Iqra’ in the Age of AI: What Islam Actually Says About Learning with Technology

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CITE AS	Hanif, H. (2026, August 16). Iqra’ in the Age of AI: What Islam Actually Says About Learning with Technology. Hack(edu).tech Chronicle. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21964297
PUBLISHED	16 August 2026
DOI	10.5281/zenodo.21964297
LICENCE	CC-BY-4.0
AVAILABLE AT	https://hackedu.tech/articles/iqra-in-the-age-of-ai-what-islam-actually-says-about-learning-with-technology

ABSTRACT

What does Islam say about learning with technology? This article argues the tradition answers with coherence, not suspicion: revelation opens by pairing the command to read with the pen, jurisprudence treats tools as means judged by their ends, and history rewards adoption over hesitation. Drawing on emerging maqasid-based AI ethics scholarship, it identifies preservation of intellect as the key duty amid cognitive offloading, and proposes isnad verification as a ready-made AI literacy framework. The command was Iqra’, never "compute".

KEYWORDS

Islamic Views, Technology

After a recent AI workshop I conducted for teachers, one participant waited until the room emptied before approaching me. Her question was quiet, almost apologetic. "Dr., boleh ke kita guna benda ni? Agama kata apa?" *(Dr, can we you this tool? What does our religion say?)*

It is a fair question, and it deserves a better answer than the two lazy ones circulating today: the technophile’s shrug that religion has nothing to say about tools, and the alarmist’s verdict that anything new is suspect. Both, I want to argue, misread a tradition that has been thinking about learning and its instruments for fourteen centuries.

Start where the tradition itself starts. The first word of revelation was not a ritual instruction. It was a command: Iqra’. Read. And within the same five opening verses of Surah al-‘Alaq, the Quran names an instrument: He who taught by the pen, taught man what he knew not. Pause on that pairing. The inaugural moment of Islam binds the command to learn together with the learning technology of its age. The pen was hardware. Revelation did not treat it as a distraction from knowledge; it treated it as the means through which knowledge travels. Add the Prophet’s famous declaration that seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim,

and the foundation is set: learning is not merely permitted in this tradition. It is commanded, and its tools are honoured in the same breath.

Classical jurisprudence then gives us the operating principle. In matters of worldly things and tools, the default ruling is permissibility, and the means take the ruling of their ends. A tool is a wasilah, a vehicle. It carries the moral weight of what it is used for and why, in line with perhaps the most quoted maxim in Islamic law: actions are judged by intentions. A laptop used to master mathematics and a laptop used to harm are the same machine and two entirely different acts. Readers of my previous columns will recognise this as the position I have long argued on purely pedagogical grounds, that technology is just a tool and a fool with a tool is still a fool. It turns out the jurists arrived at the same conclusion a millennium before the EdTech industry existed.

History shows Muslims acting on this principle at civilisational scale. When papermaking arrived from China in the eighth century, the Muslim world did not agonise over its foreignness. It built paper mills, and on that cheap, abundant medium rose the House of Wisdom, the translation movement, al-Khwarizmi's algebra, and libraries that dwarfed anything in Europe. The Golden Age was, among other things, a story of aggressive adoption of learning technology. The cautionary tale sits on the other side of the ledger: the Ottoman lands' long hesitation over the printing press, which historians still debate, but which most agree cost the Muslim world dearly in the centuries of knowledge production that followed. Our own tradition, read honestly, warns against both blind embrace and reflexive suspicion.

So what happens when we bring this framework to artificial intelligence? Here the conversation becomes genuinely contemporary, because Muslim scholars are already building it. A growing body of scholarship now derives AI ethics directly from the maqasid al-shariah, the higher objectives of Islamic law, arguing that AI development and use must be measured against the protection of faith, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Mohadi & Tarshany 2023). Others have gone further, proposing full Islamic virtue-based frameworks for AI that ask not only "is this tool permissible?" but "what kind of human being does habitual use of this tool produce?" (Raquib et al. 2022). This work is being taken seriously well beyond Muslim circles; the journal Philosophy & Technology recently carried an argument that Islamic ethics offers a valuable pluralist benchmark for global AI governance, precisely because the field has been dominated by a narrow band of Western frameworks (Elmahjub 2023).

For educators, one of those five objectives deserves special attention: hifz al-'aql, the preservation of intellect. Classically invoked against intoxicants, contemporary scholars read it more broadly, as a duty to protect the human mind from whatever degrades it. Now place beside that a finding I have cited before in these pages: emerging research links heavy reliance on AI tools to weakened critical thinking through cognitive offloading. A tradition that counts the intellect among the five things worth protecting at all costs has something precise to say about outsourcing our thinking wholesale to a machine. The tool is halal. The atrophy is not.

There is a second gift the tradition offers, and I would argue it is the most practical AI literacy framework we have never used. Islamic scholarship built the isnad, the science of verifying knowledge through authenticated chains of transmission, interrogating every narrator's reliability before accepting a single sentence. The Quran itself commands tabayyun, verification, when information arrives from a source of unknown integrity (49:6). Now consider what a large language model is: a fluent, confident narrator of unknown reliability, known to fabricate. Our scholarly ancestors would have recognised this problem instantly, and they would not have banned the narrator. They would have graded the report. Verify before you transmit is not a Silicon Valley media literacy slogan. It is muhaddith methodology, and it belongs in every Malaysian classroom that touches AI.

And here is where the tradition quietly agrees with the education research. Studies consistently find that AI can support planning, feedback, and instruction, yet falls short of what teachers actually do in classrooms. Islam has a word for that gap. The tradition never reduced education

to information transfer; it speaks of tarbiyah, the slow cultivation of a whole person, and of the teacher as murabbi, a shaper of character, not a dispenser of facts. A machine can transmit maklumat at superhuman speed. It cannot model sabar in front of a difficult class, or notice the student whose silence means something is wrong at home. The tradition would have no difficulty deciding which of those two functions is the essence of teaching.

Let me be clear about what I am not doing. I am not issuing a fatwa; that is the work of our religious authorities, and questions of specific use belong with them and with bodies already deliberating these matters, as Malaysia develops its own AI governance frameworks. I am describing, as an educational technologist, the remarkable coherence of a tradition that began with a command to read, honoured the pen in its first breath, industrialised paper, built the world's most rigorous verification science, and named the intellect among the five things worth guarding with our lives.

That tradition does not fear the machine in our students' pockets. It asks the same two questions it has always asked of every tool and every learner. What are you using it for? And what is it doing to your mind?

The first command was Iqra'. It was never "compute". Read, question, verify, think. In the age of AI, that command has never been harder to obey, or more important.

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