

EL-THORIA ART EXHIBITION: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING-BASED MODEL FOR DEVELOPING 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The development of twenty-first-century skills has become a major priority in education, requiring learning approaches that integrate critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs). Within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), these competencies need to be developed while preserving Islamic educational values. This study aimed to describe the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition based on Experiential Learning, examine its contribution to the development of santri's 21st-century skills, and identify the Islamic values reflected throughout the program. A descriptive qualitative field study was conducted at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Putri Campus 1 involving 29 purposively selected informants. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings indicate that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition was implemented through the stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle, providing authentic learning experiences in planning, artwork production, exhibition management, presentation, and reflection. These activities illustrated the development of critical thinking through collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, creativity through artwork design and innovation, communication through presentations and interactions with visitors, and collaboration through teamwork and shared responsibilities. The findings also revealed the internalization of Islamic values, including amanah (trustworthiness), responsibility, discipline, ta'awun (mutual cooperation), and leadership during the exhibition process. These findings suggest that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition represents an experiential learning practice that integrates the development of 21st-century skills with Islamic character education within the context of pesantren.

Keyword: Experiential Learning; Art Exhibition; 21st-Century Skills; Islamic Boarding School; Islamic Education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of science and technology has transformed educational demands, shifting the focus from knowledge acquisition to the development of competencies that enable learners to adapt

to social, cultural, economic, and technological changes (Ali & Emre, 2022; Zou et al., 2023; Khoiriyah & Sirozi, 2026). Among these competencies, 21st-century skills commonly represented by critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs) have become essential learning outcomes for preparing students to address increasingly complex global challenges (Bond et al., 2021; Martinez, 2022; Thornhill-Miller, 2023).

Despite their recognized importance, many students continue to demonstrate limited proficiency in the 4Cs. Previous studies report that learners often rely on memorization rather than critical analysis, experience difficulties in generating innovative ideas, have limited opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, and lack confidence in communicating their ideas effectively (Dilekçi & Karatay, 2023). Consequently, graduates may possess adequate theoretical knowledge while lacking practical competencies required in contemporary society (Hadiyanto et al., 2022). These conditions highlight the need for authentic learning experiences that actively engage students in solving real-world problems and developing the competencies required for the twenty-first century.

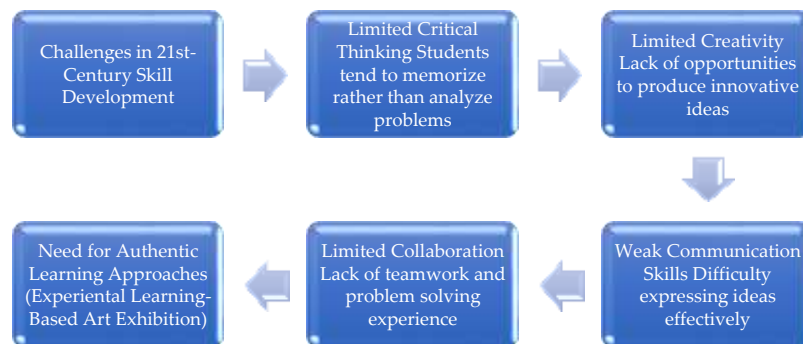


Figure 1. Data Problems Related to the Development of 21st-Century Skills in Education

Figure 1 illustrates the main challenges in developing 21st-century skills among students. These challenges indicate that conventional learning approaches are insufficient to provide authentic experiences required for developing critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. Therefore, innovative learning strategies that engage students in real-world activities are needed, particularly within Islamic boarding school environments where competency development must remain aligned with Islamic values.

The urgency of fostering 21st-century skills has intensified as digital technologies continue to transform the ways people learn, work, and interact (Jennifer Lock, Sawsen Lakhal, Martha Cleveland-Innes, Paula Arancibia, Debra Dell, 2021). Students are expected not only to comprehend information but also to analyze, evaluate, and develop creative solutions to various real-world problems (Mustaqim et al., 2024). Accordingly, educational systems should create meaningful learning experiences that encourage students to think critically, collaborate with others, communicate effectively, and cultivate creativity through authentic and engaging activities.

In the context of Islamic education, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have long played a significant role in shaping the character, morality, and spirituality of Muslim generations. For centuries, *pesantren* have served as centers of Islamic learning that instill religious values, independence, discipline, and responsibility among students (*santri*).

However, in the face of increasingly dynamic global developments, pesantren are also expected to equip their students with competencies that meet the demands of the twenty-first century while preserving their distinctive Islamic identity and values (Taufiq, 2026; Rochmat, 2022). This challenge calls for innovation in pesantren education that extends beyond cognitive and religious instruction to foster higher-order thinking skills and social competencies among santri (Sodikin et al., 2026).

One promising approach to developing 21st-century skills in pesantren is through experiential learning (Maimunah & Jannah, 2025). This approach provides students with opportunities to engage directly in planning, implementation, problem-solving, and reflective activities, thereby promoting the integrated development of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (Indrawati, 2025).

A particularly engaging form of project-based learning that can be implemented in pesantren is an Art Exhibition. The El-Thoria Art Exhibition is an educational program that provides students with a platform to showcase their creative works to the public (Fkip et al., 2025). Throughout its implementation, the exhibition emphasizes not only the final artistic products but also the entire learning process, including concept development, task distribution, artwork creation, promotional planning, event management, and presentations to visitors (Sa'diyin et al., 2022). These activities require the active participation of *santri* in a wide range of tasks that foster the development of 21st-century competencies (Farid, 2024).

Through participation in the Art Exhibition, santri have opportunities to cultivate creativity by producing innovative and aesthetically valuable works. They also develop communication skills by presenting their ideas and interacting with exhibition visitors. Furthermore, the program encourages teamwork, collaborative problem-solving, and collective decision-making throughout the preparation and implementation stages (Subakir et al., 2026). Therefore, the Art Exhibition serves not only as a platform for artistic appreciation but also as an authentic learning environment that holistically promotes the development of 21st-century skills.

Numerous studies have examined the development of 21st-century skills in educational settings. Research by Nurhayati et al. demonstrated that the 4C competencies are essential for addressing the challenges of twenty-first-century education and should be systematically integrated into teaching and learning processes (Education et al., 2024). Similarly, other studies have found that student-centered learning approaches that provide authentic and hands-on learning experiences are more effective in enhancing critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration than conventional instructional methods (Novia et al., 2024).

Furthermore, numerous studies have demonstrated that learning approaches that provide active, collaborative, and contextual learning experiences effectively support the development of students' 21st-century skills (Busnawir et al., 2025). Research in Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*) has also revealed that student-centered learning processes that actively engage learners contribute to the integrated development of

knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills (Soraya & Hamdani, 2024). Moreover, recent studies indicate that project-based activities and project-based assessment significantly strengthen 21st-century competencies within Islamic education (Sinaga, 2026).

Despite these findings, a review of previous studies indicates that most research has primarily focused on the development of the 4C competencies within classroom instruction or specific subject areas. Studies that specifically investigate Art Exhibitions as a medium for developing 21st-century skills in the context of pesantren education remain relatively limited. This is noteworthy because Art Exhibitions possess unique characteristics that facilitate the integration of creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving within an Islamic educational environment.

This research gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive investigation into the contribution of Art Exhibitions to the development of santri's 21st-century skills. In addition, examining Art Exhibitions in pesantren is important for understanding how Islamic values such as amanah (trustworthiness), responsibility, ta'awun (mutual cooperation), discipline, and creativity are internalized throughout the implementation of such activities. Consequently, this study extends beyond examining 21st-century competencies by exploring their integration with the distinctive characteristics and educational philosophy of *pesantren*.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition as a strategy for fostering 21st-century skills within the unique educational setting of an Islamic boarding school. Unlike previous studies, which have largely concentrated on project-based learning in formal school settings, this research positions the Art Exhibition as an authentic learning medium that integrates the development of the 4C competencies with the core values of Islamic education that characterize *pesantren*.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to (1) describe the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition within the *pesantren* environment; (2) analyze its contribution to enhancing *santri*'s 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration; and (3) identify the Islamic educational values that emerge throughout the planning and implementation of the exhibition. The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of innovative pesantren education that is responsive to the demands of the twenty-first century while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic educational values.

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a field research design. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its natural setting, where the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection (Fadli, 2021). Meanwhile, descriptive research aims to systematically and factually describe the conditions of the research object based on the realities observed in the field (Abdullah, 2024).

The research was conducted at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Putri Campus 1, where the El-Thoria Art Exhibition was organized. Data collection was carried out from May to June 2026 during the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of the exhibition. The researcher acted as a participant observer, directly engaging in the exhibition activities while observing participants' experiences and interactions. The research site was selected purposively because the pesantren actively promotes students' creativity through artistic activities and exhibitions, making it highly relevant to the focus of this study.

The study involved 29 participants who were directly involved in organizing and participating in the El-Thoria Art Exhibition. They consisted of one chief coordinator, three committee supervisors (DEMA), five committee members, and twenty participating santri. The participating santri were actively involved in planning, preparing, implementing, and evaluating the exhibition activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that identifies individuals with extensive knowledge, direct experience, and active involvement in the phenomenon under investigation, enabling them to provide rich and relevant information aligned with the objectives of the study (Latip et al., 2024). To obtain more in-depth information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five key informants, consisting of one DEMA supervisor, the chairperson of DEMA, the exhibition committee chairperson, and two participating santri who were purposively selected based on their active involvement and comprehensive understanding of the exhibition process.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted on three occasions during the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition, with each observation lasting approximately two hours. The observations focused on participants' interactions, collaborative activities, decision-making processes, and the overall implementation of the exhibition program across different stages of the exhibition. Semi-structured interviews were guided by an interview protocol developed based on the research objectives and the theoretical framework of experiential learning and 21st-century skills. The interview questions explored participants' roles, experiences, challenges, and perceived learning outcomes throughout the exhibition process. Documentation, including photographs, field notes, meeting minutes, and institutional archives, was used to complement and strengthen the research findings (Priatna et al., 2025).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validity was established through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from the chief coordinator, committee supervisors (DEMA), committee members, and participating santri. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing data gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure consistency and credibility. In addition, member checking was carried out with several informants to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts and interpretations, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sugiyono, 2023). Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives

of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate by providing informed consent. To protect participants' privacy, all informants were anonymized using identification codes throughout the interview transcripts and research report. The study was conducted with permission from the pesantren authorities and followed ethical principles for educational research, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the authorities of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Putri Campus 1. All participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate by providing informed consent. To protect participants' privacy, all informants were anonymized using identification codes throughout the interview transcripts and research report. The study adhered to the ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participants' rights.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were first transcribed, then organized, categorized, and coded according to the research objectives. The coding process involved identifying meaningful units of data, grouping similar concepts into categories, and developing themes that reflected the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition and its contribution to the development of 21st-century skills. Subsequently, the data were presented narratively to facilitate the identification of patterns, relationships among findings, and emerging meanings before conclusions were drawn and continuously verified throughout the analysis process.



Figure 2. Research Process Flowchart of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition Study

Figure 2 presents the research process conducted in this study. The research began with problem identification and site selection, followed by participant determination, data collection, data validation, and qualitative data analysis. This systematic process ensured that the findings regarding the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition and its contribution to students' 21st-century skills were obtained through a rigorous research procedure.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition Based on Experiential Learning in the Islamic Boarding School

The observation findings indicate that the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition was designed as an experiential learning activity that actively involved santri throughout the entire process, from planning to evaluation. The program began with the establishment of the organizing committee, followed by theme selection, artwork conceptualization, task distribution among committee divisions, artwork production, curation, exhibition layout design, exhibition implementation, and post-event reflection. These stages were carried out collaboratively, allowing participants to gain authentic learning experiences through direct involvement in each phase of the exhibition.

More specifically, during the first observation at the planning stage, the researcher observed the committee discussing the exhibition theme, distributing responsibilities among divisions, and identifying the materials and equipment required for the event. During the second observation at the implementation stage, committee members coordinated the arrangement of exhibition booths, prepared artworks, and adjusted several aspects of the exhibition layout according to conditions in the field. During the third observation at the evaluation stage, the committee and supervisors reviewed the implementation of the exhibition, identified challenges, and discussed possible improvements for future activities. These observations demonstrated that experiential learning occurred continuously through direct experience, problem-solving, collaborative action, and reflection.

Documentary evidence further supported these findings. Photographs showed students participating in planning meetings, preparing artworks, arranging exhibition booths, presenting their works to visitors, and attending post-event evaluation activities. The committee structure and task-distribution documents also indicated that responsibilities were divided among different divisions. In addition, meeting minutes and exhibition reports documented discussions concerning exhibition preparation, task coordination, implementation challenges, and post-event evaluation.



Figure 1. Stages of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition Based on Experiential Learning

Source: Researcher's Analysis (2026).

Figure 1 illustrates the implementation stages of the *El-Thoria Art Exhibition as an experiential learning process*. The program begins with planning, followed by preparation, practice and collaboration, performance, reflection, and culminates in skill development. Through these sequential stages, santri actively engage in authentic learning experiences that

foster critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4C), while strengthening responsibility, teamwork, and self-confidence.

The observations also revealed that supervisors did not dominate the learning process but acted as facilitators who provided guidance when necessary. Santri were given opportunities to determine exhibition concepts, manage assigned responsibilities, solve problems that emerged during preparation and implementation, and evaluate their group performance. Consequently, the exhibition created a student-centered learning environment in which participants learned through direct experience and reflection.

A supervisor explained:

"In the El-Thoria Art Exhibition, we evaluate not only the final artworks but also the entire process experienced by the students. They learn to design concepts, work in teams, overcome challenges, and take responsibility for their work. This learning process is an essential component of education in the pesantren." (Supervisor, S1)

The chairperson of the exhibition committee similarly explained that students were encouraged to manage their responsibilities independently while coordinating with other divisions:

"Each committee division was responsible for completing its assigned tasks while maintaining coordination with other divisions to ensure the exhibition ran smoothly." (Committee Chair, C1)

A committee member also described the experience of carrying out responsibilities within the organizing structure:

"Each committee member had specific responsibilities, and we regularly coordinated with other divisions to ensure that every stage of the exhibition was completed on schedule. Whenever problems arose, we discussed them together and agreed on the best solution." (Committee Member, M1)

One participating santri described the learning experience gained during the preparation stage:

"We learned many things during the preparation of the Art Exhibition. It was not only about creating artworks but also about discussing ideas, dividing responsibilities, and solving problems whenever difficulties arose." (Participant, P3)

Taken together, evidence from the supervisor, committee chairperson, committee member, participating santri, observations, and documentation demonstrates that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition functioned as an experiential learning activity. Participants learned not only by producing artistic works but also by planning activities, completing responsibilities, solving problems, coordinating with others, and reflecting on the results of their work.

Table 1. Implementation of Experiential Learning Stages in the El-Thoria Art Exhibition

Experiential Learning Stage	Implementation in the Art Exhibition
Concrete Experience	Students gained direct experience through conceptualizing, producing, and presenting artworks.
Reflective Observation	Students reflected on the implementation process, challenges, and outcomes together with the supervisors.
Abstract Conceptualization	Reflection results were transformed into new ideas, solutions, and improvement strategies.
Active Experimentation	These strategies were applied to improve subsequent exhibition activities.

Source: Researcher's Analysis (2026).

Table 1 shows how the stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle were implemented in the El-Thoria Art Exhibition. Students progressed from direct involvement in artistic and organizational activities to reflection, formulation of new insights, and application of improvement strategies. Therefore, the exhibition functioned as a continuous experiential learning cycle that supported students' cognitive, collaborative, and practical competencies.

Contribution of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition to the Development of 21st-Century Skills **Critical Thinking**

The observation findings revealed that students' critical-thinking skills were demonstrated throughout the planning and implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition. During the planning stage, participants analyzed exhibition requirements, considered possible themes, selected appropriate artworks, and identified the materials and equipment required. During the implementation stage, they encountered technical issues related to artwork placement, equipment availability, and exhibition layout. These conditions required students to identify problems, evaluate possible alternatives, and make collective decisions.

The committee chairperson explained:

"Whenever problems occurred, such as inappropriate artwork placement or insufficient equipment, we discussed them together to find the best solution. Supervisors only provided guidance when necessary." (Committee Chair, C1)

A committee member also explained how the committee evaluated possible solutions before taking action:

"When challenges arose, we did not make decisions immediately. We first identified the root cause of the problem, then discussed several alternative solutions before deciding on the most effective course of action." (Committee Member, M1)

Similarly, one participant described the process of reconsidering initial ideas:

"Before making decisions, we discussed several alternatives together. Sometimes our first idea did not work, so we had to evaluate it and agree on another solution." (Participant, P2)

The supervisor's perspective may also be included to strengthen the triangulation of interview sources:

"I observed that the students did not immediately ask the supervisors for solutions whenever they encountered difficulties. Instead, they first discussed the problem, analyzed its causes, and attempted to find their own solutions before consulting us." (Supervisor, S1)

These interview findings were supported by observational evidence. During the planning observation, students were seen discussing the suitability of exhibition concepts and considering the availability of materials. During the implementation observation, committee members evaluated artwork placement and modified the booth arrangement when the original layout did not fully meet exhibition needs. During the evaluation stage, participants identified difficulties encountered during the event and proposed possible improvements.

Documentary evidence also supported these findings. Meeting minutes recorded discussions about task distribution, equipment needs, and exhibition arrangements. Photographs showed committee members discussing the exhibition layout and repositioning artworks. The evaluation report also contained notes concerning implementation challenges and suggested improvements.

Taken together, evidence from the committee chairperson, committee member, participant, supervisor, observations, meeting minutes, photographs, and evaluation report

indicates that the exhibition provided authentic opportunities for students to analyze problems, evaluate alternatives, justify their opinions, and make collective decisions.

Creativity

Observation findings showed that students' creativity was demonstrated throughout the design and implementation of the exhibition. Participants were given opportunities to determine artistic concepts, select media, design exhibition booths, produce artworks, and develop presentation strategies. Limitations related to materials, preparation time, and exhibition space encouraged students to modify their initial ideas and use available resources creatively.

A supervisor explained:

"We allow students to develop their own artistic concepts according to their abilities. Our role is only to ensure that their work remains aligned with the exhibition theme and educational values." (Supervisor, S1)

The exhibition committee chairperson also described how students were given space to propose and develop creative ideas:

"From the beginning, we encouraged every committee member to share their ideas. All suggestions were discussed collectively, and the most suitable ones were selected and further developed into the exhibition concept." (Committee Chair, C1)

A committee member may provide a more practical perspective on how designs or materials were adapted:

"We revised the decoration design several times to accommodate the exhibition theme and the available materials. Despite these limitations, we continuously sought ways to ensure that the final outcome remained visually appealing and consistent with the agreed concept." (Committee Member, M2)

Similarly, one participant described the process of revising an initial design:

"Initially, our design was not satisfactory, so we discussed several alternatives and revised it to make it more attractive." (Participant, P2)

The observation data showed that students did not merely follow fixed instructions. They compared several design possibilities, adjusted display arrangements, and combined available materials to produce displays that remained consistent with the exhibition theme. When initial arrangements were considered less attractive or unsuitable for the available space, students discussed and implemented alternative designs.

Documentary evidence strengthened these findings. Photographs displayed variations in artwork, booth decorations, media, and presentation formats. Draft designs and exhibition-layout documents, when available, showed changes between initial concepts and final arrangements. The exhibition report also documented students' efforts to adapt their artistic concepts to available time, materials, and space.

Taken together, evidence from the supervisor, committee chairperson, committee member, participant, observations, photographs, design documents, and exhibition report

indicates that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition encouraged students to generate ideas, revise designs, adapt available resources, and express creativity through authentic artistic activities.

Communication

Observation findings showed that students' communication skills were demonstrated throughout the preparation and implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition. During preparation, students exchanged ideas, participated in committee meetings, coordinated responsibilities across divisions, and discussed solutions to misunderstandings. During the exhibition, they communicated directly with visitors by presenting artworks, explaining artistic concepts, and responding to questions.

The committee chairperson explained:

"Effective communication among committee members was essential to ensure that every stage of the exhibition was carried out according to the plan. Students were encouraged to express their ideas, coordinate with one another, and resolve misunderstandings through discussion."
(Committee Chair, C1)

A supervisor may strengthen this finding by describing changes in students' confidence or ability to communicate:

"I observed that the students' communication skills improved throughout the exhibition. They became more confident in explaining their work to visitors, expressing their opinions during discussions, and responding to questions more effectively." (Supervisor, S1)

A committee member also needs to be represented because committee communication occurred across divisions:

"Throughout the exhibition preparation, we continuously communicated with other divisions to ensure that information was conveyed clearly. Whenever misunderstandings occurred, we discussed them together so that the work could continue smoothly." (Committee Member, M1)

One participant explained how presenting artwork to visitors contributed to her confidence:

"Initially, I felt nervous when presenting my artwork to visitors. However, after practicing several times, I became much more confident." (Participant, P3)

The observation data showed that communication occurred in both organizational and public contexts. During preparation, committee members conveyed instructions, confirmed task completion, and coordinated with other divisions. During the exhibition, participating santri explained the meaning and production process of their artworks to visitors and responded to questions. At the evaluation stage, participants expressed opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the activity.

Documentary evidence included photographs of students participating in discussions, coordinating exhibition activities, presenting artworks, and interacting with visitors. The exhibition schedule and task-distribution documents also showed the assignment of presentation and visitor-service responsibilities. When available, meeting minutes may also be used to demonstrate that ideas and implementation problems were discussed collectively.

Taken together, evidence from the committee chairperson, supervisor, committee member, participant, observations, photographs, meeting minutes, and exhibition documents

indicates that the exhibition provided authentic opportunities for students to develop interpersonal, organizational, and public communication skills.

Collaboration

Observation findings indicated that collaboration was demonstrated throughout the planning, preparation, implementation, and evaluation stages of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition. Students worked in committees with clearly defined responsibilities, coordinated tasks across divisions, and assisted one another in completing exhibition activities. Collaboration was visible during artwork preparation, booth arrangement, equipment management, visitor services, and post-event evaluation.

The committee chairperson explained:

"This event could not succeed if each division worked independently. We had to coordinate continuously, help one another whenever problems emerged, and complete every task together."
(Committee Chair, C1)

A supervisor also needs to be included to explain how collaboration was observed and guided:

"I observed that the students worked well together throughout the preparation and implementation of the exhibition. They shared responsibilities, assisted members of other divisions when needed, and made consistent efforts to complete every task as a team." (Supervisor, S1)

A committee member may provide direct evidence of collaboration in carrying out practical responsibilities:

"Although each division had its own responsibilities, we helped one another whenever another division needed support. By working together and sharing responsibilities, we were able to overcome challenges and keep the exhibition preparations on schedule." (Committee Member, M2)

A participating santri may describe how collaboration affected the completion of the exhibition:

"Throughout the exhibition, we helped one another in preparing and completing each activity. Whenever a friend encountered difficulties, we worked together to find solutions so that every task could be completed successfully." (Participant, P1)

The observational evidence showed that committee members did not work solely within their respective divisions. During preparation and implementation, students assisted other groups when particular tasks required additional support. Members coordinated the movement of artworks and equipment, arranged booths together, and responded collectively when implementation problems emerged. During the evaluation stage, they jointly discussed the contribution of each division and identified areas requiring improvement.

Documentary evidence further supported these findings. The committee structure and task-distribution documents showed the allocation of responsibilities across divisions, while photographs showed students working together in preparing booths, arranging artworks, managing visitors, and completing post-event activities. Meeting minutes and evaluation reports also documented coordination among divisions and collective discussions of implementation challenges.

Taken together, evidence from the committee chairperson, supervisor, committee member, participating santri, observations, organizational documents, photographs, meeting minutes, and evaluation reports indicates that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition provided authentic opportunities for students to develop collaboration through teamwork, shared responsibility, cross-divisional coordination, mutual assistance, and collective problem-solving.

Table 2. Development of 21st-Century Skills through the El-Thoria Art Exhibition

Skill	Research Findings
Critical Thinking	Students analyzed exhibition themes, identified logistical constraints, evaluated alternative solutions, and made collective decisions during committee meetings.
Creativity	Students designed exhibition concepts, produced artworks using available materials, and modified display strategies according to exhibition conditions.
Communication	Students presented artworks to visitors, explained artistic concepts, and coordinated with committee members during the exhibition.
Collaboration	Students worked across committee divisions, coordinated exhibition preparation, shared responsibilities, and resolved implementation problems collectively.

Source: Researcher's Analysis (2026).

Table 2 summarizes the contribution of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition to the development of students' 21st-century competencies. The findings indicate that creativity and collaboration appeared more prominently because students were continuously involved in producing artworks, designing displays, and completing tasks in teams. Communication developed through committee coordination, group discussions, artwork presentations, and interaction with visitors. Critical thinking was particularly demonstrated when students encountered technical or organizational problems that required them to analyze conditions, compare alternatives, and make collective decisions. Therefore, the four competencies developed through different forms and intensities of participation rather than emerging to the same extent.

DISCUSSION

Experiential Learning Through the El-Thoria Art Exhibition

The findings indicate that the implementation of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition reflects the four stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students acquired authentic experiences through direct participation in exhibition planning, artwork production, evaluation, and reflection. These experiences enabled them to construct knowledge through active engagement rather than passive instruction, consistent with Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory.

More specifically, each stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle contributed to different aspects of students' competency development. Concrete experience primarily fostered communication and collaboration because students interacted directly while organizing the exhibition, negotiating responsibilities, and presenting artworks to visitors. Reflective observation promoted critical thinking as students evaluated implementation challenges, discussed alternative solutions, and reflected on their performance during evaluation sessions. Abstract conceptualization stimulated creativity by encouraging students to transform reflective insights into new exhibition concepts, artistic designs, and improvement strategies. Finally, active experimentation strengthened collaboration and adaptive problem-solving as students implemented revised ideas, tested alternative approaches, and continuously refined the exhibition process. These findings demonstrate that each experiential learning stage supported different competencies rather than contributing equally to all four 21st-century skills.

These findings support those of Apriliana et al. (2022), who reported that experiential learning in Islamic education enhances student engagement through authentic experiences accompanied by systematic reflection. Likewise, Farid et al. (2024) concluded that experiential learning within pesantren effectively develops students' competencies by connecting learning with real-life situations.

Unlike previous studies, which mainly examined experiential learning in formal classroom settings, the present study demonstrates that the experiential learning cycle can also be effectively implemented through extracurricular artistic activities in an Islamic boarding school. Rather than focusing solely on academic achievement, the El-Thoria Art Exhibition enabled students to integrate artistic creativity, organizational responsibility, collaboration, and Islamic values within authentic learning situations. This finding expands previous studies by illustrating how experiential learning can be adapted to the pesantren context while simultaneously promoting both educational and character development.

Although the art exhibition provided valuable learning experiences, several challenges were identified during its implementation. These included limited preparation time and an insufficient number of committee members to manage the exhibition effectively. Nevertheless, these challenges served as meaningful learning opportunities, encouraging students to negotiate, collaborate, and develop solutions collectively.

These findings suggest that implementation challenges did not hinder the experiential learning process; instead, they became part of students' learning experiences by encouraging reflection, collaboration, and adaptive problem-solving. Despite these positive outcomes, not all aspects of the exhibition were implemented optimally. Several planned activities had to be simplified because of limited preparation time and the availability of committee members. In addition, some students initially experienced difficulties coordinating responsibilities across committee divisions and balancing exhibition preparation with their regular academic activities. These findings indicate that experiential learning within the pesantren context

remains influenced by organizational and time-related constraints that may reduce the effectiveness of certain learning experiences.

The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating that an Art Exhibition can function as an experiential learning model that integrates authentic learning, Islamic character education, and the development of 21st-century competencies within the pesantren context.

Development of 21st-Century Skills

The findings demonstrate that participation in the El-Thoria Art Exhibition contributed significantly to the development of the four core competencies of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21).

Students' critical thinking developed through collaborative decision-making and authentic problem-solving. Creativity emerged through artistic design and innovation. Communication skills improved through presentations and interactions with visitors, while collaboration was strengthened through teamwork, shared responsibilities, and collective task completion.

These findings are consistent with previous studies (Artama et al., 2023; Sodikin et al., 2025), which found that project-based learning effectively develops 21st-century competencies. However, unlike previous research conducted primarily in formal classroom settings, this study demonstrates that an Art Exhibition within a pesantren provides a more authentic environment where the four competencies develop simultaneously alongside Islamic educational values. This finding extends previous research by showing that experiential learning can be effectively implemented in non-classroom settings while simultaneously fostering students' competencies and character development.

The participants also experienced the exhibition differently according to their respective roles. Committee chairpersons and committee members reported greater learning experiences related to leadership, coordination, and decision-making because they were directly responsible for organizing exhibition activities. In contrast, participating santri emphasized creativity, communication, and self-confidence gained through artwork preparation and presentation. Supervisors primarily observed students' increasing independence, responsibility, and ability to solve problems collaboratively. These differences indicate that experiential learning outcomes varied according to participants' responsibilities and levels of involvement in the exhibition.

The findings further suggest that the four competencies did not develop to the same extent. Collaboration and creativity emerged more prominently because students continuously worked in teams to design artworks, prepare exhibition displays, and coordinate committee responsibilities. In contrast, communication and critical thinking became more evident during planning meetings, presentations, discussions, and evaluation sessions. This variation reflects the different learning opportunities provided throughout each stage of the experiential learning cycle and the differing responsibilities assigned to participants during the exhibition.

Implications for Islamic Boarding School Education

The findings suggest that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition has important implications for educational innovation in *pesantren*. Beyond functioning as an artistic exhibition, it serves as a meaningful experiential learning model that integrates the development of 21st-century competencies with Islamic values such as amanah (trustworthiness), responsibility, discipline, ta'awun (mutual cooperation), leadership, and accountability. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing that *pesantren* education continues to develop through innovative educational approaches while maintaining its Islamic identity and character (Rochmat, 2022).

However, the successful implementation of this experiential learning model requires adequate institutional support, sufficient preparation time, effective supervision, and opportunities for structured reflection. These conditions enable students to participate actively in each stage of the learning process and maximize the educational value of the exhibition. Without such support, the experiential learning process may not achieve its intended educational outcomes.

A supervisor emphasized this educational impact:

"Students do not merely learn theoretical knowledge; they learn through direct practice. Besides producing artworks, they develop teamwork, responsibility, and the confidence to communicate their ideas."

These findings indicate that experiential learning through the El-Thoria Art Exhibition contributes not only to students' competence development but also to the transformation of *pesantren* education into a learning environment that is innovative, contextual, and responsive to the demands of the twenty-first century while preserving its distinctive Islamic educational identity.



Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition's Contribution to the Development of Islamic Boarding School Education

Source: Researcher's Analysis (2026).

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework of the El-Thoria Art Exhibition as an experiential learning-based educational activity in Islamic boarding schools. The model demonstrates the relationship between the stages of exhibition implementation, the development of 21st-century skills (critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration), and the strengthening

of Islamic educational values, including responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and leadership.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the El-Thoria Art Exhibition represents an experiential learning practice within the *pesantren* context that actively engages *santri* in planning, implementing, reflecting on, and evaluating exhibition activities. Participation in the exhibition provided authentic learning experiences that contributed to the development of 21st-century competencies, particularly critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs). The exhibition also supported the internalization of Islamic values, including *amanah* (trustworthiness), *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation), discipline, responsibility, and leadership, demonstrating that experiential learning can be integrated with Islamic character education in *pesantren*.

This study was conducted in a single Islamic boarding school using a qualitative approach; therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this context. Future research is recommended to involve multiple *pesantren* and employ mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to examine the implementation of experiential learning-based art exhibitions across different educational settings and explore their contribution to students' competencies and character development over time.

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