

Best Practices for Creating a Meaningful Classroom

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Abstract

Education is a systematic process of providing knowledge, skills, values, and experiences that prepare an individual for life, work, responsible citizenship, and meaningful contribution to the community. The very fact that quality and quantity of learning depends not only on what is taught but how it is taught mandates that best practices are used in educational institutes at all levels for creating meaningful learning outcomes. The society is in a state of constant flux, so are its demands on the educational system. Whatever was deemed as effective yesterday may not be as effective today, whatever is considered as best today, may not be the same tomorrow. It, therefore, becomes very pertinent that innovative ways of enhancing the quality in education are discussed, explored, researched and practiced. The paper attempts at discussing some of the best approaches in education that can be used to produce quality results for a meaningful life. Pedagogical tools and practices that can creatively and meaningfully engage the learner and stimulate critical and creative thinking are discussed in the paper. The aim is to foster such approaches that would create a generation of creative thinkers and problem solvers that meet the skill requirements of the globalized world and are at the same time socially and ethically responsible members of the society.

Keywords: Active Learning, Best Practices, Meaningful Classroom, Meaningful Learning, Pedagogy

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a system that prepares, or 'is supposed to prepare' an individual for a successful and meaningful living. Yet, today we have a large number of people who are educated-unemployed, several university toppers who are unable to deal with the challenges and pressures of life, and many 'A' graders who are failures in their work and relationships. Teacher-centered classrooms, authoritarian or permissive style of teaching, rote learning and mechanistically reproducing set answers in the exams, is not what prepares a student for dealing with practical problems of real life and creating a successful living. Learning has to be meaningful, and transferable to real life situations. The foundation for meaningful learning is a meaningful classroom, and there is a need to continuously explore, innovate, implement and evaluate the practices that contribute to the making of a meaningful classroom.

II. PRACTICES FOR CREATING A MEANINGFUL CLASSROOM

Creating a culture of positive classroom interactions

Learning outcomes are undoubtedly essential indicators for the quality of the institution and education programme. Eisner states that outcomes of learning experiences are the result of interactions among the student, instructor, and the content^[1]. Classroom environment, especially the socio-cultural environment, is in fact one of the significant factors that decides the students' attitudes and consequently the achievement of learning outcomes. Learning has been called as an emotional process. A teacher-dominated approach of delivering the lesson; demanding the students to complete a set of exercises in a fixed, rigid, framework; shaming/

rebuking/ punishing them for home-work not done, is not at all the solution to achieving learning objectives in the 21st century classroom. At the elementary level, such an approach could adversely impact the self-worth and self-esteem of the child and emotionally shut them down to authentic and creative learning experiences.

With the teenaged students, excessive dominance and authoritarian approach could generate covert or overt repulsive tendencies in them. Overt repulsion creates ego conflicts between the teacher and the taught and also vitiates the classroom environment by creating unpleasant situations. Covert repulsion may not have any perceptible indicators on the classroom environment, but it does create a disliking for the subject in the student's mind. In both the cases, it is ultimately the learning outcomes that are adversely affected.

On the contrary, it has been found that the authoritative teachers who respect the individuality of their students, are able to create a more pro-learning climate in the classroom. It is said that love begets love and respect commands respect. This is true of a teaching learning situation as well. Respecting the students commands respect from them, loving them despite all their flaws elicits true, honest love from them. Once this positive relationship is set between the teacher and the taught, the students are psychologically and emotionally motivated to take up all possible challenges to do well in the subject of the teacher they so love. Moreover, they like to attend his/ her class, they take more keen interest in what he/she teaches and they actively involve themselves in all the activities that he/she assigns.

Fostering meaningful learning in classrooms

Meaningful learning involves the construction of knowledge, whereby students make sense of their experiences by

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engaging in active cognitive processing, such as paying attention to relevant incoming information, mentally organizing incoming information into a coherent representation, and mentally integrating incoming information with existing knowledge^[2]. The key characteristics of meaningful learning is that it is active, constructive, authentic, intentional and cooperative (Table 1)^{[3][4]}.

Table 1 Characteristics of Meaningful Learning Attributes (Adapted from Jonassen, et al., 2003; Howland, Jonassen & Marra, 2012)

Characteristics of Meaningful Learning Attributes	Description
Active (Manipulative/Observant)	Students are not passive listeners but play active roles in learning activities, actively manipulating objects and information, and observing results from the learning activities.
Constructive (Articulative/ Reflective)	Students construct their own understanding and knowledge, reflect and articulate their personal understandings of phenomenon/activities observed.
Authentic (Complex/Contextual)	Students engage in authentic tasks and problems rather than memorizing abstract concepts and ideas; solving real-life problems.
Intentional (Goal-directed/ Regulatory)	Students set their learning goals and plan their learning pathways.
Cooperative (Collaborative/ Conversational)	Students work with peers to solve problems/tasks through collaborative activities and discussions to better learn and apply their knowledge.

Some of the ways in which teachers can foster meaningful learning in the classroom are:

1. Objectives sharing and eliciting student expectations:

When the students are informed about the objectives and are aware of what is expected from them, they feel a sense of goal and purpose in the academic task. Devoid of this awareness, their minds can become rudderless ships wandering aimlessly in the vast ocean. Having a sense of purpose shows them the clear cut direction to where they are heading and keeps them focused on the task, and motivates them to create their own learning pathways.

2. K-W-L technique: Ogle has suggested the K-W-L technique, which involves asking the students to list what they know, what they want to know, and what they learned each class^[5]. KWL should essentially be a part of every lesson in the classroom. Asking the students what they know, can help the teacher in scaffolding the lesson/ classroom tasks in accordance with the students existing interest, knowledge and potential, in a way that maximizes students' comprehension, interest and excitement. Asking students their expectations from the lesson to be taught gives them a

feel of being the active seekers of information rather than being passive receivers of processed knowledge. The very fact that their expectations are being asked and are being considered makes them feel important and cared for. When their expectations are given merit and consideration, they feel included in the classroom processes and are therefore, cognitively as well as psychologically engaged. Similarly, regular assessment of what they learn in every lesson keeps them cognitively challenged and actively engaged in the classroom processes.

3. Fostering Students Commitment through Active Engagement:

There is a saying that "You can take the horse to water but you cannot make it drink that". It is always possible for the teacher to teach a subject without the learners being engaged, but it is just impossible for any teacher to impart learning without the learners' involvement. Silver and Perini assert that if teachers do not create lessons that foster students' commitment to learning, then teachers cannot possibly expect those students to be active learners who master the material at a deep or meaningful level^[6].

The amount of attention and interest that a teacher can generate in their students toward their learning, will eventually decide the quality and quantity of learning experience. However competent a teacher may be in their subject, if they cannot touch the right emotional button that creates a desire to learn, all their knowledge will go waste^[7]. There is a famous Chinese saying "Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand." Engaged learners are intrinsically motivated by curiosity, interest, and enjoyment, and are likely to want to achieve their intellectual and personal goals^[8].

4. Project Based Learning: Project-based learning involves learning experiences, which allow the students to create an outcome in the form of a product, like a web-design, an event, a seminar or a presentation. Rather than simply transferring content knowledge, project based learning helps students in transferring their learning to novel problems and performance situations. Research on project-based learning (PBL) has found that students who engage in this approach benefit from gains in factual learning that are equivalent or superior to those of students who engage in traditional forms of instruction^[9]. The benefits of project based learning are based in its five key components: the project-task is central to the curriculum; it is organized around driving questions that lead students to encounter central concepts or principles; it is focused on a constructive investigation that involves inquiry and knowledge building; it is student-driven; and it is authentic, that is, it focuses on problems that occur in the real world and that people care about^[9].

5. Creative Problem Solving Method: Closely related to project based learning, problem solving method involves activities that require the students to employ subject knowledge to solve authentic problems. The role of the teacher is to provide students with engaging, thought-provoking learning opportunities by structuring and presenting realistic problems. Since the problems can have multiple solutions and methods for reaching them, rather than a single 'right' approach, it fosters creative and divergent thinking among students. In the process of solving realistic problems, the students learn to create and translate

6. Brainstorming: Brainstorming, which was popularized by Alex Faickney Osborn^[10] in the 1953, is a very effective method for activating the brains and keeping the students engaged. Conventional group problem solving following a structured analytical process can lead a group to develop limited and unimaginative ideas. On the contrary, brainstorming provides a free and open environment that encourages everyone to participate. In fact, brainstorming, besides keeping the students actively involved at the task, also helps in generation of diverse ideas and serves as one of the best methods for divergent thinking and creative problem solving.

7. Mind Mapping: Mind mapping (Fig. 1) is yet another effective tool for active cognitive engagement and can be used for brainstorming, summarizing and note taking, consolidating information, and thinking through complex problems. The organization of mind maps reflects the way our brain organizes ideas. It employs an effective integration of the left brain (logical organizing and reasoning elements) and right brain (visual and spatial elements) processes. Just as the students break down bigger topics or projects into manageable chunks while mind mapping, they learn the art of handling complex situations, in organized yet creative ways, without being overwhelmed with the size of the task.



8. Creating multiple opportunities for the students to interact: Interaction provides a real life scenario for students for working in a social set-up while at the same time keeping them engaged. Many of the relevant social skills like sharing, cooperation, empathy, ability to face and handle disagreements, communication and interpersonal skills, etc. are naturally practiced when the students are engaged in interaction-based activities. Some of the ways to create such opportunities for interaction and collaboration are project-based learning, problem-solving activities, service-learning, and group-reflection tasks.

Preparing psycho-socially competent and humane individuals

Teaching learning is not just a cognitive but also a socio-emotional process. The students need to be exposed to the right set of psycho-social skills and humanitarian values, which are better set examples of, rather than taught. It is said that example is better than precept. A lot is learnt through

observation, imitation and practice in the classroom. When it comes to personal and social skills, a classroom teacher can play a very constructive role in shaping a generation of good Samaritans with great humanitarian values. NCFTE 2009 also has proposed the need to need to develop certain attitudes, dispositions, habits and interests in a teacher, apart from the mandatory conceptual and pedagogical aspects^[11].

Some of the ways in which the classroom could lay the foundation for preparing psycho-socially competent and humane individuals are:

1. Encouraging shift from inter-learner to intra- learner competition: It is desirable to shift the focus of competition from inter learner to intra learner competition. It is only when human beings are competing with each other that they nurture the feelings of greed, envy, criticism, resentment and ill will against the other. When the focus shifts from others to self, there is no hostility, there is only improvement. Ironically, our examination system has a mechanism of inter learner competition which is almost in-built into the system, because of the grades and marks that distinguish the high performers from the average and low performers. However, there is still much that classroom habits can do to invalidate the adverse effects of this mechanism. Instead of having the good student- bad student categorization of students on the basis of their comparative examination performance, the students must be given credit for their efforts. Let them know and understand that they are good performers if they are striving to do better than their previous performance, not when they performing better than their classmates. The desire to show oneself as superior to others, or to prove others as inferior, has to be replaced by the desire to excel one's previous self.

2. Connecting education to community through service learning: One good practice of providing students an understanding of the social milieu and instilling social responsibility is through service learning which engages students in hands-on activities that provide opportunities for learning and development. Students from every discipline should be exposed to the problems of the society not just through printed word or pictures but through real life situations and community interactions.

The former President of India, Smt. Pratibha Patil at a conference on 'Facing global and local challenges: the new dynamics of higher education' stated that "No institute can claim to have achieved its objectives unless it fulfills its social responsibility. It would be useful if in the curriculum an outreach programme is incorporated where interaction of the students with marginalized sections of society and in neighbouring communities is included. This would provide students an understanding of the social milieu in which they work and make them responsive to the needs of those around them. Education should contribute, in a broader sense, to the improvement of the quality of life"^[12]. Through service-learning, students learn to participate in humane experiences, while making connections between their field/ community work and coursework.

3. Development of life skills and humanitarian values: In a world rife with competition, discrimination, corruption, unemployment, frustration, conflicts, poverty and hunger, literacy and numeracy skills cannot be called as comprehensive and meaningful education. To deal with the

demands and challenges of everyday life, a set of psychosocial skills, called as life skills are required to be taught to the young learners who are ready to step out from the cocoons of parental protection and face the real world independently.

World Health Organization identifies life skills as the skills dealing with conflict that cannot be resolved, dealing with authority, solving problems, making and keeping friends/relationships, cooperation, self-awareness, creative thinking, decision-making, critical thinking, dealing with stress, negotiation, clarification of values, resisting pressure, coping with disappointment, planning ahead, dealing with emotions, assertiveness, active listening, empathy, respect, tolerance, trust, sharing, sympathy, compassion, sociability, equality, and justice^[13]. The National Education Policy 2020 enlists the universal human values of truth (satya), righteous conduct (dharma), peace (shanti), love (prem), nonviolence (ahimsa), scientific temper, and citizenship values as integral part of holistic education^[14]. These are the skills and values that form the foundation for a wholesome and meaningful life, these are the skills and values that are the mark of professionalism in any industry, these are the skills and values that ensure better production as well as production capacity, these are the skills and values that are required to have good work life balance, these are the skills and values that enable an individual to deal with challenging situations, and these are the skills and values that lead an individual to make positive contributions and uplift the society.

The present psycho-social-economic crisis as a fall out of the COVID-19 pandemic related regulations, and its implications on the mental health of the public, is a compelling reminder of the need of having essential life skills and strong foundational values. Degrees and bookish knowledge don't necessarily prepare an individual to deal with crisis situations in life. There's more to real life education than the learning of text-book material and clearing the school, college, and university exams. Roy and Biswas have emphasized the need of life skills in the students of today's generation to equip them with the necessary psychosocial skills and cognitive abilities for making informed decisions and choices and managing their emotional well-being in times of crisis like the present^[15].

The National Education Policy 2020 has taken a positive step by endorsing life skills and value education in its policy document as one of the fundamental principles that should guide the education system at large^[14]. Education at all levels must include life skills as a necessary component of the curricula for teaching so as to equip the students with the skills needed for success in the real world scenario. Moreover, as these skills and values cannot be taught through lectures and books, highly trained and competent professionals should be employed for the teaching of this course.

Additionally, all the faculties should be imparted adequate orientation and training so that they communicate the essence of these skills and values in the way they behave, in the way they interact and more importantly in the way they transact the curriculum. Through proper training initiatives, these essential life skills and values could form the basis for a strong, effective, and humanitarian pedagogy in every classroom.

III. CONCLUSION

Policies and proposals for practices are simply meaningless unless they are appropriately and adequately put into practice. A classroom is the real space for practicing these approaches and actualizing the envisioned outcomes in the real world. Educational institutes are the threads that link the policies and proposals to the classroom and provide the necessary infrastructure and impetus for their implementation. Teachers are the true channels of real, on-ground implementation. Committed, structured, and organized steps need to be taken at all the levels to implement such practices which can help in creating successful as well as humane individuals and pave the way for sustainable human development in the 21st century.

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