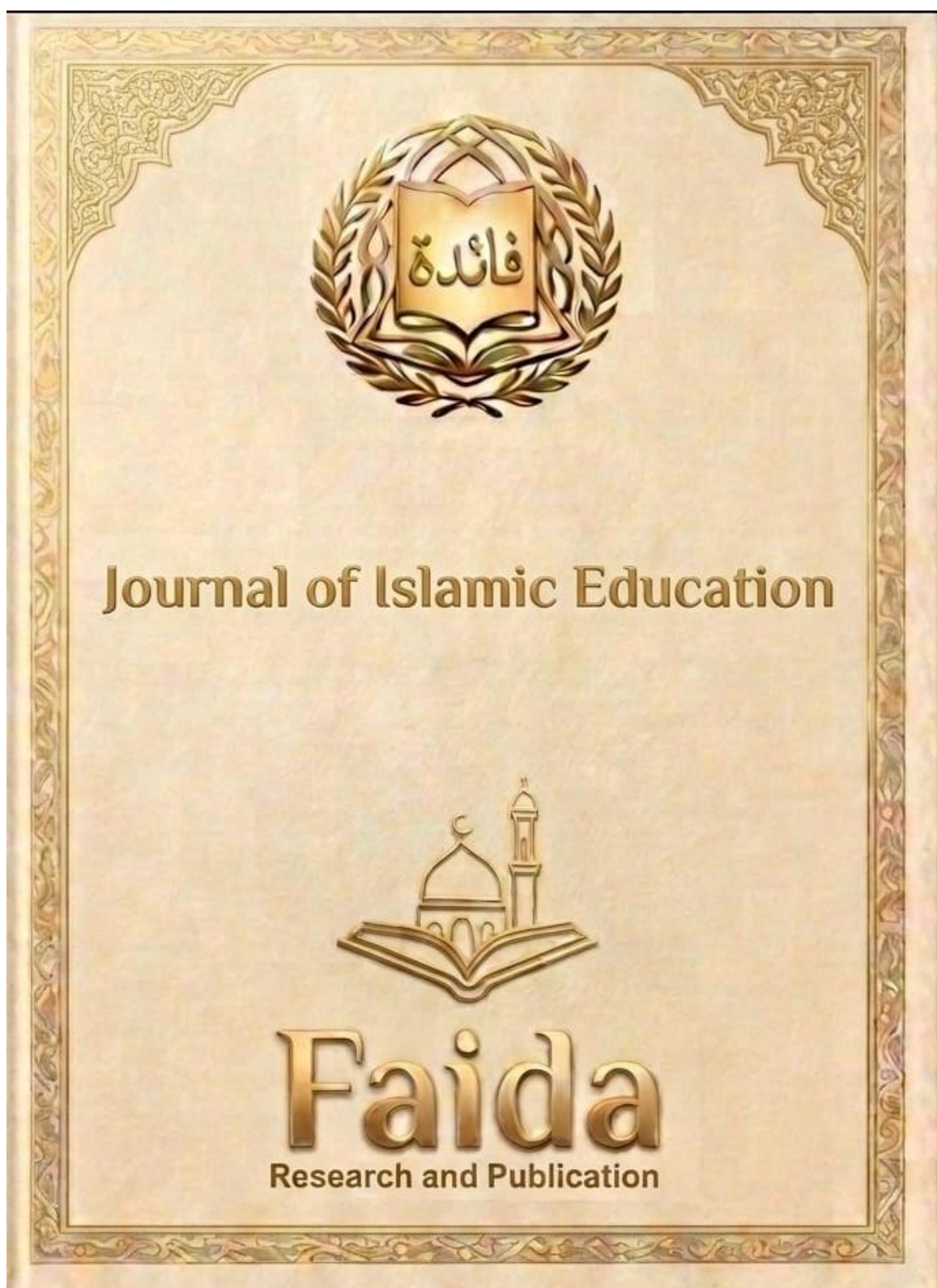




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TELEOLOGICAL SECULARIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY LEARNING DESIGN: PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM AND REORIENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS

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ABSTRACT

Today's learning design has undergone major changes towards systematization and technology. However, behind this progress lies the risk of teleological secularization, namely the disconnection of the ultimate goal of education from its philosophical and transcendental foundation. This article aims to examine the evolution of the learning design paradigm, analyze its main models, and propose a philosophical critique of instrumental reductionism tendencies. The research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. The data sources are in the form of indexed textbooks and international journal articles. The analysis was carried out in a critical descriptive manner with a hermeneutic approach. The results of the study show that modern learning design models trap education on three main problems. Among them are the dominance of instrumental rationality, pseudo-metaphysical neutrality, and the loss of the human dimension of students. This article recommends a reorientation of educational goals that return ethical and spiritual values to each phase of learning design.

Keywords: learning design, teleological secularization, reorientation of educational goals, philosophical criticism, perfect human.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, learning design has changed dramatically.(Manchanda & Arora, 2023) Technology has permeated every aspect of instructional planning. A 2023 UNESCO report noted that more than eighty percent of educational institutions in developing countries have adopted neatly structured competency-based learning models. (Miglani et al., 2026) Yet the efficiency gained has not come without cost. Dominici warns that when technology turns into ideology, education can fade into a mere bureaucracy of measurable goals.(Dominici, 2022) Curricula at every level are now eagerly pursuing learning outcomes that can be tested numerically, while space for reflection and the cultivation of spiritual values grows ever narrower.(Miller et al., 2026; Selvan & Lakshmi, 2025)

A similar critique comes from Maijala, who argues that contemporary education has lost a substantive language of purpose.(Maijala et al., 2024) What remains is merely *learnification*, a condition in which the educational process is reduced to questions about what learners do, rather than about who they are meant to become.(Woo & Lim, 2025) Sadraei's data reinforces this concern, showing that teachers in developed countries report feeling more pressure to meet targets than freedom to develop character.(Sadraei et al., 2024) In Indonesia, Syafruddin reminds us that the main challenge of Islamic Religious Education actually lies in the tendency to adopt learning models that are procedural yet poor in spiritual value.(Syafruddin, 2025)

More fundamentally, Delahunty criticizes the way educational secularization has separated knowledge from divine values, thereby giving rise to an epistemological crisis.(Delahunty, 2024) In the world of learning design, this symptom appears as teleological secularization, defined as the severing of education's ultimate goal (telos) from its transcendental roots. As a result, models such as ADDIE, Dick and Carey, and Kemp remain trapped in instrumental rationality. They are adept at answering the question of how, but blunt when confronted with the question of why.(Dick et al., n.d., 2015)

A number of researchers have mapped the evolution of learning design. (Abuhassna et al., 2024) conclude that three major paradigms — behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist — still persist today. (Zhang & Wu, 2025) show a shift from a mechanistic to a systemic approach. In Indonesia, Adi and Herdiana compare the implementation of behaviorist and cognitivist theory in instructional design. (adi & Herdiana, 2024) Unfortunately, all of these studies remain confined to technical effectiveness rather than philosophical critique.

Meanwhile, critiques of learning design have begun to emerge. (Utari et al., 2025) highlight how Islamic education often loses its spiritual substance when forced into models that claim to be value-neutral. (Tamiosso et al., 2025) propose an educational design research approach more responsive to the challenges of the times, yet it has not touched upon the teleological problem. (Macfarlane, 2025) offers a typology of critique for teaching in higher education, but this remains at the level of pedagogical practice and has not reached the ontological structure of learning design itself.

Most existing studies are descriptive-procedural or technically empirical in nature. None has yet philosophically dissected the hidden teleological assumptions behind learning design models. More specifically, no study has systematically critiqued the tendency toward teleological secularization while simultaneously offering a reorientation grounded in the concept of *insan kamil* (the perfect human). This is the gap this article seeks to fill. Rather than merely describing the evolution of these models, this article undertakes a radical philosophical critique and offers a way out in the form of teleological reorientation.

This article therefore pursues three objectives. First, to analyze the evolution of the learning design paradigm. Second, to dissect the dominant major models. Third, to put forward a philosophical critique of teleological secularization and its implications for the reorientation of educational goals. Its theoretical contribution is to provide a critical framework for evaluating instructional models from a values perspective, while also laying a foundation for the development of a more holistic and transformative learning design, particularly within Islamic Religious Education. Practically, this study is expected to help instructional designers, lecturers, and teachers not merely follow technical procedures, but also question the moral and spiritual direction of the processes they design. The scope of this article is limited to a qualitative-philosophical literature study examining three major design models (Dick and Carey, ADDIE, Kemp) along with the Backward Design model. This study does not include empirical field testing.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature study design. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is a critical analysis of the concepts and theories of learning design, rather than empirical testing.

Data sources are divided into two categories. Primary data are drawn from major textbooks on learning design, namely the works of (Dick et al., n.d., 2015; Morrison et al., 2007; Wiggins & Mctighe, 2005). Indexed international journal articles discussing the evolution of the learning design paradigm and critiques of educational secularization were also used as primary sources. Secondary data consist of supporting articles, research reports, and educational policy documents.

Data collection was carried out through a systematic literature search of the Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR databases. Keywords used included: instructional design models, behaviorism cognitivism constructivism, secularization in education, teleological aims of education, and *insan kamil*. Inclusion criteria covered literature published within the last twenty years (2005–2025), written in Indonesian or English, and relevant to the focus of the study. Literature with no direct connection to learning design or to the teleological issues of education was excluded from the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted in a critical-descriptive manner through four stages. The first stage involved reading and understanding all the collected literature. The second stage involved reducing the data by selecting sections relevant to the three areas of focus. The third stage involved presenting the data systematically in the form of descriptive narrative and comparative tables. The fourth stage involved interpretation and critical dialogue between findings from various sources, grounded in the framework of Islamic educational philosophy, particularly the concept of *insan kamil*.

The validity of the data was examined through source triangulation, comparing information from various pieces of literature to ensure the consistency of findings. Cross-theory checking was also conducted, dialoguing findings from one theory with another, along with discussions with colleagues in the fields of Islamic education and learning design to test the logical coherence of the interpretation. This study is a literature-based study and is therefore not intended to produce empirical generalizations. The resulting findings are theoretical in nature and require further testing through field research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evolution of the Learning Design Paradigm: Technically Advanced, Substantively Regressing

A review of the literature reveals three major phases in the development of learning design. Each phase carries different underlying assumptions about the nature of learning and the position of the learner.

The first phase is behaviorism, which dominated from the 1950s to the 1960s. In this phase, learning design was crafted as a tool for controlling behavior. Attention was directed solely toward externally observable behavioral change. (Alberts et al., 2026; Mitsea et al., 2023a) Learners were positioned as parties who respond to stimuli, while teachers served to provide reinforcement. Consequently, the goal of education narrowed to merely achieving predetermined behaviors. The inner dimension, intention, and spiritual values found no place. (Islamic et al., 2024; Juthi et al., 2025)

The second phase is cognitivism, which developed during the 1970s and 1980s. (Duong et al., 2023; Scholz & Vosgerau, 2025) Attention shifted to mental structures and the way information is processed, stored, and retrieved. Learning design began to take schemas, memory, and mental representation into account. (Pflieger et al., 2024) Yet teleologically, this phase is not far removed from its predecessor. Education was still directed toward optimizing intellectual capacity merely as a technical tool. The larger questions of life's meaning and existential purpose remained sidelined. (Mitsea et al., 2023)

The third phase is constructivism, which has persisted from the 1990s to the present. (Bos et al., 2025) This paradigm emphasizes that meaning is constructed by learners themselves, and that social context heavily determines the learning process. Methodologically, constructivism gives greater weight to subjectivity. However, without a robust value framework, constructivism risks slipping into relativism. The purpose of education becomes fluid and loses direction. (Muhammad et al., 2025)

The three phases above show impressive progress in terms of methods and techniques. Yet there is a troubling paradox: learning design has become increasingly adept at answering the question of how (how to learn), while becoming increasingly blunt in answering the question of why (what learning is for). This phenomenon is what is termed teleological secularization, namely the severing of education's ultimate goal from its philosophical and transcendental roots.

This finding reinforces the critique of learnification, which holds that education has narrowed to focus only on what learners do, causing the language of substantive purpose to disappear. (Delahunty, 2024) This finding also aligns with the view that secularization has separated knowledge from divine values, generating an epistemological crisis within Islamic education. From a broader perspective, this

study complements the findings of Mejía-Rodríguez and Kyriakides, who showed that systemic factors such as inequality have a significant effect on learning outcomes.(Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022) This study adds that the absence of a transcendental orientation also constitutes an equally important form of disparity. Meanwhile, it has been revealed that prescribed curricula reduce the time available for student autonomy (Zhong & Zhao, 2025). This study extends those findings by showing that learning design, not curriculum alone, also reduces autonomy through mechanisms of time concentration and distorted time perception.

A Review of the Major Models of Learning Design

The analysis covers four major models, namely Dick and Carey, ADDIE, Kemp, and Backward Design. These models were found to share a fundamental, and at the same time concerning, commonality. All four are oriented toward measurable outcomes that can be procedurally evaluated.(Dick et al., 2015; Marrison et al., n.d.)

The Dick, Carey and Carey model views learning as a linear system with interdependent components: goal identification, instructional analysis, strategy development, and formative-summative evaluation.(Beahm & Bradshaw, 2023; Li & Jiang, 2026) Its main weakness is that learners are treated like components of a system. Success is measured by the accuracy of output relative to input, without ever questioning whether the output itself holds meaning for the learner's life.

The ADDIE model offers five generic phases: analysis, design, development, implementation, evaluation. Although flexible as a framework, in practice this model is often trapped in administrative routine. Efficiency becomes everything, while the depth of educational reflection is neglected (Reigeluth & An, 2021).

The Kemp model emerges as a more flexible and non-linear alternative. Its design components can be developed simultaneously according to contextual needs (Morrison et al., 2007). Unfortunately, its goal orientation remains fixed on measurable instructional achievement. The transcendental dimension remains untouched.

Wiggins and McTighe's Backward Design model is the most compelling, as it explicitly claims to focus on enduring understanding (Ndabezitha, n.d.; Wiggins & Mctighe, 2005). Through six facets of understanding (explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge), this model attempts to capture the complexity of understanding.(Bagheri, 2023) Yet this model, too, remains within a secular, outcome-oriented design framework. When the final outcome is locked onto narrow competency standards, the transcendental dimension remains difficult to incorporate. In other words, none of the four models inherently provides room to question humanity's ultimate purpose from a spiritual perspective. Each, in its own way, supports what Macfarlane terms functional pragmatism.

This finding complements the critique by Mejía-Rodríguez and Kyriakides regarding the need to attend to a broader educational environment, one that includes cultural values. This study shows that this broader educational environment should also include a transcendental dimension.(Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022) From Zhong and Zhao's perspective, existing models tend to reinforce the concentration of learning time through the synchronization of learning pace and seat-time requirements in the classroom.(Zhong & Zhao, 2025) As a result, the space for developing spiritual understanding — which in fact requires unstructured time and deep contemplation — becomes increasingly narrow.

Teleological Secularization and the Need for a Reorientation Based on Insan Kamil

From this philosophical analysis, this study identifies three core problems in contemporary learning design.(Brod et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2023) First, the dominance of instrumental rationality. Technical efficiency is placed as the highest value. As a result, the question of how submerges the

question of why.(Lindebaum et al., 2023; Mökander & Schroeder, 2024) Education becomes trapped in the mastery of tools rather than the attainment of essence. Students become skilled at solving problems but do not know why those problems matter.

Second, a false metaphysical neutrality. By claiming scientific objectivity, modern design treats ethical and spiritual values as disruptive variables best set aside. As a consequence, learners become technically competent yet spiritually hollow. Ironically, the claimed neutrality turns out not to be neutral at all, since it implicitly supports a secular worldview.(Hanafi & Pohan, 2024; Ikhwan et al., 2025)

Third, depersonalization. A separation occurs between the acquisition of knowledge and the formation of character.(Amaya, 2025; Fazakas, 2025; Schäfer, 2025) Human beings are no longer regarded as insan — beings with spiritual and moral dimensions — but rather as resources to be optimized.(Kartika et al., 2024; Lomas et al., 2025) These three problems are interrelated. Instrumental rationality gives rise to metaphysical neutrality, since only what is measurable is deemed important. Metaphysical neutrality obscures the spiritual dimension. Depersonalization is the final result.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this issue is highly crucial. The essence of Islamic Religious Education is precisely to build a vertical relationship (habl min Allāh) and a horizontal relationship (habl min al-nās) simultaneously. Utari et al.'s critique that Islamic education loses its spiritual substance when forced into an instructional model that claims to be value-neutral is well founded.(Utari et al., 2025) However, this study goes beyond that critique. The source of the problem lies not only in the content, but in the learning design itself.

As an alternative, the concept of insan kamil (the universal human who reflects the names and attributes of God) within Islamic Sufism offers a comprehensive teleological framework.(Piraino, 2023) Insan kamil is not merely a knowledgeable or skilled human being, but one who has perfected their character and is aware of their position as khalifah (steward) on earth.(Mahfuzi & Solehudin, 2025) In learning design, this vision provides direction such that every learning experience must contribute to the formation of three forms of intelligence at once: intellectual (hikmah), spiritual (taqwa), and social (khidmah).(Kurnianingsih et al., 2025; Sehati et al., 2024)

Practically, this reorientation requires changes at four levels of design. At the level of needs analysis, not only performance gaps but also spiritual and moral gaps must be identified.(Allen & Fry, 2022) At the level of goal formulation, learning outcomes need to be complemented with being outcomes such as depth of faith, wisdom, and ihsān (awareness of God's presence).(Jenuri et al., 2025) At the level of strategy, the methods used must be transformative, such as values discussions, spiritual reflection, ethical case studies, and the practice of worship as an integral part of learning.(Karwadi et al., 2025; Mundofi, 2025; Sulisworo et al., 2024) At the level of evaluation, the function of muhasabah (reflective, spiritually grounded self-evaluation) needs to be restored to a position equal to that of objective testing.(Aisyah et al., 2025; Masuwai et al., 2024)

This study certainly has its limitations. The analysis conducted remains theoretical and has not been empirically tested. Further research is needed to develop instruments for insan-kamil-based learning design and to pilot them in Islamic educational institutions. It is also necessary to examine how to integrate transcendental values into the ADDIE or Backward Design models without reducing their flexibility. As suggested by Mejía-Rodríguez and Kyriakides, longitudinal studies are greatly needed to investigate the long-term effects of teleologically oriented learning design, including non-cognitive outcomes such as happiness, meaning in life, and social contribution.(Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022)

4. CONCLUSION

The three paradigms of learning design — behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism — have advanced the technical aspects of instruction while neglecting the teleological dimension. The four major models (Dick and Carey, ADDIE, Kemp, Backward Design) have been shown to leave no room for transcendental educational goals. A reorientation grounded in the concept of insan kamil is therefore needed, one that restores spiritual values to needs analysis, goal formulation, strategy, and learning evaluation.

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