

THE INFLUENCE OF STRUCTURED DEBATE METHOD  
ON STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND  
UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAMIC CREED IN THE STUDY  
OF *AHLUSUNNAH WAL JAMAAH*

M. Ali Karmani & Ahmad Gozali

STIT Palapa Nusantara Lombok NTB, Indonesia  
karmaniali07@gmail.com; ahmadgozalistitpn@gmail.com

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Abstract

The integration of the structured debate method in Islamic theology education remains underexplored, despite its potential to enhance students' critical thinking and deepen their understanding of Islamic creed, particularly within the *Ablusunnah wal Jamaah* (Aswaja) framework. This study aimed to examine the impact of the structured debate method on (1) students' critical thinking skills and (2) their comprehension of Islamic creed (*Aqidah*) among second-semester students in the Islamic Education Management Program at STIT Palapa Nusantara. Utilizing a quantitative approach with a pre-experimental design (one-group pre-test and post-test), the study involved 35 purposively selected students. Data were gathered through structured questionnaires and analyzed using paired sample *t*-tests and correlation analysis. The findings indicate that the structured debate method significantly improved students' critical thinking skills ( $p < 0.05$ ) and positively influenced their understanding of the Aswaja creed. These results align with constructivist pedagogical theory, emphasizing the role of interactive learning in promoting cognitive engagement and theological internalization. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse in Islamic education and offers practical guidance for educators and institutions to incorporate structured debate as a strategy to enhance students' intellectual and spiritual development. Further research is

recommended to assess the long-term effects and broader applicability of this method across other areas of Islamic studies.

**Keywords:** Structured Debate; Critical Thinking; Islamic Creed; Aswaja; Islamic Education

## INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and rapid technological advancement, the world of education faces significant challenges in instilling religious values, particularly in the teaching of Aqidah (Islamic creed). The transformation of Islamic religious education requires a renewal of teaching methods that are more interactive, inclusive, and tailored to the needs of learners. One approach that has gained considerable attention and is deemed effective in addressing these challenges is the debate method.

The debate method provides students with opportunities to explore diverse perspectives, sharpen their argumentative skills, and solve problems critically. During debates, students are challenged to defend their positions using strong evidence and logic, which directly enhances their analytical abilities, communication skills, and self-confidence (Walenta & Nofirman 2024). This method represents an active learning strategy that engages students not only cognitively but also socially and emotionally.

As explained by Nurcahyo in the Handbook Panduan Debat Bahasa Indonesia, debate is a structured clash of arguments aimed at exploring the reasoning behind various viewpoints (Widarmana, et al., 2015). Therefore, discipline is essential in conducting debates, including the ability to manage time effectively—referred to as a "sense of time," which is the debater's intuitive ability to distinguish brief time intervals, such as 30 seconds and 1 minute, without any tools (Hendi Pratama et al., 2018).

The debate method has been proven to be an innovative learning strategy capable of enhancing both the understanding and practice of moral values. Fitri et al., (2025) assert that this method helps develop students' critical thinking and argumentative skills while increasing their active participation in class. The implementation steps of the debate method include: (1) selecting relevant topics, such as the impact of social media on students' morality; (2) dividing students into pro and contra teams; (3) preparing arguments based on data and logic; (4) conducting the debate and Q&A sessions; (5) providing

teacher feedback; and (6) joint reflection to evaluate the effectiveness of debate in learning (Fitri et al., 2025).

Furthermore, debate encourages students to think logically, clearly, and structurally; to practice listening to differing opinions; and to develop a critical stance towards various theories (Revitasari and Nurlizawati 2024). This activity plays a role not only in academic achievement but also in enhancing students' overall learning outcomes (Tarmizi Ninoersy 2020). Thus, debate becomes a strategic method to foster character development and life skills.

One of the essential competencies in 21st-century education is critical thinking. Wijaya (2020) notes that this skill is crucial in solving real-life problems. Critical thinking is not merely an innate ability; it can be cultivated through structured learning processes. The goal is not only academic improvement but also personal development (Elsabrina et al., 2022) as critical thinking directly impacts everyday decision-making (Syafitri et al. 2021).

In the context of Aqidah learning, the debate method is highly relevant because the subject matter involves not only cognitive elements but also belief and morality. Aqidah generally refers to a deep and correct belief in Islamic teachings (Wahyudi, 2017). A central theme in Aqidah Akhlak is the understanding of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja), an Islamic theological school based on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the views of the majority of scholars (Taufiq et al., 2020).

A sound understanding of Aswaja is vital for preserving the purity of Islamic teachings and reinforcing the principle of moderation in religious life (Harifah and Sofa, 2025). However, modern challenges such as the rise of extremist ideologies, misinformation about religion, and low Islamic literacy among youth can hinder this understanding (Maulidya and Sofa, 2025). Hence, a systematic and contextual approach is needed in teaching Aswaja theology, especially in Islamic educational institutions (Harifah and Sofa, 2025).

This study aims to examine primary Islamic sources and modern academic literature to explore how the teachings of Aswaja can be effectively applied in daily life (Firdausiyah, 2025). Accordingly, the debate method is viewed as a strategic approach to foster critical reasoning while strengthening the understanding and internalization of Aqidah teachings.

Various previous studies have shown that the debate method effectively enhances students' critical thinking skills. Ma'rufah (2022) found a significant improvement in

students' reasoning abilities in the subject of Islamic Cultural History through debate, supported by statistical analysis. (Sianturi et al. (2024) also recorded significant increases in elementary students' critical thinking skills in civics education using debate, as reflected in post-test scores and active participation. Meanwhile, Nahildah (2024) emphasized the effectiveness of discussions in Aqidah Akhlak learning in junior high schools, highlighting the importance of interactive approaches. Pasaribu et al. (2025) underlined the relevance of the debate method in Islamic Religious Education to deepen the understanding of religious values through communication theory and active learning.

This research addresses the existing gap by applying a structured debate method in Aqidah learning with a focus on Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah teachings. Unlike previous studies that emphasized rhetoric and general communication, this study investigates the connection between debate methods and two crucial aspects: critical thinking and theological understanding. This is supported by a constructivist pedagogical approach, which is believed to empower students' thinking abilities. Constructivism encourages students to discover and construct knowledge independently Anggraeni et al., (2016), along with the principles of educative communication in Islamic religious education (Fitri et al., 2025).

The objective of this research are: (1) To examine the influence of the structured debate method on the critical thinking skills of second-semester students in the Islamic Education Management Study Program at STIT Palapa Nusantara; (2) To investigate the effect of the structured debate method on students' understanding of Islamic creed (Aqidah) within the framework of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah; and (3) To contribute to the development of effective and applicable learning strategies in Islamic higher education through the implementation of structured debate methods. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and applicable learning strategies in Islamic higher education.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a quantitative approach with an associative research design, aiming to examine the influence of the structured debate method on students' critical thinking skills and their understanding of Islamic creed (Aqidah) in the context of Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah. In line with the characteristics of quantitative research, this

approach seeks to identify generalizable patterns through objective measurement. Researchers typically rely on precise numerical data and employ statistical tools, sampling techniques, randomization, and standardized instruments such as structured questionnaires with limited, predetermined responses, all within a value-neutral framework.(Sedhai 2024)

The research used a pre-experimental design, specifically the one-group pre-test and post-test model. This design involved administering a test before and after the treatment—in this case, the implementation of structured debate—to determine the impact of the intervention on the dependent variables. Although this model includes both pre-test and post-test to improve the accuracy of results through comparison, it lacks a control group. Consequently, external variables may also influence the dependent variable, meaning that any observed changes cannot be attributed solely to the independent variable.(Yana and Damayanti 2018)

The research was conducted from March to May 2025. The population in this study comprised 42 second-semester students enrolled in the Islamic Education Management Program at STIT Palapa Nusantara. A total of 35 students were selected as the sample using a purposive sampling technique. The selection was based on the students' enrollment in the Aqidah course and their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

Two instruments were used to collect data: (1) Critical Thinking Skills Test: This test was developed based on Ennis's critical thinking framework and assessed skills such as analysis, inference, evaluation, and explanation; and (2) Islamic Creed Understanding Test: This test consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer items designed to measure students' understanding of the principles of Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah.

Data collection was carried out in two stages: (1) A pre-test was administered prior to the implementation of the structured debate method; and (2) A post-test was conducted following the completion of four structured debate sessions that were integrated into the classroom learning process.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to describe student performance, and inferential statistics to evaluate the significance of the treatment. A paired sample t-test was employed to compare the results of the pre-test and post-test, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  was used. Additionally, Cohen's d was calculated to determine

the effect size of the intervention on both critical thinking skills and understanding of Islamic creed.

## RESULTS

### 1. Improvement in Critical Thinking Skills

The analysis of pre-test and post-test scores revealed a significant improvement in students' critical thinking skills following the implementation of the structured debate method. As shown in Table 1, the mean score for critical thinking increased from 61.20 (SD = 6.45) in the pre-test to 79.31 (SD = 5.98) in the post-test, indicating substantial progress.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Critical Thinking Skills**

Measurement	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Pre-Test	61.20	6.45
Post-Test	79.31	5.98

Table 1 provides descriptive statistical data on students' critical thinking skills as measured before and after the implementation of the structured debate method. The pre-test mean score was 61.20, with a standard deviation of 6.45, indicating that, on average, students demonstrated a moderate level of critical thinking ability prior to the intervention, with some variability among individual scores. Following the application of the structured debate method in the learning process, the post-test mean score increased significantly to 79.31, accompanied by a slightly lower standard deviation of 5.98, suggesting not only a marked improvement in students' overall critical thinking performance but also a relatively more consistent outcome across the group. This increase in the mean score from pre-test to post-test reflects the positive influence of the structured debate method on enhancing students' critical thinking skills.

### 2. Enhancement of Understanding in Islamic Creed (Aqidah)

Similarly, students' understanding of Islamic creed (Aqidah) also improved notably. As presented in Table 2, the average score increased from 63.77 (SD = 7.32) to 81.15 (SD = 6.09) after structured debate sessions were introduced.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Understanding of Islamic Creed (Aqidah)**

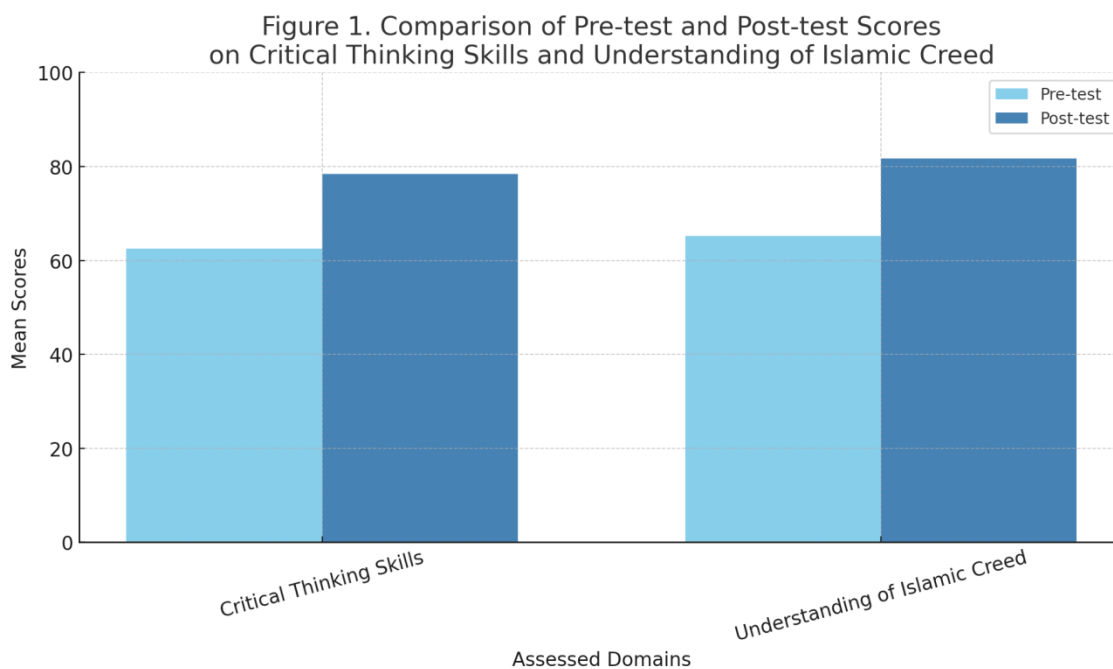
Measurement	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Pre-Test	63.77	7.32
Post-Test	81.15	6.09

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics regarding students' understanding of Islamic Creed (Aqidah) before and after the implementation of the structured debate method. The mean score of the pre-test was 63.77, with a standard deviation of 7.32. This suggests that students, on average, had a relatively moderate understanding of Islamic Creed prior to the intervention, and there was a noticeable degree of variation among individual students' performance. After students engaged in the learning process that incorporated the structured debate method, the mean score of the post-test increased to 81.15, with a reduced standard deviation of 6.09. This significant improvement in the average score indicates that students' conceptual grasp of Islamic Creed became substantially stronger following the use of structured debates in instruction. Furthermore, the decrease in standard deviation reflects a more uniform level of understanding among the students, meaning the majority of students reached a higher and more consistent level of achievement.

### 3. Statistical Significance and Effect Size

A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine the statistical significance of the differences observed. For critical thinking skills, the result was  $t(34) = -13.72, p < 0.001$ , indicating a highly significant improvement. For Aqidah understanding, the result was  $t(34) = -12.84, p < 0.001$ , confirming a similar significant gain.

To assess the magnitude of the intervention's impact, Cohen's *d* was calculated. The effect size for critical thinking was  $d = 2.15$ , and for Aqidah understanding,  $d = 2.03$ —both of which indicate a large effect according to Cohen's benchmarks.



**Figure 1. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores in Critical Thinking Skills and Islamic Creed (Aqidah) Understanding**

This figure illustrates the improvement in students’ performance across two assessed domains—critical thinking skills and understanding of Islamic creed—before and after the implementation of the structured debate method. The data shows a noticeable increase in mean scores in both domains, indicating the potential effectiveness of structured debate as a learning strategy in Islamic higher education.

**4. Outlier Cases and Anomalous Data**

Although the overall results were positive, analysis revealed that 3 out of the 35 participants did not demonstrate significant improvement in their post-test scores. These anomalies provide insights into the nuanced factors affecting learning outcomes:

- a. Participant P14 (Male, 20 years) displayed minimal change in both assessments. Follow-up interviews revealed that this participant had limited participation in the debate sessions due to ongoing health issues, which likely affected his performance.
- b. Participant P06 (Female, 19 years) showed a slight improvement in critical thinking but no change in Aqidah understanding. She reported difficulties adapting to the debate format, which may have hindered her engagement with the material.

- c. Participant P10 (Female, 20 years) exhibited no measurable progress in critical thinking skills, despite a modest increase in her Aqidah understanding score. Observational data indicated that she played a passive role during discussions, which may have limited the cognitive stimulation necessary for deeper thinking.

These exceptions underscore the variability in individual learning experiences and highlight the importance of active engagement, health, and learning styles in the successful implementation of structured debate as a pedagogical approach.

## 5. Contribution to Pedagogical Strategies in Islamic Higher Education

Overall, the data supports the effectiveness of the structured debate method in enhancing students' critical thinking skills and deepening their understanding of Aqidah in alignment with the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah framework. The combination of statistically significant improvements and substantial effect sizes suggests that structured debate is a powerful and applicable learning strategy for Islamic higher education settings.

By integrating cognitive rigor with theological comprehension, this method holds promise for cultivating intellectually engaged and doctrinally grounded graduates in the field of Islamic Education Management.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Analysis of Results

#### a. Influence on Critical Thinking Skills

Addressing the first research objective—to examine the influence of the structured debate method on students' critical thinking skills—the results indicate a marked improvement. The pre-test mean score of 61.20 increased significantly to 79.31 in the post-test, with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 2.15$ ). This suggests that structured debate sessions provided a cognitively stimulating environment that encouraged analytical reasoning, evaluative judgment, and reflective thinking—core components of critical thinking.

Debate requires students to actively listen, construct arguments, anticipate counter-arguments, and articulate responses clearly and logically. These practices align with the theoretical underpinnings of critical thinking and explain the substantial gains observed. The statistically significant results ( $t(34) = -13.72, p < 0.001$ ) confirm the method's

effectiveness and its potential for broader application in other cognitively demanding subjects.

This finding supports the assertion by Wijaya (2020) that critical thinking is a vital 21st-century skill necessary for solving real-life problems, and it is not merely innate but can be cultivated through structured learning. As Syafitri et al. (2021) emphasize, critical thinking influences everyday decision-making, making it essential not only for academic success but for life competence. Moreover, Walenta & Nofirman (2024) highlight that debate directly enhances students' analytical abilities, communication skills, and self-confidence by encouraging them to defend their positions with strong evidence and logical reasoning.

b. Effect on Understanding of Islamic Creed (Aqidah)

In relation to the second objective—to investigate the effect of the structured debate method on students' understanding of Islamic creed (Aqidah) within the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah framework—the study also found substantial gains. The average score rose from 63.77 to 81.15 post-intervention, with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 2.03$ ). This reinforces the idea that structured debates not only foster critical inquiry but also enhance theological understanding.

Through structured debates, students were encouraged to explore, compare, and defend doctrinal principles, thereby deepening their comprehension of key Aqidah concepts. This approach appears to facilitate meaningful engagement with theological content, transforming abstract beliefs into intellectually processed knowledge.

The effectiveness of debate in Aqidah learning is corroborated by Wahyudi (2017), who defines Aqidah as a deep and correct belief in Islamic teachings. A proper understanding of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja) is essential for maintaining theological integrity and promoting moderation in religious practice, as highlighted by Taufiq et al., (2020) and (Harifah and Sofa, 2025)

c. Contribution to Effective Learning Strategies in Islamic Higher Education

The third objective focused on contributing to the development of effective and applicable learning strategies. The empirical results affirm that structured debate is a highly beneficial pedagogical approach. The method fosters a learning environment where intellectual rigor and doctrinal understanding intersect, encouraging both critical thought

and spiritual depth. This dual impact highlights structured debate as a viable, replicable model for enhancing both cognitive and affective domains in Islamic education.

This is in line with Fitri et al. (2025), who assert that debate enhances students' critical and argumentative skills while also increasing classroom participation. The structured implementation-including topic selection, team division, argument preparation, debate execution, feedback, and reflection-demonstrates the method's pedagogical strength.

## **2. Comparison with Previous Literature**

The findings are consistent with prior studies affirming the role of debate in improving critical thinking. Ma'rufah (2022) found that debate significantly enhanced students' reasoning in Islamic Cultural History. Similarly, Sianturi et al. (2024) demonstrated improvement in elementary students' civics critical thinking through structured debate formats. In Islamic Religious Education, Pasaribu et al. (2025) highlighted the effectiveness of debate in strengthening understanding through communicative learning, while Nahildah (2024) emphasized the benefits of interactive learning for Aqidah Akhlak.

In alignment with these studies, this research extends the discussion by specifically exploring the context of Aqidah Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah, demonstrating that debate not only hones logic and reasoning but also deepens students' understanding of essential Islamic creeds. It further supports the constructivist view that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction and engagement with content (Anggraeni et al., 2016).

## **3. Implications**

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. Theoretically, the study contributes to the pedagogical discourse on Islamic education by validating structured debate as an effective learning model to meet 21st-century educational goals. Practically, it offers educators a viable strategy for teaching complex religious concepts in a way that promotes student autonomy, reasoning, and ethical development. This is particularly significant for institutions aiming to balance doctrinal fidelity with modern pedagogical approaches.

Moreover, structured debate serves not only academic goals but also character development by cultivating respectful dialogue, active listening, and tolerance of differing opinions-qualities that are essential in building a moderate and inclusive Islamic worldview, as championed by Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah.

#### **4. Limitations**

Despite the overall positive results, the study acknowledges several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a specific cohort (second-semester students in one program at STIT Palapa Nusantara), which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on a short-term intervention; long-term effects of debate-based learning were not assessed.

Third, the presence of outlier cases, such as participants P14, P06, and P10—who showed minimal or no improvement—underscores the complexity of learning processes. Factors such as health issues, personal learning styles, and levels of participation significantly influenced outcomes. For instance, low engagement in debate sessions correlated with stagnant cognitive development, suggesting that student involvement is a crucial mediator in the success of the debate method.

Finally, while the study attempted to control extraneous variables, factors such as students' prior knowledge, motivation levels, and external stressors were not fully accounted for, which could have influenced the results.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study confirmed that the structured debate method significantly influences students' critical thinking skills and their understanding of Islamic creed, as targeted in the research objectives. The results showed that the debate method positively affected students' ability to analyze, argue, and reflect critically, while also deepening their comprehension of the Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah theology. The statistical analysis indicated a significant difference between pre-test and post-test results ( $p < 0.05$ ), validating the effectiveness of structured debate as an educational intervention.

This research offers three main contributions: (1) It integrates constructivist pedagogy into Islamic theological education through the implementation of structured debate; (2) It provides empirical validation of the debate method's effectiveness in

improving both critical thinking and creed comprehension in a higher Islamic education setting; and (3) It enhances the learning model for Aqidah instruction by offering a replicable and adaptable method that aligns with contemporary student needs and learning styles.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions are suggested for future research: (1) Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of debate on critical thinking and belief formation; (2) Expand the sample population to include diverse Islamic institutions and academic levels to enhance generalizability; (3) Develop and test intervention modules that integrate debate with other active learning strategies to evaluate comparative effectiveness.

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