Adab Before Apps: Character Education in the Machine Age

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ABSTRACT

Introducing adab, the recognition of the right and proper place of things, this article argues character education has always anchored Malaysian schooling, from the Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan to values embedded across the curriculum. Meta-analytic evidence confirms character programmes work best through relationships and guided moral discussion. Rejecting simple claims that technology erodes values, since technologies both inherit designers' values and project users' conduct, it argues adab must now be designed into instruction, not hoped for as by-product, with AI as sparring partner, never elder.

KEYWORDS

Philosophy, Values, Adab

Let me start with a word that my non-Malaysian readers may not know, and my Malaysian readers may know so well that they have stopped noticing how deep it goes.

Adab.

The word came to us from Arabic, where it carries a family of meanings: refinement, courtesy, proper conduct, even literature, because a cultured person and a well-read person were understood to be the same project. But translating adab as "good manners" is like translating rendang as "beef stew". Technically not wrong, spiritually a crime. The Malaysian philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas gave the concept its most famous scholarly treatment: adab is the recognition and acknowledgement of the right and proper place of things, and of oneself among them, and true education, in his view, is ta'dib, the instilling of adab into a person (al-Attas 1980). So when a Malaysian parent tells a child "jaga adab", they are not merely saying "behave". They are invoking a whole cosmology: know where you stand, in front of whom, and act accordingly. Adab with teachers. Adab with parents. Adab with knowledge itself, which is why we were taught not to step over books.

I open with this because our education system, on paper, has never treated character as decoration. The Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan, our national education philosophy, states

the goal plainly: to develop individuals who are balanced and harmonious in jasmani, emosi, rohani, intelek dan sosial, what our teachers memorise as JERIS, physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social. Notice the intellect is one item on the list, not the list. Our curriculum carries this through what educators know as the values, skills, and knowledge weave: values are embedded across subjects, waiting inside the lesson, and the teacher's instructional design is supposed to give students the opportunity to discover them, not just hear about them. A science experiment done in groups is also a lesson in amanah over shared equipment. A history debate is also a rehearsal in disagreeing with adab.

And the research says this emphasis is not sentimental. A large meta-analysis in the Journal of Moral Education, covering 214 studies and more than 307,000 students, found that character education programmes produce real, significant positive effects, and, here is the detail I want you to hold, the approaches involving mentoring relationships and guided moral discussion were among those associated with the stronger outcomes (Brown et al. 2022). Read that finding as a teacher would: character grows best inside a relationship. Anyone who has stood in front of a class knows this without the meta-analysis. There is a whole layer of the classroom that never appears in any lesson plan: the way a teacher greets the boy who came late because he sent his sister to school first. The pause before correcting a wrong answer, so the child's dignity lands safely before the correction does. Students are watching all of it. That tacit layer, the thousand small transactions of respect, patience, and fairness, is where character education mostly happens, and it is bonded to a person, not a syllabus.

Now, the question everyone is really asking: are technologies eroding values in our classrooms?

I want to answer this carefully, because the popular version of the question is a trap. It puts technology in the spotlight as if technology were a single actor with intentions. It is not, and here both my engineering side and the scholarship agree. A field of research called value sensitive design has spent nearly three decades showing that technologies are not neutral pipes; designers make choices that embed values into the product, amplifying some behaviours and blocking others, through the features they build, the defaults they set, the metrics they optimise (Friedman & Hendry 2019). An app that rewards streaks is teaching something about consistency, or about compulsion, depending on the design. At the same time, a technology does not fully control its own meaning: users interpret it, bend it, use the same tool in ways that honour values or trample them. The same WhatsApp group can be a gotong-royong of homework help or a factory of fitnah. So a technology carries values twice over, once inherited from its maker's choices, once projected by its users' conduct. Blaming "technology" for value erosion is aiming at the middle of that relationship and hitting neither end. The more honest questions are: what values did the designer bake in, and what values are we performing when we use it?

Which brings me back to adab, and to the argument I most want to leave with fellow educators.

For a long time we treated character as the hoped-for by-product of instruction. Teach the content well, keep the class orderly, and values will somehow condense on the students like morning dew. And to be fair to our seniors, for a long time that assumption more or less worked, because the classroom was never doing the job alone. The child moved through a saturated moral environment: the kampung watching, the surau, the grandmother's proverbs, the neighbours who felt licensed to tegur anybody's anak. Adab was rehearsed a hundred times a day across a hundred small stages, so the school could afford to let it ride as a by-product. That environment has thinned. The stages have moved onto screens, the audiences are strangers or algorithms, and a growing share of a child's daily conversation is now with a system that has no shame, no elders, no kampung watching, and infinite patience for whatever conduct the child brings to it. The machine will never tegur. Whatever adab a student carries into that interaction must have been deliberately built somewhere, and the somewhere, increasingly, is us.

So my argument is this: adab must migrate from the hoped-for column into the designed column. Baked into the instruction, engineered with the same seriousness we give to learning outcomes, not left as dew. And I mean this at the level of craft, in the actual mechanics of lesson design, because this is where my field, instructional design, and our tradition, ta'dib, turn out to be describing the same discipline. When we plan a lesson we specify the objective, the activity that exercises it, and the evidence we will accept that it happened. We simply never extend that rigour to the V in our values-skills-knowledge weave. We write "menerapkan nilai murni" in the lesson plan, one recycled phrase, and consider the box ticked. That is not design. That is doa.

Designed adab looks different, and it is not exotic. It means the value has a named moment in the lesson where it is exercised, not announced, because values, like muscles, grow by use and atrophy by lecture. If I want honesty, my lesson includes a disclosure habit: students state what help they received, from friends, from abang, from AI, and the stating is routine and safe, so honesty gets cheaper than hiding. If I want humility before knowledge, my lesson includes a verification moment where we test a confident claim, including the machine's and occasionally the teacher's, and sometimes find it wrong in public, gracefully. If I want adab in disagreement, my discussion protocol requires students to restate the other side's point to their satisfaction before rebutting it, a small mechanic that quietly teaches that the person you disagree with has a proper place too, which is adab in its most distilled form. If I want amanah, my group work assigns real custody, of equipment, of a role, of a weaker teammate's progress, and the debrief asks about the custody, not only the product. None of this costs money. All of it costs intention, which is the point: a by-product needs no intention, a design does.

And notice one more thing, because teachers will feel this immediately: every example above is also just good pedagogy. The disclosure habit is formative assessment. The verification moment is critical thinking. The restating protocol is comprehension checking. This is the quiet elegance of taking ta'dib seriously as design: the values lesson and the content lesson stop competing for time, because they were never meant to be two lessons. Al-Attas would say we are simply putting things back in their proper places, starting with adab itself, which we had misfiled under "decoration" when it was always load-bearing structure.

And here is where I part ways with the pure pessimists, because used deliberately, AI can actually be an instrument for adab, not only a threat to it. Think about what the meta-analysis found effective: guided moral discussion. An AI can generate endless, locally-grounded dilemma scenarios for a Moral or Pendidikan Islam class, then play the difficult interlocutor, the person who disagrees, so students can practise disagreeing back with hujah and courtesy before they do it on real humans in the wild internet. It can let a student rehearse how to apologise, how to decline politely, how to ask a teacher for help respectfully, judgment-free, in Malay, at midnight. Muslim scholars working on AI ethics have proposed exactly this orientation: judge a technology by the virtues its habitual use cultivates in a person, not merely by its outputs (Raquib et al. 2022). By that test, an AI used as a sparring partner for character is passing; an AI used as a substitute for effort is failing, and the evidence on cognitive offloading tells us the failing mode is the default when nobody designs otherwise (Gerlich 2025).

But let none of this confuse us about the centre of gravity. The E in JERIS and the R in JERIS do not transmit through an API. Adab, at its root, is about knowing one's proper place among others, and "others" means beings who can be hurt, honoured, disappointed, and loved. A machine can simulate the conversation. It cannot be the elder. The teacher who models patience on a hard Thursday afternoon is performing an act of character education no platform will ever replicate, and the research on what makes character programmes work, relationships, mentoring, human example, quietly agrees.

Apps update every week. Adab updates the old way: one generation showing the next where things belong, person to person, salam by salam.

That is why, whatever we install in our classrooms this year, the order of priority was settled long before the machines arrived. Adab first. Apps after. And a teacher, always, in between.

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