The Phenomenon of Islamic Learning Organization:

Choosing an Appropriate Qualitative Method

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Abstract—the objective of this paper is to argue the possible qualitative method to undertake a study on a new phenomenon called the "Islamic Learning Organization" (ILO). An earlier paper was presented in an international conference in Kazakhstan in July 2015 discussing the conceptualization of ILO. To implement the study, since the concept is considered new, the qualitative approach is deemed suitable. The question is what qualitative method should be chosen. The author viewed that a case study design should be selected and the in-depth interview would be the main data collection method.

Keywords— Islamic learning organization, inductive, in-depth interview, qualitative research method, private Islamic universities

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'learning organization' has emerged in the management literature since 1990 in the USA. The person credited with the honor of being the first to come up with the word is Dr Peter Senge, a scholar based in the School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)[1]. His book entitled "The Fifth Discipline" captured the imagination of both academic researchers and corporate practitioners. Over time, there were other scholars worldwide who pursued studies to develop further the concept and people's understanding of how 'learning organization' can benefit mankind. One Malaysian scholar did a doctoral study in 2010 based on Senge's learning organization idea but viewed it from the Islamic perspective [2, 3, 4]. The aim of this paper is to build further on this Islamic perspective and to call the concept "Islamic learning organization".

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Senge's Concept of Learning Organization

Senge defines learning organization as an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective inspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn [1].

According to Senge, a leader of an organization must learn to manage five dimensions of the learning organization concept [1]. The dimensions or characteristics are: system thinking, personal mastery, mental models. A shared value and team learning (refer Figure 1)

Fig. 1. Senge's 5 Learning Organization Dimensions

B. Ahmad's Concept of Learning Organization from the Islamic Perpective

Ortenblad emphasized that for the concept of learning organization to be successfully implemented by an organization, it must be tailor made to the needs or specific context (i.e. countries) [7, 8]. However, Ahmad expanded this notion of context into two categories – the conventional context suitable for any capitalist type of organization and the Islamic-based context – suitable for any organization which follows the Islamic rules, whether it is based in the West or in Muslim countries [2]. She argued that Senge's learning organization model is really suited for the conventional context where the interests of the subscribers are focused more on achieving organizational effectiveness and efficiency and thereafter maximizing profits for the organization [1]. The learning organization from the Islamic perspective is meant for organizations which want to balance the achievement of profits as well as to cater for the welfare of the customers, both employees and external customers [3, 4]. In Islam, business is regarded as the obligation (termed as "ibadah") and part of religious responsibility to the community. In the West, the need for organizations to "give back" to society where they make their money is slowly becoming important in the Western management literature as reflected by the growing importance of such concepts as "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) and "corporate governance".

C. Sharif's Concept of 'Islamic Learning Organization'

Sharif and Alqolaq agreed on the notion that there is a need to consider the context of Islamic-based organizations in reviewing the concept of learning organization [9, 5]. Ahmad is content to view the concept of learning organization from the Islamic perspective [3, 4]. Sharif, however, argued that there is a real need for Islamic-based organization to embrace the idea of the "learning organization". We should call a spade, a spade, rather than hide behind some other terms [9]. These Islamic-based organizations should be called "Islamic learning organizations" as their fundamentals of doing business are different from those of the usual Western-based organizations.

Next comes the need to define what the Islamic learning organization (ILO) actually is. Senge defines a learning organization as the place where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn [1]. This is an open perception which is subject to the sincerity of the subscribers of the concept as well as its definition.

In Islam, any action, including in business, must relate to the rules of Islam. In general, the two overarching principles are "halal"(permissible) and "haram" (forbidden). Even in a learning activity, the two principles must be abided to by Muslim businessmen or entrepreneurs. One is not allowed to cheat in his or her conduct in learning. Muslims learn not to achieve the learning goals per se but more to achieve "*barakah*" (endowment by God) [10].

III. THE POSSIBLE METHODOLOGY

A. The What and How Questions

For a new concept like "Islamic learning organization", the research questions should always be 'what is it" and "how is it done". The questions should be posed to key informants who are responsible for running an organization.

B. The Research Design

Scholars have suggested that any researcher who wants to get answers to the 'what' and 'how' questions should attempt the qualitative research design (11, 12, 13]. Some scholars label this approach as the inductive approach to research [12, 13]. It begins with data collection first and then the initial results are compared to the literature before the subsequent process is followed.
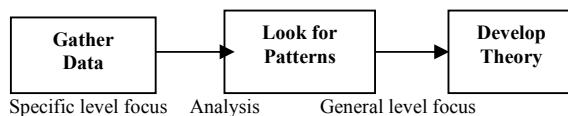
Fig. 2.   The Inductive Approach to Research

According to Ary et al., there are at least eight types of qualitative research for scholars to choose from (Table 1). For this study, the case study design seems appropriate as we want to focus on one sector which is the Islamic private colleges

and universities in Malaysia. There are 15 Islamic educational institutions in Peninsular Malaysia. Even though they are in the education sector, they are operating as business entities. We want to know how they are balancing the needs to do business and the needs to follow the rules of Islam as "Islamic learning organizations".

Table 1 Types of Qualitative Research

Type	Major Question
Basic interpretive studies	How are events, processes and activities perceived by the participant?
Case study	What are the characteristics of this individual, organization or group?
Document analysis	What can be learned about this by phenomenon studying certain documents?
Ethnography	What are the culture and perspectives of this group of people in its natural setting?
Grounded theory	What theory can be derived inductively about a phenomenon from the data collected in a particular setting?
Historical studies	What insights or conclusions can be reached about this past event?
Narrative inquiry	What insights and understandings about an issue emerge from examining life stories?
Phenomenological study	What does this experience mean for the participants in the experience?

Source: Ary et al. pp. 31

C. The Data Collection Method

Interview is a method of qualitative research in which the researcher asks open-ended questions orally and records the respondent's answers [11, 14]. Interview is typically done face-to-face, but it can also be done via telephone.

In-depth interviews are different from survey interviews in that they are less structured [11, 12, 13]. In survey interviews, the questionnaires are rigidly structured – the questions must all be asked in the same order, the same way, and only the pre-defined answer choices can be given.

In-depth qualitative interviews, on the other hand, are flexible and continuous [11, 12, 13]. They are not locked in stone and are often not prepared in advance.

In a qualitative interview, the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry, but he or she has no specific set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order. The interviewer must, however, be fully familiar with the subject, potential questions, and plan so that things proceed smoothly and naturally. Ideally, the respondent does most of the talking while the interviewer listens, takes notes, and guides the conversation in the direction it needs to go. For a doctoral study, however, scholars who plan to use "in-depth interviews" as their data collection method must prepare their interview protocol with a list of potential open-ended questions. Similar to the survey questionnaire, the questions in the interview need to be pilot tested [11, 12, 13, 14].

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper was prepared to assist the co-author to prepare for his doctoral study on the intended topic of "Islamic learning organization", a new phenomenon within the context of learning organization research. Being a new phenomenon, other researchers who have heard of the idea in various conferences that we have attended suggested that we consider the qualitative research design to explore. In line with the said suggestion, we have evaluated the research situation and the possible research design to follow. We have come to a decision that the proposed doctoral study will adopt the case study design using the in-depth interview as the data collection method combined with documentary analysis.

Acknowledgment

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