

Creating Authentic Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The NEP 2020 addresses the issues that have plagued our system of education and provoke us to think about how we can take our students forward with 21st-century skills. How can the teaching-learning experience transform itself to accommodate learning which is integrated, interdisciplinary, enjoyable, and authentic? It tries to bring the focus back on the fundamentals to ensure the holistic development of learners. Providing an authentic learning experience in the classroom could possibly be a strong solution to tide over the problems that we face today. An authentic classroom is one where the tasks, be they assignments or assessments, which are given to the students, are insightful, enjoyable, and tend to promote holistic learning. By creating authenticity around the tasks, teachers will also be able to find out and analyse the gaps in learning, if any. This way they can rewire their own teaching strategies to improve students' understanding of the concepts.

Keywords: Authentic, Learning, Classroom, Assessment, Holistic.

“How long will it take to reach the other bank?” the passenger who seemed to be in a great hurry asked the lone boatman as they started crossing the river.

“It takes half an hour or a little more or a little less depending on the course of wind and the current. I’ll do my best to ply it as fast as I can in view of the gathering storm,” said the boatman, who at first had been reluctant to set out.

“So you can tell the time looking at a watch”, sneered the Pundit, for he was a learned man. “Oh no, Sir”, replied the boatman. I can tell the time looking at the sun. I have never seen a watch in my life. I am a poor boatman.”

“Never seen a watch, what a pity. 25% of your life is wasted”, said the proud passenger. Now “be quick!” commanded the

passenger, who had insisted on being taken to the other side as he had been invited by the zamindar to deliver a discourse.

He could not travel in silence for long. “Have you studied the scriptures, boatman?” the pundit asked.

“Studied, Sir? I’m as illiterate as my boat!” I cannot read or write.

“I thought as much!” sighed the pundit. “What a pity! 50% of your life is wasted.”

“I agree with you, Sir, we uneducated folks are unfortunate,” said the boatman. They were in the middle of the river.

“Do you have a radio, I want to hear some music”, said the pundit.

“Oh, no Sir,” said the boatman. The only

music which I enjoy is the sound of this water and the waves.

“You are so useless. 75% of your life is wasted”, said the arrogant man.

Suddenly a storm broke out and the rain came down in huge torrents. Despite the effort of the boatman to keep his boat steady, strong winds shook it violently.

“Sir, do you know how to swim?”, asked the boatman nervously.

“Oh no!” replied the pundit.

“In that case, Sir, 100% of your life is going to be lost”, said the boatman. There was not the slightest irony in his voice, but great anxiety. The next moment the boat overturned. The boatman beat his strong arms and reached the shore while the pundit, with all his learning, went down into the swirling waters.

Classrooms that follow the traditional ‘stand and deliver’ model, where teachers are seen as custodians of knowledge, with learners being passive consumers, have succeeded in cramming the heads of learners much like a pot that is filled. However, this, unfortunately, fails the students when they have to transfer this learning to real-life situations. And as in the anecdote described above, it is the skill of the boatman which helped him to save himself rather than the pedantic textbook knowledge of the scholar. It may seem exaggerated, but the point is that an authentic learning environment calls for a paradigm shift in the curriculum to include problem- and project-based learning, as it helps students to readily identify and solve real-world problems, which is the ultimate goal

of all learning. Students are at the centre of this type of authentic learning environment and they take responsibility to use their understanding and solve problems. Students are not consumers, but are seen as co-creators, and teachers act as facilitators who collaborate with learners in a free and flexible classroom space to ensure that they master concepts, so that they can do something meaningful with such understanding rather than assimilate and regurgitate information at the end of each term.

What is an Authentic Classroom?

The NEP 2020 addresses the issues that have plagued our system of education and provoke us to think about how we can take our students forward with 21st-century skills. How can the teaching-learning experience transform itself to accommodate learning which is integrated, interdisciplinary, enjoyable, and authentic? It tries to bring the focus back on the fundamentals, to ensure the holistic development of learners. Providing an authentic learning experience in the classroom could possibly be a strong solution to tide over the problems that we face today.

An authentic classroom is one where the tasks, be they assignments or assessments, which are given to the students, are insightful, enjoyable, and tend to promote holistic learning. The tasks will have to be constructed in a manner that is purposeful and engaging, and not merely to fill in sheets or reports. Students should be able to mimic these tasks and help in finding solutions in society. This way the students are encouraged to put their knowledge to good use and extend the learning they have received in the

classrooms. By creating authenticity around the tasks, teachers will also be able to find out and analyse the gaps in learning, if any. This way they can rewire their own teaching strategies to improve students' understanding of the concepts. Making it multidisciplinary helps in connecting the knowledge, for learning can never be done in silos – another important point made by NEP 2020.

A small example would be in an elementary grade when teaching addition and subtraction: students can set up a snack stall in the class and bring a few snacks from their homes, along with cups of lemonade. Students can be assigned different duties, like setting up the stall, spreading the snacks, setting up the cash counter, collecting the cash in simple denominations of 5 or 10 rupees, and one group can be assigned to total up the day's sales, another group gets involved in housekeeping by ensuring nothing is spilt and the area is dry and clean. A few can explain the process of making the snacks or the lemonade, thus improving their communication skills. It is such an enjoyable activity, but with so much collaboration and camaraderie, students have learnt Maths, English, cleanliness, care for the environment by using only steel cups and plates, which they can be asked to bring from their homes, hygiene, queuing up, and taking their food in an orderly manner. The learnings from this authentic task are aplenty.

The same set of Maths problems can be done in a routine manner, but the involvement with which students learn and the interest that even a slow learner exhibits in such activities make the learning process authentic, interdisciplinary, enjoyable, and insightful. It

requires the ingenuity of teachers to come up with such tasks, by collaborating with other subject teachers, and preparing the students for life outside the school.

How can Teachers Create Authentic Classrooms?

All along, content has been the king, and educators would draw lesson plans that would include learning activities and assessments that would help students to 'somehow' understand the concepts and draw connections to the learning goals. The problem arises with the word 'somehow'. For those unable to make the connections to the goals, it becomes a battle of wits; what is actually tested is the ability to recall, rather than a test of understanding.

And thus it is that students have emerged educated, but with no real education in the true sense, much like the scholar in the anecdote. All that has to change if the vision proposed by the NEP has to translate into reality. The 'backwards design' proposed by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins begins by laying out the larger learning goals that instructors should consider before delving into the lessons. What is the enduring understanding that will emerge after a student attends a lesson and what are the essential questions that the unit should answer after students have completed a particular unit? When the focus shifts towards these kinds of higher-order concepts, then the assessments also tend to become more relevant and authentic, freed from the bane of the routine 'what' and 'why' questions. Assessments are a means for the instructors to know what the students know and they are most certainly not tested on the strength of their memory

power or the ability to recall, but on the knowledge that they have acquired and the skills which they will put to use after going through the unit.

Thus, teachers begin by focusing on the enduring understandings (EU) that a unit can reveal, rather than plunging into the lesson straight away. For example, while dealing with probability and interpretation of data, the EU would be, *'The way that data is collected, organised, and displayed influences interpretation'*; or *'The probability of an event's occurrence can be predicted with varying degrees of confidence'*.

The essential questions that the unit poses will be, *'How do people use data to influence others? How can predictions be made based on data?'* When students understand that in today's world, it is data that drives every aspect of life, from fighting elections to interpreting voter preferences, they have already made a real-world connection, and that would lend greater credence to their learning.

In science, the EU could be, *'Scientists analyse and interpret evidence to solve problems and make decisions'*. The essential questions that arise would be, *'What is the evidence collected by social scientists? How do we determine if the evidence thus collected is valid and reasonable?'* And most importantly, the unit poses an important question, *'How do we use the evidence that has been collected to solve problems and arrive at decisions?'*

The NEP also stresses the importance of making interdisciplinary connections. Thus, while the EU in a social science lesson on

'Natural Resources' can be, *'There is a relationship between consumption and conservation of natural resources'*, the essential question that can be tapped into can be, *'What is the effect that people have on their environment?'* *'What effect does the consumerist culture of people have on their surroundings?'*

An English classroom should reverberate with larger issues and the enduring understanding should certainly move beyond the ordinary and capture the larger picture. It is only by focusing on the big ideas that teachers can improve the language skills, as well as the world view, of the students. This kind of prodding should lead to real-world insights if students have to benefit from the language classes. Students do not merely decode content; their understanding has to go beyond the textbook. Great literature explores universal themes of the human condition and these transcend spatial and temporal constraints. These should lead students to gain better insight into their own experiences. Of course, it would be impractical to expect every essential question to be overarching; the teacher facilitates in bringing in a judicious mix of both the topical and overarching, to make the lessons interesting, meaningful, and relevant.

While focused reading takes place in the English classroom, the EU would be, *'Readers develop a deeper understanding through the reflection of text.'* *'Readers use different strategies to construct the meaning of the text.'* The essential questions that could be kept in focus are, *'Why do readers read? What can readers do when they do not understand?'*

Once teachers are clear about the larger picture they need to focus on while transacting the content, assessment of learning becomes easy. These will be woven around authentic tasks. When we mean authentic, we refer to a task that replicates the problems and challenges faced in the real world. Their responses may not be perfect, but when students construct their own responses they take greater ownership of their learning, and these are individual, in the sense they cannot select from solutions given by others.

Assessments should focus on the learning rather than on evaluation alone. Students should be able to make connections so that it binds together the knowledge they have learnt in the classrooms to make sense of things that are in the world outside. Assessments thus help a student to show evidence of being able to transfer the knowledge they have learnt. Assessments have to be designed creatively and must provoke and nudge the learner to think critically and come out with solutions. It is best to remember that reaching learning goals is far more important than marking performance.

How can Teachers Develop such Tasks?

When teachers give such assignments to students, they are able to assess whether students are able to apply the knowledge and skills they have learnt in the class to find solutions to problems that exist in the day-to-day world.

Armed with such a design, teachers can now begin to fill in their learning plans or lesson plans, so that learners can reach the learning goals easily. Teachers should be able to

answer the following questions before creating a lesson plan.

Is it important for my students to know this?

Will this help my students respond to the central question in an informed manner?

Once teachers begin to ask themselves these important questions, then there is much scope to revise, redraft, replace, and rethink the content they create. It may be difficult for teachers to go the whole hog at one go, hence they can think big but act small. Take baby steps and create an authentic learning experience for a few units initially, and then scale them to cover the entire portion. It is here that teachers should be oriented with sufficient training to experiment with it in the classroom.

There was a carpenter who was trained by a grandmaster and was known for his brilliance in creating such fine pieces in wood. Over time, he realised that though he was spending the same number of hours his productivity and creativity was steadily declining. Deeply worried, he went back to the grandmaster who heard him patiently and simply asked him if he had sharpened his tool.

Teachers should be constantly oriented so that fresh learnings can be received and older ones can be unlearnt or relearnt. This is the sharpening of the tool that is required for teachers. This really sounds sensible, but teachers should be willing to let go of their traditional systems of thinking and move towards bringing in fresh insights to the classroom. Schools that cater to the advantaged sections of the society may be bringing in the required changes to prepare the students for 21st-century skills, but what

about the innumerable schools that dot the length and breadth of this country? Educators should keep themselves abreast of the latest pedagogical practices and this is where effective teacher training becomes imperative. Only when teachers improve their standards will they be able to bring such innovations into the classrooms and the vision presented by the NEP can become a reality in our country.

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The ELT Practitioner

(The journal that values classroom practices over theories)

The ELT Practitioner, started in 2014 (<https://sites.google.com/view/theeltpractitioner/home>), is an **online journal** published by the English Language Teachers' Association of India (**ELTAI**). It is a **quarterly** journal – January-March, April-June, July-September, and October-December: – brought out every year. It aims at providing opportunities for English teaching practitioners in schools and colleges, especially school teachers, to share their actual classroom practices with their fellow teachers across the country and across the world.

The journal invites articles – two-to-four-page descriptions of real time classroom practices relating to the teaching and learning of English at any level of education. These descriptions may articulate briefly the assumptions of the teachers underlying the activities/practices reported, or mention very briefly the theoretical underpinnings. The journal does not expect elaborate discussions of ELT theories; in fact, it discourages such theoretical discussions in the articles submitted to the journal for publication.

This means that teachers at any level of education are encouraged to write about any experience of classroom teaching that has proved to be effective in the classroom. The focus is on the ***practitioner and classroom practices***.

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