Empowering Education: Fostering Active Student Engagement in Classroom Learning

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ABSTRACT

"Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think."

—Albert Einstein

The foundation of lifelong learning is often attributed to school education, which bears the responsibility of nurturing competent learners capable of applying knowledge in real-life situations, further education, or employment. Assessing the effectiveness of a country's school system in preparing students for the challenges of life and work is a matter of significant concern. Despite the evolutionary strides in the Indian education system since independence, various initiatives aimed at addressing children's needs and enhancing their learning experiences, national and state achievement surveys continue to reveal substantial disparities in students' mastery of fundamental skills across different regions. In response to these challenges, both researchers and policymakers advocate a paradigm shift in teaching and learning methodologies – a transition from rote learning to a constructivist learning approach. This shift entails fostering an environment where students actively engage in the learning process, constructing their knowledge. Research studies support this approach, emphasizing the brain's active and dynamic nature, enabling learners to construct and reconstruct knowledge through interaction within their learning environments (Beamon, 1997; Caine & Caine, 1997). Instructors are thus encouraged to provide ample opportunities for students to actively participate in constructing and reconstructing their knowledge, fostering reflective learning practices that empower students to direct their own educational journey.

INTRODUCTION

India, with its rich and diverse history and culture, boasts a vast education system. From the first National Policy on Education in 1968 to the National Education Policy in 2020, various efforts have been made to redesign the education system to meet the needs of children and facilitate effective learning. The education system has made remarkable progress in every sphere. With over 15,000 schools and more than 251 million children studying in them as per UDISE 2017-18, India is home to one of the largest education systems globally. Additionally, India has one of the fastest-growing youth populations globally and is poised to become the youngest country in the world within a decade. Given that education significantly contributes to a country's development index, it is crucial to assess whether we are preparing this vast number of youths to become quality human resources capable of contributing to the country's development. Are we providing our students with knowledge applicable to real-life situations? Is there a need to modify our teaching-learning processes to make learning more effective?

TRADITIONAL VS. CONSTRUCTIVIST CLASSROOM

Despite the progress, our school education system has faced criticism over time. The influential 'Learning without Burden, 1993' report highlighted that learning at school cannot be a joyful experience unless we change our perception of the child as a mere receiver of knowledge and move beyond using textbooks as the basis for examination. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005, expressed deep concerns about several aspects of our educational practice:

- The school system is resistant to change, characterized by inflexibility.
- Learning has become an isolated activity, disconnected from students' lives.
- Schools promote a regime of thought that discourages creative thinking.
- The learning presented in schools often bypasses vital dimensions of human capacity to create new knowledge.

Moreover, various national and international achievement surveys have reported significant disparities in students' achievement of basic skills across states, as confirmed by state achievement surveys. Recognizing the poor performance of Indian learners in national and international assessments, the think tank NITI Aayog also highlighted that improving learning outcomes is the greatest challenge facing India's education system today. To address these challenges, the NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of students not only learning but

also learning how to learn. Education must move towards less content-focused approaches and more towards developing critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, adaptability, and innovation skills. Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, inquiry-driven, learner-centered, and enjoyable.

To bring about significant change in school education, the most highlighted reform suggested by educationists and policymakers is a shift from traditional teaching-learning approaches to constructivist learning approaches. Teaching-learning approaches and theories generally explain the kind of environment needed for optimal student learning and the role and qualities of teachers.

Perkins (1992) highlighted some shortcomings of traditional classrooms, where learners passively receive knowledge, categorizing the knowledge acquired into three types:

• Inert knowledge: Memorized for exams but remains inert otherwise.

• Naive knowledge: Takes the form of naive theories and stereotypes, even after instruction.

• Ritual knowledge: Useful for school tasks or exams but not much otherwise.

The concept of constructivism or the constructivist approach, although widely discussed in the past decade, is not new. It draws from various disciplines such as education, psychology, philosophy, and the history of science. The constructivist approach emphasizes building or constructing knowledge, where children construct their learning when given ample opportunities to engage, explore, elaborate, explain, and evaluate, with teachers acting as facilitators. Ayaz and Sekerci (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of published research on the effects of the constructivist approach on students' learning and found positive effects on academic achievement compared to traditional approaches.

Furthermore, student engagement in the teaching-learning process has emerged as a crucial variable in promoting student learning. Wonglorsaichan et al. (2014) reaffirmed the significant effect of student engagement on achievement and positive feelings towards school. Lack of engagement may lead to a loss of interest in studying. Therefore, to enhance learning effectiveness, the following approach is discussed:

LEARNING CYCLE APPROACH FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING

The Biological Science Curriculum Study (BSCS), led by Principal Investigator Roger Bybee, developed an instructional model for constructivism called the "Five Es." Designed primarily for secondary science teaching, the 5E model follows a classic

constructivist structure. In this model, learners investigate phenomena and complete the learning cycle by creating conceptions, theories, and generalizations based on their work. The five phases of the model, capturing the essence of students' actions, are as follows:

Engagement: The teacher engages students in the topic of study, creating interest and curiosity through questioning, group activities, etc. Akar (2005) also felt that it is also a good opportunity for the teacher to identify misconceptions in students' understanding

Exploration: Students work together to explore the topic in depth, with the teacher acting as a facilitator to promote learning. Akar (2005) states that this stage allows students to test predictions and hypotheses, record observations, and suspend judgment.

Explanation: Students explain concepts in their own words, ask for evidence and clarification, and critically listen to one another's explanations and those of the teacher.

Elaboration: Students apply classroom learning in new situations, using previous information to ask questions, propose solutions, make decisions, and record observations. “Elaboration strategies apply here as well because students should be using the previous information to ask questions, propose solutions, and make decisions, experiment, and record observations.”(Akar, 2005)

Evaluation: Evaluation occurs throughout the learning experience, with the teacher observing students' knowledge and skills, application of new concepts, and changes in thinking. Students also assess their own learning.

To make students actively engage in the classroom this learning approach may be integrated into everyday lesson plan. Bevevino, Dengel and Adams (1999) implies that using the learning cycle format, the teacher can create a series of activities that are personally meaningful for students and give students opportunities to practice critical thinking skills. To promote actual learning instead of rote learning and learning-for-exams NEP 2020 has also focused on encouraging student’s creativity and critical thinking to encourage logical decision-making and innovation

CONCLUSION

In summary, the discussions presented above underscore the critical need to enhance the efficacy of learning by affording learners abundant opportunities to actively participate in the teaching-learning process. It is essential that instructional strategies are structured in a

manner that empowers learners to generate knowledge rather than passively consume it. In this regard, teachers play a pivotal role as facilitators throughout the educational journey

Furthermore, educators should strive to inject creativity into their instruction by incorporating innovative pedagogical approaches that captivate and sustain students' interest. Ensuring a classroom environment free from emotional abuse and harassment is not merely a duty but a fundamental prerequisite for fostering effective learning. Students thrive in environments conducive to academic growth while also honing essential 21st-century skills such as collaboration, decision-making, communication, and leadership.

Collectively, let us endeavor to construct an education system that equips our youth for a brighter future, where India assumes a leadership role in shaping the global educational landscape

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