of spiritual learning. Second, everything that he or she learns needs to be put into practice so that both the individual and the community may benefit. The following extract of a dialogue between a disciple and his master illustrates this approach to spiritual education:

> *[DISCIPLE:] . . . Can that lofty level of mystical knowledge and perfection be reached by following the trail of the levels that are below it?*
>
> *[MASTER:] . . . That level can only be attained through the most excellent and meritorious action. However, if you perform the actions appropriate to this level and strive for it in the proper way, with the most sincere certainty and a pure, attentive heart, then you can hope to reach as much of it as was reached by "the friends of God, the chosen and purified ones, the very best."*
>
> (Q 38:47)
>
> *[DISCIPLE:] And who . . . would even aspire to attain such a spiritual level through which "God has raised up"* (Q 2:253). *His friends?*
>
> *[MASTER:] . . . The creatures only come close to God through their spiritual mindfulness and appropriate actions . . . . As for that knowledge 'through which God raised up'* (Q 12:76; 58:11). *His friends, you are now at the beginning of that. So if you put that knowledge into action, you can reach its culmination. For it is only right for God to help you reach the attainments of "the pure and righteous"* (e.g., Q 2:130, 21:105) *among them, and "He will not treat you unjustly"* (e.g., Q 9:70) *in respect to anything which He bestowed on them."*
>
> (Morris 2002, 10)

Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman does not offer a specific curriculum. He does, however, provide a number of principles and characteristics of successful learning and teaching, for example:

- Learning is a gradual process, leading from the lower to the higher levels of knowledge, and from the simpler to the more complex kind of understanding. Thus ignorance (as an infant) is no stigma. On the contrary, it is a God-given "sign pointing toward knowledge."
- Teaching, in order to be virtuous and true, requires: (a) trust on the part of the teacher that all knowledge eventually comes from one source, God, the first and highest Teacher and (b) the insight that ethics are of utmost importance in education. Indeed, instructors will reach true merit only if they do "the deeds of kindness . . . of what is truly good" (Morris 2002, 73–74).
- Learning is equal to belief in God. Indeed, "the full attainment of knowledge and the furthest extent of (your intellectual) power," is the best way to obey God and perform right actions wholeheartedly (Morris 2002, 109).

MISKAWAYH: STRUCTURED AND ETHICAL LEARNING REINFORCES EDUCATION

Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad ibn Miskawayh is one of the most original medieval Muslim thinkers. He was interested in a wide array of scholarly disciplines, ranging from philosophy to history, literature, medicine, psychology, and chemistry. Above all, however, his scholarly reputation rests on his influential work on philosophical ethics, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa-taṭhīr al-aʿrāq* ("The Refinement of Character Traits and Purification of Dispositions")—for which he is considered the "father of Islamic ethics" among modern scholarship.[10]

Miskawayh, of Persian origin, was born in 320/932 in the city of Rayy, near Teheran. He died in 421/1030 in Isfahan. Even in his youth, Miskawayh took part in teaching sessions in Baghdad held by renowned thinkers of his time, where he familiarized himself with the ancient Greek sciences, especially logic and medicine. Next to scholars of his own faith, he also studied with Jewish and Christian scholars, including Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974 AD), a noted Syriac-Orthodox philosopher, theologian, and translator of Greek sources (from their Syriac versions) into Arabic. In later years, Miskawayh was appointed treasurer and librarian in the large libraries of Buyid rulers, a position that enabled him to continue his intensive study of the Arabic translations of the works of Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek authors. He drew inspiration in particular, as he said himself, from the *Kitāb Fī tadbīr al-manzil* ("The Book of Household Management"), the Arabic translation of *Oikonomikos,* a work written in Greek by the little known author Bryson.[11]

Although Miskawayh composed his famous *The Refinement of Character Traits* "especially for lovers of philosophy rather than for laymen" (Miskawayh 65), and in spite of the fact that this work is expressly on ethics rather than learning as such, this manual is a particularly rich source of scholarly advice on Islamic education in the narrow sense of the word as well.

The vital implications of *The Refinement* for education are already clear in Miskawayh's introduction, in which the author explains that the purpose of the volume is to provide the reader with guidance for "the acquisition of a noble character, i.e., a character which imparts to us a nobility that is essential and real, not one that is accidental, unstable, and unreal," and "by which all our actions issuing therefrom may be performed by us easily, without any constraint or difficulty" (Miskawayh 5). The means to accomplish this goal is, according to Miskawayh, an 'art' (or 'science,' *ṣināʿa*), that is, the "the art of character training which is concerned with the betterment of the actions of humans as human beings; this is the most excellent of the arts" (Miskawayh 33). The best way to reach this aim is through a didactic, "organized, gradual process of instruction" (*tartīb taʿlīmī*). The principal ethical aspect of this idea is stressed again in his maintaining that, although one can—and should—'learn' how to refine one's character, the ultimate state to which a person can aspire is that of 'spontaneous' performance, where good acts are performed without prior thinking or deliberation.[12]

In this regard, Miskawayh draws once again on an ancient Greek idea according to which the 'aim' or 'end' (*ghāya*) of an act may influence—and even define—the 'principle' or 'beginning' (*mabdaʾ*) of an undertaking. Accordingly, the objective of an act may come to characterize the action itself: If the objective of a deed is virtuous, the action that leads to it may—or would necessarily—acquire the quality of being virtuous. Translated into an educational context, this means that, if the aim of learning is virtuous, learning as such is a virtuous activity as well. Miskawayh writes in this regard:

> *. . . we must observe the 'principle' which plays the role of the 'end,' so that, having observed the 'end,' one can come down gradually, by way of analysis, to the physical things, and then start from the bottom and proceed, by way of synthesis, until one reaches again the 'end' which had been observed before.*
>
> (Miskawayh 1994, 64)

Generally, learning is seen as a life-long process and as something that requires more modesty and humility than any other activity, as Miskawayh states:

> *Should the one who is seeking to preserve this health [of the soul] become unique and eminent in knowledge, then let not his pride in what*

> *he has achieved cause him to cease to seek beyond, for knowledge has no limit, and above every man of knowledge there is One who knows.*
> (Miskawayh 1994, 60)

Some of Miskawayh's more specific educational recommendations include the following advice:

- Only those of virtuous morals should be engaged in the education of the young.
- If reprimand is unavoidable, it should never be too explicit verbally nor excessive physically, as this leads to the opposite of the intended effect: The student might become accustomed to penalization, become ill mannered, and unresponsive.
- Instruction needs to take the intellectual and physical capabilities of the young into due account. "Some of them are more responsive to the 'art' [of learning and character formation], and others less" (Miskawayh 1994, 31, 32, 49, 52).
- Miskawayh's educational ideas significantly influenced the concepts of learning held by principal Muslim scholars of later times, in particular the highly influential Sunni theologian and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111 AD) and the eminent Shiʿi philosopher-vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (d. 672/1274 AD).
- Likewise it is notable that, although Miskawayh speaks in his *Refinement of the Character* only of the education of boys and male youth, his pedagogical advice appears to convey ideas, which one could call humanistic, if they are understood in the context of modern societies, which express gender-unspecific, universal values and ethics.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ: CLEANSING THE HEART IS THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN GROWTH

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī is known today as the most important philosophical theologian of Islam. In addition, he was a noted jurist, mystic, and an influential religious reformer. He was born in 445/1056 in the district of Tus, near Mashhad, in northeast Iran. He died there in 505/1111.

Al-Ghazālī pursued much of his education and higher studies in Nishapur, Iran, and Baghdad, Iraq. In 484/1091, at the age of thirty-three, he accepted the head teaching position at the newly founded Niẓāmiyya College, the most famous institution of higher learning in Baghdad and the entire Muslim world in the 4th/11th century. He occupied this position for several years before suddenly giving it up in 488/1095 on the pretext of going on pilgrimage. During this journey to Mecca and Medina, which lasted three years, he stayed for some time in Damascus and Jerusalem. In Hebron, at the grave of Abraham, he vowed no longer to serve any state

authority. He only briefly returned to Baghdad to teach again, before leaving for Khorasan, where he spent the rest of his life.

In addition to the far-reaching impact that al-Ghazālī has had on Islamic religious thought, he can also be seen as the principal architect of classical Islamic education. He accepted Greek logic as a neutral means of learning and recommended that students of religion-related subjects, including theology and jurisprudence, learn to understand and apply it. Al-Ghazālī's wealth of experience in teaching is reflected in his many treatises on the role of knowledge in the educational process, and of teaching and learning as activities in providing, acquiring, and deepening the understanding of certain subject matters. For al-Ghazālī, all who "seek God through knowledge, no matter what kind" are embarking on a blessed journey. Therefore, it is important for him to offer assistance to both those beginning their educational voyage and those who guide others on the path of learning. Along these lines, al-Ghazālī has the following important advice for students:

> *O Disciple, advice is easy—what is difficult is accepting it. . . . This is particularly so for whoever is the student of conventional knowledge, who is occupied with gratifying his ego and with worldly exploits, for he supposes that his knowledge alone will be his salvation and that his deliverance is in it, and that he can do without deeds . . . as the Messenger of God—God bless him and give him peace—said, "The man most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection is a scholar whom God did not benefit by his knowledge."*
>
> (Al-Ghazālī 2005, 6)

With this kind of counsel, al-Ghazālī begins his famous treatise *Ayyuhā l-walad* ("O Disciple"), which is probably one of his last and most appealing works. While reflecting in this book upon his own life, he uses a spiritual-mystical literary framework to address a mature student and to provide him with specific educational and ethical advice. These recommendations concern, above all, two aspects: the urge to fear God and the encouragement to acquire knowledge and to better oneself. This is the way, al-Ghazālī advocates, to live a meaningful and virtuous life in this world and to earn an eternal life in paradise in the next.

In what is perhaps al-Ghazālī's most important book, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (*The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*), the author first advises learners:

- Begin the educational voyage by cleansing the soul of bad morals and reprehensible qualities so as to put oneself in a state worthy of receiving knowledge;
- Devote all of one's physical and mental abilities to learning, and study with focus and concentration;
- Show no arrogance toward a subject or a teacher;

- Achieve a firm grasp of one discipline, beginning with the most important items of knowledge first, before moving on to a new subject; and
- Aspire to spiritual perfection rather than worldly fame and fortune.

As for the curriculum, al-Ghazālī highlights the supremacy of the religious sciences vis-à-vis the secular disciplines in the context of Islamic learning. According to al-Ghazālī, religious instruction comprises both 'religious practice' and the 'sacred sciences' (*sharʿiyya*). The former, which al-Ghazālī equates with "the knowledge of the conditions of the heart," is a discipline that does not require analytical study, i.e., learning "through scrutiny, investigation, and research." Rather, it suffices to believe and to confess sincerely and without hesitation. The 'sacred sciences,' on the other hand, are devoted to the knowledge acquired from the prophets and incorporate the following:

- Fundamental topics of learning such as the Quran, the authoritative custom and precedence of the Prophet (*sunna*), the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the Muslim community, and the traditions relating to the companions of the Prophet (*āthār al-ṣaḥāba*), and such topics as:
- The derived disciplines, which deal with the systematic elaboration of canonical Islamic law and with ethics;
- Preparatory disciplines, such as linguistics and syntax, as these are tools necessary for the understanding of the Holy Scripture and the prophetic traditions;
- Supplementary disciplines, such as the variant readings of the Quran; and
- The history of the revelation and the biographies of virtuous people and transmitters of prophetic traditions are complementary study topics.

Finally, there are the 'secular sciences' (*ghayr sharʿiyya*) consisting of:

1. Praiseworthy disciplines such as medicine, arithmetic, and astronomy. These sciences are indispensable for the welfare of society;
2. Blameworthy disciplines, such as magic, talismanic science, juggling, trickery, and the like; and
3. Permissible disciplines subordinate to philosophy. These include geometry and arithmetic; logic, which studies the manner of proofs and conditions; metaphysics, which investigates the being of God and His attributes; and physics, which investigates different substances of the natural world, their properties, transformations, and changes.

Finally, as al-Ghazālī also says, although jurisprudence is related to religion, it deals predominantly with the affairs of this world, which is merely "the preparation for the hereafter," and which is the reason why legal study and practice are restricted to the affairs of the here and now.

AL-ZARNŪJĪ: PROPER STUDY METHOD ENSURES LEARNING SUCCESS

Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī was a scholar who modeled his own educational views very closely on the examples of al-Ghazālī. Very little is known about al-Zarnūjī's biography. He was born and apparently lived much of his active life in Zarnuj, a town in the present Turkistan, where he flourished in the late 6th/12th and early 7th/13th century. He died in Bukhara, in what today is Uzbekistan.[13] Al-Zarnūjī appears to have been a philosophically inclined theologian and an expert on Islamic jurisprudence, belonging to the Hanafi School of Law. Moreover, his honorary name, Burhān al-Dīn ('Proof of Religion'), indicates that within his lifetime, his peers already held him in high esteem as a particularly learned religious scholar.

Al-Zarnūjī's *Taʿlīm al-mutaʿallim ṭarīq at-taʿallum* ("Instructing the Learner in the Method of Learning") is a pedagogical manual that was particularly widely read and already famous in medieval times, as the many manuscript copies of this work preserved in Oriental libraries suggest. The author was prompted to write this treatise because, as he himself states in the opening paragraph of his manual:

> *I observed in our day many students of learning striving to attain knowledge but failing to do so and are thus barred from its utility and fruition. This is because they have missed the [proper] methods [of learning] and have abandoned its conditions. Anyone who misses this way goes astray and, therefore, does not reach [its] objective, however modest or glorious.*
>
> *It is my desire here to elucidate the proven methods of study that I myself had either read about in books or heard from my learned wise teachers. It is my hope that those sincerely interested in this matter would pray for my deliverance and redemption on the Day of Judgment.*
>
> (Al-Zarnūjī 2003, 1)

Al-Zarnūjī stresses, "the joys of knowledge, learning, and insight are a sufficient incentive for the intelligent" so that they would not need any further motivation or stimulus to acquire knowledge and to learn. As for the techniques and the course of studying, he emphasizes:

> *Our elders stated that it is necessary that the length of study for the beginner be an amount in which he can retain in his memory after two repetitions. Every day he should increase [the measure of] his recall by one word, so that even if the duration and quantity of his study become large, it would [still] remain possible for him to recall [his lessons by repeating them] twice. He would thus increase [his capacity] gently and gradually. . . .*

> *[Also,] it is necessary to begin [studying] with matters that are more readily understood. . . . [Therefore,] the right procedure is what our elders practiced. They chose to begin with a few subjects of broad content because these are more readily understood and retained [before proceeding to busy themselves with more detailed topics]. . . .*
>
> *It is important that the student exert himself strenuously to understand what he is offered by the teacher, applying intelligence, reflection, and much repetition. For if reading is limited but repetition and reflection are extensive, then [the student] will attain a firm grasp and understanding [of all material taught].*
>
> (Al-Zarnūjī 2003, 25–26)

Like several of his scholarly predecessors, al-Zarnūjī does not give a full-scale curriculum. However, he does name certain disciplines that hold special importance for religious learning and certain others that involve dangers for pious learners. Thus jurisprudence is singled out as a particularly beneficial field of study, for the knowledge of one's rights and duties "is the best guide to piety and the fear of God, and it is the straightest path to the ultimate goal"; that is, the reward of eternal bliss in paradise. The study of astronomy is discouraged with the qualification that one is permitted to learn just enough of it to enable the person to determine the direction (*qibla*) and the times (*mīqāt*) of prayer. Furthermore, dealing with medicine is permitted because "it deals with accidental causes. Therefore, its study is allowed, as is [the study] of other worldly necessities." Generally, one ought to choose those branches of learning that are beneficial and needed for one's current life and future. More specifically, however, one must always give preference to 'established traditions' over 'new things,' so as to "beware of becoming engrossed in those disputes which come about after one has cut loose from the traditional authorities" (Al-Zarnūjī 2003, 3–5 and 9).

IBN JAMĀʿA: BOOKS ARE INDISPENSABLE IN EDUCATION

Another scholar of principal importance in the development of pedagogical thought in classical Islam was Badr al-Dīn Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Jamāʿa, a distinguished scholar and Shafiʿi Chief Judge in Cairo and Damascus.

Ibn Jamāʿa was born in 639/1241 in the North Syrian city of Hama, where he received the primary and first levels of his higher education in the traditional religious disciplines. Later, he traveled to Aleppo, Damascus, Alexandria, and Jerusalem to continue his education. Thanks to his academic standing and friendship with Mamluk rulers and governmental administrators, he was granted several prestigious juridical and academic appointments at institutions in Egypt and Syria, many of which included teaching responsibilities. Ibn Jamāʿa died in 733/1333 in Cairo.

Ibn Jamāʿa is probably best known today for his pedagogical handbook *Tadhkirat al-sāmiʿ wa-l-mutakallim fī ādāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* ("The Memorandum for the Listener and the Speaker [in Teaching Sessions] Concerning the Rules of Behavior for the Learned and the Learner").[14] It is a systematic outline of views on traditional higher learning, with a certain emphasis on the prophetic tradition and jurisprudence. Issues in elementary education are mentioned only "in some isolated instances such as the incidental admonitions for students to sit before their professors as children do before the teacher of the Qurʾān," as F. Rosenthal observed (Rosenthal 2007, 296).

Throughout this treatise, Ibn Jamāʿa stresses two points of principle importance to his educational thought: One is the central role, which he assigns to the Quran, and the prophetic tradition as primary sources of knowledge and learning. Another relates to his strong promotion of books as indispensable tools in the educational process. Whereas the first point had already become a very characteristic feature of classical Islamic education, the second is noteworthy despite the fact that Ibn Jamāʿa wrote it at a time when the written word was already firmly established as a tool of learning throughout the Islamic Empire. Nevertheless, the author feels it necessary to emphasize the special usefulness of books for all kinds of scholarly pursuit.

Furthermore, students are expressly instructed as follows:

1. To be sincere in their desire to learn;
2. To devote the time of youth entirely to the pursuit of knowledge;
3. To divide the nights and days so as to learn most effectively: Scheduling memorization in the early morning, research at dawn, writing around midday, and study and discussion in the evening is most advisable; and
4. Not least important, a teacher is central to a student's learning, to the extent that students should be denied access to sources that might contradict a teacher's position (Ibn Jamāʿa 1991, 49–57; Rosenthal 1947, 7–19).

Apart from the highly ethical and pious tenor of Ibn Jamāʿa's manual, the similarity of his educational views and statements with those offered by his famous predecessor, al-Ghazālī, is striking. It is, therefore, not surprising that Ibn Jamāʿa's handbook was a great source of inspiration for many later generations of Muslim scholars writing on education. A notable example in this regard is ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ibn Mūsā al-ʿAlmawī (d. 981/1573 AD), who, in his *Muʿīd fī adab al-mufīd wa-l-mustafīd* ("The Tutor Concerning the Etiquette of the Provider and the Acquirer [of Knowledge]"), repeated much of Ibn Jamāʿa's ideas, some of them verbatim.[15]

These classical Muslim thinkers significantly contributed to the foundations on which Islamic educational thought in the centuries to come would grow and prosper. At the same time, it must be stressed that the pedagogical

writings reviewed here provide but a glimpse of the richness of the educational literature, which evolved during the classical period of Islam. Many works by other Muslim scholars with specific pedagogical interests could be added to this list, such as the *Kitāb Ādāb al-murīdīn* ("Rules of Conduct for Novices"), a guidebook on mystic-spiritual growth, by Abū l-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1168 AD); *Adab al-imlāʾ wa-l-istimlāʾ* ("The Codex of Dictating and Taking Notes from Dictation"), a work on the rules of written text transmission, by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Samʿānī (d. 562/1166–67 AD); the *Kitāb Ādāb al-mutaʿallimīn* ("Rules of Conduct for Students") by the Shiʿite author Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274 AD), or the historian, jurist, and sociologist Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406 AD), whose *Muqaddima* ("Prolegomena") deals extensively—often in discrete chapters or special expositions—with key issues in the theory and practice of Islamic learning, to mention just a few particularly original examples.[16]

CONCLUSIONS

Although each of the texts reviewed in this chapter is distinct and needs to be appreciated on its own scholarly terms and historical conditions, a number of aspects that link these works are striking, as they appear to represent major characteristics common to pedagogical thought in classical Islam:

1. More than one of our authors emphasizes, as did Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle before them, the importance of teacher assistance in student learning. Thus they highlight the usefulness of the so-called 'maieutic method' in recalling and bringing out in students knowledge that they "already knew."[17] Principals of this kind of instruction clearly indicated in the texts we surveyed include the power of observation (to deepen and expand knowledge) and personal experience (in problem solving), for example. Basically, however, it is the interaction between teacher and student through reflective dialogue and the teaching through question and answer, which guides the student to reach deeper insight and eventually enables him to learn, as Abū Ḥanīfa/al-Samarqandī, Ibn Saḥnūn, and al-Zarnūjī suggest. These scholars highlight, in the context of learning, the advantages of inductively discovering contextual relationships and conclusions. Then the role of the teachers in this regard is specifically addressed by al-Jāḥiẓ in his recommendation that teachers should not oversee and control learning too strictly. Flexible and student-responsive supervision would generally ensure that students learn to form their own opinions in the process of education and also may develop a critical approach toward the materials they use in learning.
2. Thoughtful structuring is particularly conducive to successful instruction. This includes careful planning in general, as well as a well-designed

presentation of the teaching content more specifically, which takes the learner progressively from basic topics to the more complex, as Ibn Jamāʿa suggests. This manner of teaching enables learners to familiarize themselves systematically with the contents of learning, as Miskawayh, al-Ghazālī, and al-Zarnūjī state. Likewise, connecting new topics to knowledge that students already possess, and the idea of learning through observation and imitation (of the teacher), are major principles of education in Islamic learning. This manner of progressive education is particularly effective not only for students individually or in groups but also for large groups of people or even nations. When seen in this perspective, it is not surprising that the sociologist and historian Ibn Khaldūn, in particular, emphasizes this insight. [18]

3. A caring and respectful attitude toward pupils and students is key in Islamic education. This idea is underscored on more than one occasion by almost all the medieval Muslim scholars surveyed here. Al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Jamāʿa recommend paying close attention to the individual intellectual capabilities of the learners, as these are, in their views, essential preconditions for a person to make progress in learning. The emotional dimensions of instruction, in turn, are crucial parts of Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman's and al-Ghazālī's deliberations. In addition, several Muslim scholars identify motivation, as known already in antiquity,[19] as particularly stimulating to learning.
4. To learners, a great deal of principal advice is offered. Al-Fārābī and Miskawayh, for example, stress that students should begin—and continue—learning with an open mind. Al-Zarnūjī speaks about the need for students to work with focus and determination. Ibn Jamāʿa explicates that the students' polite, punctual, and respectful behavior as well as their alertness in class significantly facilitate learning.
5. Most of the medieval Muslim authors looked at here regard memorizing and a close reliance on the written tradition as important measures toward gaining scholarly proficiency. This view seems to relegate the practical application of acquired knowledge to a position of secondary importance—especially, as Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Zarnūjī state, when rote memorization is given priority. In contrast, al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman are more balanced in their views. They see memorization, repetition, and reading (new) books as components inseparably interconnected with each other and, thus, as particularly helpful in making learning into a creative and sustainable process. This way of knowledge acquisition would ultimately lead students to new insights and a sound application of information they acquired. The fact that a genuine and, perhaps, practical interest on the part of the students in what they learn substantially promotes learning success seems to be indicated in what Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman writes.
6. Finally, and no less importantly, in the classical time of Islam it seems that, even within a more strictly religion-based framework, a good

and comprehensive education is based on the acquisition of both secular and religious expertise. Obviously, whether the secular or the religious constituents of learning are stressed significantly differs in the educational theories of the Muslim scholars discussed here. At the same time, all our classical scholars determine that the secular and the religious aspects of Islamic education are inseparably connected. This general quality of classical Islamic educational thought expresses itself in a rich and quite dynamic spectrum of educational theories. Here the rationalist theologian and man of letters al-Jāḥiẓ and the logician and philosopher al-Fārābī seem to represent the one, more secular-oriented end of the spectrum, as they stress the centrality of the mind, as well as reasoning and creative thinking for learning. The other, much more strongly religion-oriented educational approach is epitomized by the theologian and mystic al-Ghazālī, the legal scholars al-Zarnūjī and Ibn Jamāʿa, as well as several other pedagogically interested scholars of later time who famously put the Quran, the prophetic tradition, and spiritual experience at the very heart of the Islamic education. The common link between these educational theories, however, is the great importance that their representatives assign to ethics in all aspects of teaching and learning. Ethics, as Miskawayh highlights, thus appear as a central and defining component in the search of classical Muslims for human perfection and happiness, if not in this world, then in the next.

NOTES

1 The quotation in the title refers to a statement by the early 4th/11th century scholar Miskawayh, which he included in his work on Islamic ethics, Constantine K. Zurayk, trans., *The Refinement of Character* Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 160. The relevant passage is cited in full on pp. 81–2 of the present chapter. All translations from the Arabic are my own, unless indicated otherwise. Dates are given according to both the Islamic calendar and the Gregorian, thus “Hijiri date/common era date”.

2 For the use of the term ‘classical’ in the context of Islam’s intellectual history, see Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xi; Sebastian Günther, ed., *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), xvii–xx; and Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 14.

3 A similar connotation is commonly conveyed by the Arabic term *tarbiya* (from *rabbā*, ‘to let grow,’ ‘to raise,’ and ‘to educate’). It expresses the meaning of ‘education’ in its general sense, denoting the act, process, and result of imparting and acquiring knowledge, values and skills. Other terms used in premodern times to convey the concept of education are *taʿlīm* and *taʿallum* (‘teaching and learning’), *tadrīs* (‘[more advanced] instruction’), as well as *taʾdīb* (‘tutoring, educating’), leading to *adab* (‘cultural and intellectual refinement, education’); cf. Sebastian Günther, “Education,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition, forthcoming.

4 Cf. Joseph Schacht, "An early Murciʾite treatise: The Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim," *Oriens* 17 (1964): 96–117; Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991–1997), esp. i: 183–214; Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 44–53.

5 According to Schacht, "An early Murciʾite treatise," 97.

6 Ed. in Ibrahim Geries, ed., *Kitabān li-l-Jāḥiẓ: Kitāb al-Muʿallimīn wa-Kitāb fī l-radd ʿalā l-mushabbiha* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1980), 57–87.

7 Ed. Muḥammad al-ʿArūsī al-Maṭwī, [repr.] in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Uthmān Ḥijāzī, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawī ʿinda Ibn Saḥnūn* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla), 1406/1986, 111–128.

8 Charles M. Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period: A.D. 700–1300* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 84; David C. Reisman, "Al-Farabi and the Philosophical Curriculum," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 52–71.

9 Ed. in James R. Morris, ed. and trans., *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue on Conversion Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), esp. 22–27.

10 Ed. Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq (Beirut: al-Jāmiʿa al-Amīrikīya), 1966. For an English translation, see n. 1.

11 Bryson was apparently a Neopythagorean who lived in the 1st century CE. His *Oikonomikos* is lost today in Greek, but extant in an Arabic translation from about 900 CE, as well as in Latin and Hebrew translations. It was used by a range of ancient authors and became the standard work of its time on the topic in the Islamic tradition. Cf. Simon Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam: A Critical Edition, English Translation, and Study of Bryson's Management of the Estate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

12 Nadia Gamal al-Din, "Miskawayh (A.H. 320–421/A.D. 932–1030)," *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 24.1–2 (1994): 131–152, esp. 137–145 and *passim* [repr. in Zaghloul Morsy, ed., *Thinkers on Education*, 4 vols. (UNESCO 1994, 1995, 1997)].

13 Al-Zarnūjī's death dates occasionally given in the secondary literature range from 620/1223 to 640/1242–3. However, all of them seem to be based on speculation (cf. Martin Plessner and Jonathan P. Berkey, "al-Zarnūdjī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. Peri Bearman (Leiden, Brill), vol. xi, 462.

14 Ed. Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1353/[1934]); Noor M. Ghifari, trans., *Ibn Jamāʿah* (sic), *The Memoir of the Listener and the Speaker in the Training of Teacher and Student* (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1991).

15 For more on this topic, see the detailed study by Rosenthal, *Technique*, 7–24.

16 See also the rich collection of studies by Joseph E. Lowry et al., eds., *Law and Education in Medieval Islam: Studies in Memory of George Makdisi* (Chippenham: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004).

17 Maieutic relates to Greek *maieutikos* (from *maieuesthai*, 'to act as midwife'). It conveys the image of the teacher assisting the student to bring out and to fruition knowledge he already has, as a midwife helps the infant to see the world. It may be noted here as well that Plato explicitly suggested that teachers should guide the students in a way that enables them to think consistently with supporting evidence, instead of 'infusing' knowledge into them; cf. his *The Republic*, Book VII ("students cannot learn . . . unless they have a director").

18 For the question of tying new information to what the students have already learned, see R.C. Clark and R.E. Mayer, *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven*

Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning (San Francisco: Pfeiffer), 2011.

19 Aristotle, for example, in his *De Anima* III, chapter 10, saw motivation as "the real or the apparent good" of some anticipated consequence of "what is to come" (be it pleasant or painful); that is, as something that makes it a force and stimulus also in learning.

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