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Student Centric Learning in Higher Education - A Review

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Abstract:

The quality of higher education in India has always been a matter of concern as it directly impacts the future of our nation. Although the industry and the academia both acknowledge that there is something seriously wrong our education system, it is only recently that the learning-teaching process has become the center of discussion and research. The traditional teaching methods have failed to acknowledge the students as individuals. The theatrical mode of teaching places the teacher on the center stage and pushes the student to the background. Whereas researches carried out all over the world suggest that effective learning can happen only when a student is made comfortable and important in the classroom and is given a chance to experience learning in his own way. Also when he is given a chance to be understood as a unique individual with his own special set of qualities, traits and needs, abilities, personality & learning styles (Joshani Shervan, S. 2008). The paper focuses on the different learning styles that the students bring to the classroom and the need to acknowledge them. There is a need to move to a student centric mode of teaching by understanding how students learn in order to impart education that is effective to prepare the students for the challenges in the world of work. The paper concludes that for the teaching learning process to become more effective, it is imperative that the student becomes an active participant in the process, and is thus actively involved in his own education. This can happen only when the significance of learning styles is not only understood but also catered to in the system of higher education.

1. Introduction

“The teaching must be modified according to the needs of the taught”-Swami Vivekananda.

The higher education industry in India has grown by leaps and bounds over the last few years, with lots of private players and private money being thrown into the fray (Agrawal P, 2006). It is being seen that more number of professionally qualified people whether it be doctors, engineers or managers are being produced in the country than ever before. As a result our country has been registering a consistent economic growth at the rate of 5 to 6 % in the last two decades. It is very much obvious that higher enrolment in higher education higher is the GDP of a nation (Agrawal P, 2006). Investment in human capital, and by implication in education, has thus moved to centre stage in strategies to promote economic prosperity, fuller employment, and social cohesion (Gherssi, G, 1999). Thus, with the rise of knowledge driven economies, the key role which education plays in the economic well being of the individuals and intimately that of nations is increasingly being recognized. Education not only develops well rounded & engaged citizens but also contributes in the economic growth of societies by way of accumulation of human capital (UNESCO-UIS/OECD 2003). Following the developed world, the developing countries have also realized that any amount of investment in human capital is justifiable (Rena, R. 2010). As a result, education is increasingly considered an investment in the collective future of societies and nations, rather than simply in the future success of individuals. Human capital refers to the stock of competences and knowledge, talent and potential bestowed in its citizens. These attributes are gained by a person through education, experience, and human resource development (Ireland P. 2011).

Though the opportunities for education especially higher and professional education have increased manifold in the past few years, nothing much can be said about the quality of education which unfortunately remains substandard to a large extent (Yashpal 2009, Agrawal P. 2006). This is obvious from the fact that these education institutions fall short of satisfying the basic expectations of the people at the receiving end, be it the industry or the common man.

“The Indian system of Higher education has kept itself at a distance from the real world outside. This lack of dialogue becomes more profound when we talk of areas like engineering, medicine etc. While universities award engineering and medical degrees, it is ironic that they do not have the power to determine whether an institution that claims to train Engineers and Doctors has the wherewithal to do so” (Yashpal 2009).

2. Skill Deficiency

Out of the huge talent pool of youth in our country who pursue professional education very few can claim to achieve professional success and attain the end objective of such education. Many students passing out from institutions of higher learning lack the skills they need to work in real world environment (Yashpal 2009). Despite producing large number of engineering & management graduates in India, the industry is facing shortage of trained & skilled manpower that is readily employable (Singh, C.D, 2008) (Lombardi M, 2008). This gap is increasing as the changing workforce & technology needs of a global knowledge economy are dramatically changing the nature of engineering practice, demanding for broader skills than simple mastery of scientific & technological disciplines (Duderstadt J, 2008). And how many out of those who get employment turn out to be efficient and effective and sustain in their jobs again depends upon many factors like their skills levels, motivation levels etc (Mo, Y et al, 2007). Similarly, the common man is far from satisfied with the competence of doctors nowadays (Powell, M, 2009). The instances of medical negligence and apathy are on the rise. It is well said that the health of the public depends on the quality of medical educational programmes (Ren.X et al, 2008). Thus, if professionals are to be equipped better to meet the needs of modern health care systems & standards of practice requested significant educational change is needed (Spencer J, Jordan R, 2012).

3. Concerns

Thus it is increasingly becoming evident that there is something which is seriously wrong about our educational system which needs to be set right in order to progress on the path of development and growth. This concern has been shared by Academicians like Prof. V.K. Mehta, who has been the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University in his lecture at Ranchi University where he said that “ Our best students can indeed be compared to the best anywhere in the world. But the system has not done enough to address the problems of students at middle or lower levels. Education by rote learning is still the order of the day” (UGC golden Jubilee lecture series, 2003) unfortunately, till late governing bodies of Education, in our country have been obsessed with quantity and the said concern about quality was talked about in a very superficial sense (Prakodi . V et al, 2012). Sadly, there is no concern about the end outcome of such education and thus an outcome based approach to education is the need of the hour. Which emphasizes what the receiver of such education will be able to do following the learning experience & what as a professional he will be able to bring to his practice (Spencer J, Jordan, R, 2012). There is an urgent and immediate need to take a deeper look at the core of the education system i.e. the seeker of such professional education whether it is the life saving Medical Education, Technological engineering education or the management education, at the end of which the professionals who matter the most to the society i.e. Doctors, Engineers and managers are produced. Given the fact that majority of students who seek admission to professional courses have to clear an entrance test which tests their knowledge and aptitude, it can safely be assumed that they are fit enough to undertake the course as far as their cognitive abilities are concerned (Fraser, W & Killen R, 2003). There is a trend in engineering colleges in India those students who are considered highly intelligent show poor academic performance during first year (Cheruvalath 2012). Because our traditional teaching and learning methods fail to acknowledge them as individuals and without taking into consideration their individual strength, weaknesses, needs and expectations, they are burdened with the expectation to excel everywhere. Researches show high level of stress in medical students where the principal stressors were related to medical training; uncertainty about study behavior progress & aptitude (Lewis, A et al 2009). Intense pressures & relentless demands of medical education need to demonstrate competence (bel M et al, 2004) may impair students behavior & diminish learning (Do, Dinh, Q, 2007). Teaching practices, teacher expectations and students strategies for learning have all known to contribute to academic poor performance (Cheruvalath. R, 2012). They are expected to assimilate whatever is being taught without anyone bothering to know whether this is actually happening or not. Our teaching learning process is the theatrical one where the teacher stands in front of the class room. And the students sit as passive audiences with minimum interaction (Rugarcia, A, Felder R, Woods D, Stice, J, 2000, Msonde. C, 2011) and many of the students being lectured at feel easily bored by such rote teaching (Hills, G & Tedford, D, 2003) then they are tested on primarily memory based exams (Yashpal 2009). These kinds of classroom practices seem to have culminated in learners’ passivity & deterioration of quality education (Msonde. C, 2011). The lecturing method is not only an inefficient way of conveying information but for the students the lecture theatre is often the graveyard of motivation (Hills, be et al, 2003). If the systems really wants to prepare the students for the realities of the world of work or professional practice, then new forms of assessment which examine their ability to engage with ambiguous & complex problems dealing with people and issues taken from real life and which thus documents their ability for higher order abstract thinking and problem solving need to be introduced. (Yashpal 2009; Lombardi N, 2008).

The education system suffers from multiple systemic ills which many a times are not in the hands of the earnest teacher, who himself attained professional qualification in the same system.

4. Difficult Journey

Most of the students find themselves in completely new surroundings, amongst new people are exposed to a new environment & range to adapt to a new & somewhat uncertain world. (Srperamareddy, C et al 2007), where even before they get a chance to settle down, adapt or adjust, the pressure of academic performance already starts building up. (Smith. K, et al, 2005) whereas some of them are

completely confused, bewildered and puzzled as they face a neyread of changes during their transition to higher education (Ballentine, H, 2010) They feel like spectators who are not involved in the learning process where a theatrical style of teaching is taking place and the teacher is the star and some students seems to know everything beforehand, understand everything that the teacher says are the “star performers”. (Nagaraj C, Pradeep BS, 2011) The others who fail to decipher the technical verbiage are less confident tend to be pushed into oblivion or worse still end up being unduly compared with the “star performers”. The traditional teaching methods favor high achievers and neglects the grasp of low achiever (Mushi, as cited in Msonde. C, 2011). A highly demanding educational process & professional life frequently festered by a competitive environment are additional relevant factors (Votmer, E, et al, 2008).

This might be completely unintentional on the part of the teacher as Waddaj Akili (2008) contend that the problem may not be that the teacher is a poor lecturer but rather that lecturing may not be the most appropriate way of engaging students in the learning process, A teacher is basically more concerned about the content coverage rather than the students. Whereas the real challenge in college teaching is not covering the material for the students; it’s uncovering the material with the students. (Smith, K. et al, 2005) i.e. a major paradigm shift from “teaching” to learning is heralded (Passow, H. 2008). He is unaware of the fact that the personality of a student also has a bearing on his performance and that every student is unique and has different capacities of acquiring knowledge or skills. The fundamental issues which concern learning are how students learn, how they process information and the varied ways in which different individuals learn. It can be simply said that because students have different learning styles ,teaching methods which are effective for some may be ineffective for others. (Akili. W, 2008). Is there anything that can be done to empower the teacher to make the teaching learning process more effective and produce a whole class of skilled professionals who are more likely to succeed in their respective professions and lead a better, more satisfied and happier lives ?The key to the answer to this question lies within the classroom itself. The classroom has to become more student centric. The student centered learning is expected to facilitate the total development of the student (Dahanayale, S.S., 2006). Learner-centered learning is defined as learning where the learner is the main character in the learning process: he or she takes the initiative, controls the learning process, and actively learns in a socially interactive way (Hansen, 2000). This type of learning emphasis facilitation rather than lecturing and the uniqueness of every learner. (Msonde. C, 2011). Student centered learning places at the centre of learning process. (E stes. C, 2004).

In fact, unless the individuality of the students is catered, effective professionals can never be produced. Hence, it is high time that we focus on the fact that the student is more important than the teacher and before attempting to impart knowledge, the teacher's duty is to first understand his student. As students bring multiple perspectives to the classroom-diverse backgrounds, learning styles, experiences & aspirations, a teacher can no longer assume a one sew fetes all approach. (Smith. B et al, 1992).

5. Conclusion

The teacher needs to pay attention to individual differences in learning and consider each student as unique and that he or she comprehends information at different pace & ease. (Santrak, 2001) For the teaching learning process to become more effective, it is imperative that the student becomes an active participant in the process, and is thus actively involved in his own education (Vighearajah, et al 2008). Pepovic.C. (2007) cites Kolb (1894), Gibbs (1992), Laurillard (1993) & race (1999) to say that students learn more effectively when they are able to have some control over the pace and content of the learning. He is made comfortable and important in the classroom and is given a chance to experience learning in his own way. He is given a chance to be understood as a unique individual with his own special set of qualities, traits and needs, abilities, personality & learning styles (Joshani Shervan, S. 2008). He should be accepted unconditionally with his attitudes and behaviors, which makes his personality distinct from others. He should be allowed to think, relate, create, and handle information in his own particular style of learning (Knowles.M, 1980). He should be treated as mature enough to be independent in his learning. He should be encouraged to be inquisitive and ask questions. He should be taught in a relevant, practically applicable way. An active involvement of medical students in the learning events is advocated by Popvic. C. (2007). Thus, an appropriate educational experience needs to be provided which takes into consideration how people are different and how they learn differently. (Spencer J, Jordan R, 2012).

6. References

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