



Strategy for Strengthening Religious Moderation in Vocational Higher Education through Project-Based Learning

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Abstrak

Strengthening religious moderation is a strategic priority in Indonesian higher education, including vocational institutions that emphasize practical and workforce-oriented learning. However, the integration of religious moderation in vocational education is often limited to normative approaches and lacks effective pedagogical implementation. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in strengthening students' religious moderation attitudes in vocational higher education. This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design using a sequential explanatory strategy. The participants were 59 second-semester students from the D3 Electrical Engineering and Installation program. Quantitative data were collected using a religious moderation attitude scale and analyzed through paired-samples t-tests and ANCOVA. Qualitative data were obtained from reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, and analyzed thematically. The results indicate that students who participated in PBL-based Islamic Religious Education showed a statistically significant improvement in religious moderation attitudes compared to those who received conventional lecture-based instruction. Qualitative findings reveal that collaborative project work, exposure to diverse perspectives, and structured reflection played key roles in facilitating the internalization of moderation values. These findings suggest that Project-Based Learning is an effective and contextually relevant pedagogical strategy for strengthening religious moderation in vocational higher education, with implications for curriculum design and instructional practice.

Keywords: *Religious Moderation; Project-Based Learning; Vocational Higher Education; Islamic Education; Character Education*

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INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation has become an increasingly important concern in contemporary higher education, particularly in plural societies characterized by religious, cultural, and ideological diversity. In Indonesia, religious moderation is not merely a moral aspiration but a national educational agenda promoted to strengthen tolerance, social cohesion, and democratic citizenship among young adults (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019, p. 7). The urgency of this agenda is closely related to the growing challenges of intolerance, polarization, and exclusivist religious interpretations that may threaten social harmony if not addressed systematically through education (Nisa & Hidayah, 2021, p. 114).

Higher education institutions occupy a strategic position in promoting religious moderation, as they serve as critical spaces for identity formation, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement among emerging adults (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022, p. 216). At this level, students are not only expected to master disciplinary knowledge but also to develop social responsibility, openness to diversity, and the ability to engage constructively with difference. Consequently, universities and colleges are expected to play an active role in transforming moderation values into lived practices rather than merely transmitting them as abstract norms.

Despite strong policy commitments and institutional initiatives, the practical realization of religious moderation in higher education remains uneven. Many programs emphasize normative declarations, curriculum insertion, or symbolic activities without sufficient attention to how moderation values are pedagogically enacted in everyday learning processes (Suharto, 2022, p. 89). As a result, religious moderation is often articulated at the conceptual or policy level but insufficiently translated into students' lived learning experiences and behavioral dispositions (Wahyuningsih & Munawaroh, 2023, p. 249).

This challenge is particularly evident in vocational higher education. Vocational institutions prioritize applied skills, industry relevance, teamwork, and problem-solving competencies aligned with labor market needs (Sudira, 2018, p. 42). In such contexts, learning is oriented toward doing, producing, and solving concrete problems rather than abstract theorization. Consequently, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) courses are frequently perceived by students as supplementary or peripheral, rather than as integral components of their professional and personal development (Fauzi & Anwar, 2022, p. 134). Instructional practices in IRE courses within vocational settings often rely on conventional lecture-based approaches, which limit student engagement and hinder the internalization of religious values.

As a result, religious moderation in vocational education is often treated as a body of knowledge to be memorized rather than a value system to be practiced, negotiated, and reflected upon through authentic social interaction (Hidayatullah, 2020, p. 101). This condition is problematic, given that vocational students tend to demonstrate stronger engagement with learning activities that are contextual, collaborative, and practically meaningful (Sudira, 2018, p. 55). When moderation is taught primarily through transmissive methods, students may acquire conceptual understanding without developing the dispositions and skills necessary to enact moderation in real-life social and professional contexts.

Existing studies on religious moderation in higher education predominantly focus on descriptive analyses of students' attitudes, institutional policies, or curriculum documents (Nisa & Hidayah, 2021, p. 118; Ulum et al., 2025, p. 962). These studies provide important baseline insights into the state of moderation awareness and institutional commitment. However, they often stop short of examining pedagogical strategies that can actively shape students'

moderation attitudes through intentional instructional design and classroom practice (Rahman & Syaifuddin, 2023, p. 67). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how religious moderation can be fostered through concrete learning experiences, particularly in vocational education contexts.

Moreover, research on Islamic Religious Education in higher education continues to be dominated by transmissive learning models that prioritize doctrinal mastery over experiential engagement, reflective practice, and dialogical learning (Fauzi & Anwar, 2022, p. 136). Such approaches may be effective in conveying religious concepts but are less successful in cultivating ethical sensitivity, openness to diversity, and dialogical competence. This limitation is especially pronounced in vocational education, where learning cultures emphasize collaboration, problem-solving, and hands-on experience rather than passive reception of information (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022, p. 224).

In response to these limitations, educational research increasingly highlights the potential of student-centered pedagogies to foster holistic learning outcomes, including ethical awareness, social responsibility, and character development (Suryadi, 2021, p. 93). Among these approaches, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has gained prominence due to its grounding in constructivist and experiential learning theories, which position learners as active agents in the construction of knowledge and values through sustained inquiry, collaboration, and reflection (Thomas, 2020, p. 18).

Within vocational education, PBL has been widely implemented to enhance employability skills, teamwork, and problem-solving capacity (Wibowo & Prasetyo, 2022, p. 61). Empirical studies consistently show that PBL supports deeper learning, learner autonomy, and the integration of theory and practice. However, most of these studies focus on cognitive achievement, technical competence, or generic 21st-century skills. The intentional use of PBL as a pedagogical strategy for strengthening religious moderation, particularly in structured and measurable ways, remains underexplored (Ulum et al., 2025, p. 967).

Conceptually, religious moderation encompasses balanced religious understanding, respect for diversity, inclusivity, dialogical openness, and the rejection of extremism and violence (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019, p. 16). These dimensions align closely with the core principles of PBL, which emphasize collaboration, exposure to multiple perspectives, negotiation of meaning, and reflective evaluation of learning processes (Suryadi, 2021, p. 95). Through carefully designed projects addressing real social or ethical issues, PBL provides opportunities for students to encounter difference, manage disagreement, and practice moderation within concrete and meaningful contexts (Rahman & Syaifuddin, 2023, p. 71).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence demonstrating how PBL can be systematically designed and implemented to foster religious moderation, especially in vocational higher education, remains limited. Previous studies tend to discuss PBL and character education in general terms without explicitly linking project design, learning activities, and assessment strategies to specific dimensions of religious moderation (Wahyuningsih & Munawaroh, 2023, p. 252). As a result, the mechanisms through which PBL may contribute to the internalization of moderation values are not yet well understood.

Another critical gap in the literature concerns contextual specificity. Religious moderation is deeply shaped by socio-cultural, institutional, and pedagogical contexts (Ulum et al., 2025, p. 960). Pedagogical models developed for academic universities or religious seminaries may not be directly transferable to vocational institutions, where students prioritize practical relevance and immediate applicability (Sudira, 2018, p. 58). Therefore, strategies for

strengthening religious moderation must be context-sensitive, embedding values within experiential learning activities that resonate with vocational students' orientations and professional aspirations (Wahyuningsih & Munawaroh, 2023, p. 253).

Based on these considerations, this study proposes Project-Based Learning as a strategic pedagogical approach for strengthening religious moderation in vocational higher education. The study was conducted in the D3 Teknik Listrik dan Instalasi program, semester 2 of the 2024/2025 academic year, involving 59 students from two classes. Religious moderation values were embedded within collaborative projects that required students to engage with social diversity, ethical dilemmas, and real-world problem-solving scenarios relevant to their vocational field (Rahman & Syaifuddin, 2023, p. 69).

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework integrating social constructivism, experiential learning theory, and character education. Social constructivism emphasizes learning as a socially mediated process of meaning-making (Thomas, 2020, p. 21). Experiential learning highlights the role of concrete experience and reflective observation in internalizing values (Kolb, 2015, p. 51). Character education underscores the importance of intentional and structured learning experiences for moral development (Lickona, 2018, p. 44). Empirically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining quantitative pre–post analysis with qualitative data from student reflections and interviews to capture both outcomes and learning processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 67).

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to develop a pedagogically grounded PBL model for integrating religious moderation into vocational higher education, and (2) to empirically examine its impact on students' religious moderation attitudes. By doing so, the study contributes theoretically by linking moderation with experiential pedagogy, methodologically by offering an intervention-based mixed-methods approach, and practically by providing actionable guidance for educators in vocational institutions (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022, p. 227).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design employing a quasi-experimental approach with a sequential explanatory strategy. This design was selected to comprehensively examine both the quantitative effects of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on students' religious moderation attitudes and the qualitative processes through which these effects were formed and experienced. In sequential explanatory designs, quantitative data collection and analysis precede qualitative inquiry, enabling qualitative findings to elaborate and contextualize statistical results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, pp. 69–71).

The quantitative phase utilized a pretest–posttest control group quasi-experimental design. This approach was deemed appropriate due to institutional constraints that prevented random assignment of participants, a common condition in educational research involving intact classes. Quasi-experimental designs of this type allow for reasonable causal inference while maintaining ecological validity in real classroom settings (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 103). In this study, the experimental group received Islamic Religious Education instruction through a PBL-based learning strategy integrating religious moderation values, whereas the control group was taught using conventional lecture-based instruction, which remains prevalent in vocational higher education contexts (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022, p. 226).

The learning intervention was systematically designed according to established principles of Project-Based Learning, emphasizing sustained inquiry, collaboration, learner autonomy, and reflective practice. The PBL model implemented in this study followed four instructional phases: (1) problem identification, (2) project planning, (3) project implementation, and (4) reflection and evaluation. Each phase intentionally embedded values associated with religious moderation such as tolerance, inclusivity, balance, dialogical engagement, and respect for diversity within authentic, socially relevant project tasks (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2012, p. 319).

Quantitative data were collected using a religious moderation attitude scale developed based on contemporary moderation constructs and adapted to the vocational higher education context. The instrument measured dimensions including openness to diversity, rejection of extremism, dialogical attitudes, and social responsibility. Prior to implementation, the scale underwent reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency, and content validation through expert judgment to ensure construct relevance (DeVellis, 2017, pp. 102–104).

Qualitative data were gathered during the second phase of the study to explain and enrich the quantitative findings. Data sources included student reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations conducted throughout the intervention. These data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding, category development, and theme interpretation to capture students' lived experiences of religious moderation during collaborative project work (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87–88).

To enhance methodological rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed several validation strategies, including methodological triangulation, peer debriefing, and audit trails documenting instructional procedures and analytical decisions. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive understanding of both outcomes and mechanisms of the PBL intervention (Ulm et al., 2025, p. 964). Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation throughout the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 92).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A. Overview of the Project-Based Learning Implementation

The Project-Based Learning (PBL) intervention integrating religious moderation values was implemented over a 14-week semester in the experimental group. Students engaged in collaborative projects addressing authentic issues related to religious diversity, social harmony, and ethical decision-making within vocational and professional contexts. These projects required sustained inquiry, teamwork, and reflective discussion, aligning with core principles of PBL in values-oriented education (Bell, 2010, pp. 41–42).

Classroom observations revealed high levels of student engagement, active peer collaboration, and meaningful dialogue across project phases. Students demonstrated increasing autonomy in managing tasks and negotiating differing viewpoints, indicating a shift from passive learning toward participatory and reflective learning practices (Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016, p. 270).

Compared to the control group, which followed conventional lecture-based instruction, the experimental group exhibited more frequent peer interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective exchanges during classroom activities (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022, p. 224). These process-level findings provide contextual grounding for the quantitative and qualitative outcomes presented below.

B. Quantitative Results

At the pretest stage, mean scores of religious moderation attitudes between the experimental and control groups were statistically comparable, indicating equivalent baseline conditions. Following the instructional intervention, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in mean posttest scores, while the control group showed only minimal change. A paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group's religious moderation attitudes from pretest to posttest, accompanied by a moderate to large effect size, suggesting practical as well as statistical significance (Field, 2018, p. 345). In contrast, the control group did not exhibit a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores. Further analysis using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), with pretest scores as the covariate, indicated a significant main effect of instructional strategy on posttest religious moderation attitudes. These results confirm that the PBL-based instructional approach had a meaningful impact beyond initial group differences (Ulum et al., 2025, p. 964).

C. Qualitative Results

Qualitative data from student reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations were analyzed thematically. Three major themes emerged:

1. Increased Awareness of Religious Diversity

Students reported heightened awareness and understanding of religious diversity, particularly through collaborative engagement with peers holding different perspectives. Project discussions encouraged students to reconsider preconceived assumptions and appreciate pluralistic viewpoints (Banks, 2017, p. 89).

2. Development of Tolerant and Inclusive Attitudes

Many participants described a shift toward greater tolerance, openness, and inclusivity. Students noted that negotiating group decisions and resolving differences during project work fostered empathy and mutual respect, reinforcing moderation values in concrete learning situations (Kokotsaki et al., 2016, p. 272).

3. Reflective Internalization of Moderation Values

Structured reflection activities enabled students to internalize religious moderation values and relate them to future professional conduct. Reflection journals revealed students' growing ability to connect moderation principles with ethical responsibilities in vocational workplaces (Bell, 2010, p. 43).

D. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings complement and explain the quantitative results by illuminating the mechanisms through which PBL influenced students' religious moderation attitudes. Exposure to diverse perspectives, collaborative inquiry, and systematic reflection emerged as central factors contributing to observed improvements in moderation scores. This integration of findings strengthens the explanatory power of the study and aligns with best practices in mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 221; Ulum et al., 2025, p. 968).

Table 1.
Research Gap Analysis

Research Aspect	Findings from Previous Studies	Limitations / Gap	Contribution of This Study
Educational Context	Studies largely focus on academic universities or general higher education (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022; Ulum et al., 2025).	Limited evidence from vocational and technical programs.	Conducted in D3 Electrical Engineering and Installation, semester 2, involving 59 students from two classes.
Learning Strategy	PBL frequently examined for cognitive outcomes and soft skills (Bell, 2010; Kokotsaki et al., 2016).	Limited integration of religious moderation values into PBL.	Develops a PBL model explicitly embedding moderation values across all project phases.
Research Methodology	Many studies employ descriptive or correlational designs (Banks, 2017).	Lack of quasi-experimental and mixed-methods approaches.	Uses quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with quantitative–qualitative triangulation.
Measurement of Moderation	Moderation often measured via unvalidated self-report surveys (Afwadzi & Miski, 2022).	Limited reliability and validation procedures.	Applies a validated and reliability-tested moderation attitude scale.
Empirical Evidence	PBL linked to character education broadly (Bell, 2010).	Scarce empirical proof of PBL’s effect on religious moderation.	Provides statistical (t-test, ANCOVA) and qualitative evidence of effectiveness.

Discussion

A. Project-Based Learning as an Experiential Pathway to Religious Moderation

The quantitative findings indicate that PBL produced a meaningful enhancement in students’ religious moderation attitudes, as reflected in higher posttest scores and moderate-to-large effect sizes. From an experiential learning perspective, this outcome can be explained by the central role of concrete experience and reflective engagement in shaping attitudes and values. Experiential learning theory posits that learning becomes transformative when learners actively engage in meaningful experiences and subsequently reflect upon them to construct personal meaning (Kolb, 2015, pp. 49–51). In this study, projects addressing religious diversity, ethical dilemmas, and social harmony provided students with opportunities to experience moderation in practice, rather than merely learning about it conceptually. This experiential dimension distinguishes PBL from transmissive instructional models that often limit religious education to doctrinal understanding.

B. Social Constructivism and the Role of Collaborative Learning

Qualitative findings further reveal that collaborative learning played a central role in the internalization of moderation values. Students’ reflections highlighted how working in heterogeneous groups exposed them to diverse viewpoints, personal narratives, and interpretive frameworks related to religion and social life. These interactions encouraged students to reassess rigid assumptions and develop more dialogical and inclusive attitudes. This finding

aligns with social constructivist theory, which emphasizes that knowledge and values are constructed through social interaction and dialogue rather than individual cognition alone (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). PBL's collaborative structure created a social space where moderation values were negotiated, contested, and co-constructed, enabling students to move beyond binary or exclusionary perspectives.

C. Reflection as a Mechanism for Value Internalization

A key pedagogical mechanism identified in this study is structured reflection. Reflection activities, such as journals and guided discussions, enabled students to critically examine their emotional responses, interpersonal dynamics, and ethical considerations encountered during project work. Reflection functioned as a bridge between external experience and internal value formation, allowing students to consciously articulate and integrate moderation principles into their personal belief systems. Educational research consistently emphasizes that without reflection, experiential activities risk remaining superficial and task-oriented (Ryan & Ryan, 2013, p. 246). The findings of this study confirm that reflection is not an auxiliary component of PBL but a core process through which religious moderation becomes internalized rather than merely performed.

D. Contextual Relevance in Vocational Higher Education

The vocational higher education context significantly shaped the effectiveness of the PBL strategy. Vocational students often prioritize practical relevance and may perceive religious education as disconnected from professional aspirations. By embedding religious moderation values within authentic vocational and workplace-related scenarios, the PBL approach enhanced perceived relevance and student engagement. This contextualization aligns with research in vocational pedagogy, which stresses that value education becomes meaningful when linked to professional ethics, teamwork, and real-world problem-solving (Billett, 2011, pp. 34–36). Through this integration, religious moderation was reframed not as an abstract moral ideal but as a professional and social competency relevant to students' future workplaces.

E. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings corroborate prior research demonstrating the effectiveness of student-centered and experiential pedagogies in character and citizenship education (Banks, 2017, pp. 89–90). However, unlike most existing studies, which focus on general moral or civic outcomes, this study explicitly examines religious moderation as a distinct educational outcome within Islamic Religious Education and vocational higher education contexts. Empirical research addressing religious moderation through structured pedagogical interventions, particularly using quasi-experimental and mixed-methods designs, remains limited. In this respect, the present study extends the literature by providing methodologically robust evidence of PBL's effectiveness in strengthening moderation attitudes.

F. Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, this study contributes to the integration of experiential learning theory, social constructivism, and religious education, demonstrating how these frameworks can be operationalized through PBL to foster moderation values. The findings support the argument that religious moderation is best cultivated through situated, dialogical, and reflective learning experiences, rather than through normative instruction alone. Practically, the study offers a transferable pedagogical model for vocational higher education institutions. Educators can embed moderation values into existing PBL structures without compromising technical

learning objectives, thereby aligning religious education with vocational relevance and industry-oriented competencies.

G. Limitations and Interpretive Cautions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported attitude measures limit the generalizability of findings. Additionally, attitude change does not automatically translate into long-term behavior change. As noted by Ulum et al. (2025, p. 968), future research should incorporate behavioral indicators, longitudinal designs, and multi-institutional samples to examine the sustainability and transferability of moderation outcomes over time.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a pedagogical strategy for strengthening religious moderation attitudes among students in vocational higher education. Employing a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, the study provides empirical evidence that integrating religious moderation values into collaborative, experiential, and contextually relevant projects leads to significantly greater improvements in students' moderation attitudes compared to conventional lecture-based instruction. Quantitative findings demonstrated statistically significant gains in the experimental group, while qualitative evidence elucidated the learning processes through which these changes occurred.

Consistent with the results, the PBL approach enabled students to engage more deeply with issues of religious diversity, tolerance, inclusivity, and ethical reasoning through authentic project activities. Rather than positioning moderation as an abstract or doctrinal concept, PBL facilitated its enactment as a practical and socially negotiated disposition, shaped through sustained inquiry, peer interaction, and structured reflection. These findings affirm that moderation values are more effectively internalized when students actively experience and reflect upon them within meaningful learning contexts.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. First, it advances research on religious moderation by moving beyond descriptive or normative accounts toward a pedagogically grounded and empirically tested instructional model. By framing religious moderation as a lived and practiced value, the study highlights the central role of experiential learning, social interaction, and reflective processes in religious education. Second, the findings extend vocational education scholarship by demonstrating that character and values education can be effectively integrated into practice-oriented learning environments without undermining technical or professional learning objectives. Embedding moderation values within vocationally relevant projects enhanced students' engagement and perceived relevance, addressing a persistent challenge in Islamic Religious Education within vocational institutions.

From a practical standpoint, the findings indicate that Project-Based Learning provides a viable and scalable instructional framework for embedding religious moderation into vocational curricula. Lecturers can utilize PBL to design learning environments that promote dialogue, collaboration, ethical deliberation, and reflective inquiry, while institutions can support such pedagogical innovation through curriculum alignment, professional development, and assessment policies that value both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Importantly, the study underscores that the cultivation of religious moderation depends not solely on policy

discourse or curricular mandates, but on intentional pedagogical design and classroom-level practices.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single vocational institution and involved a relatively limited sample size, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the measurement of religious moderation relied primarily on self-reported attitudes, which may not fully capture the behavioral enactment of moderation values in real-life or professional contexts. Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt multi-institutional and longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of moderation outcomes over time. The inclusion of behavioral indicators, observational measures, or workplace-based assessments would further strengthen the empirical basis for evaluating the impact of PBL on religious moderation.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Project-Based Learning constitutes an effective and contextually appropriate pedagogical strategy for strengthening religious moderation in vocational higher education. By integrating experiential learning, collaborative engagement, and reflective practice, PBL enables students to develop religious moderation as a practical disposition that is relevant to both academic learning and future professional life. These findings provide a foundation for continued research and pedagogical innovation aimed at fostering inclusive, tolerant, and ethically grounded graduates within increasingly diverse educational and societal landscapes.

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