EFFECTIVELY NAVIGATING THE CLASSROOM FOR MAKING LASTING LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In Higher-educational Institutions (HEIs), educators are perpetually confronted with the challenge of making a meaningful and lasting learning experience for the student-learners. In this context, it becomes an imperative to create connections between the learning odyssey and their respective lives. To make education truly purposeful, two critical conditions to be fulfilled are (i) acknowledgement of the fact that meaningful knowledge must be valued and (ii) an acceptance of the linkage between education and its impact on human lives to make a positive difference. Demonstrating the influence of invaluable knowledge in human life is critical in making education meaningful. Fostering curiosity, critical thinking, and imagination make learning satisfying as well. Connecting the content with its meaning and to make learning 'stick', self-testing should replace forthwith rote memorization and rut learning. Immersive teaching-learning process and pedagogical techniques should facilitate memory and effective application of learning received by the students.

Examining the theoretical paradigms becomes a necessary preliminary for stimulating critical thinking in the minds of the learners that would be of immense use later in their careers. In a knowledge ecosystem model, we need to accept and appreciate the distinction between 'education' and 'learning'. Helping the learners function better in future should ideally remain the overarching goal of learning. Learning experiences are required to be designed by involved students to ensure that the learning outcomes are dovetailed with lesson objectives and are grasped by the students through an immersion process. They assist students in understanding where they want to go in life and how they want to make a difference.

An attempt is made in this Paper to suggest ways and means to the educators to effectively navigate the classroom so that comprehension and learning are enhanced and meaningful learning experiences are gained by the students using their prior knowledge and personal experience.

Key Words: Education vs. Learning, Higher-education Institutions (HEIs), Teaching-Learning Process, Learning experiences.

Introduction

Learning experiences can be considered as *educational* only if they lead to both intellectual and moral growth, positive behavioral change, and a favorable effect on a community. But unfortunately, for over centuries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)[1] excessively and, at times,

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even exclusively depended on textbooks and memorization to educate students. It is earnestly hoped by all the stakeholders that the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)[2] would address this contentious issue seriously. While not negating the due and valid place of such traditional methods, educators need to understand that learners' memory gets enhanced through interesting and multisensory experiences better than only through classroom lectures and rote learning. What we should not lose sight of is the fact that teaching-learning settings are diverse in nature and are filled with students who process information in different ways and at varying rates. Similarly, learners are vastly different in their learning styles—some are auditory while others are visual, tactile, or kinesthetic learners needing the deployment of different kinds of technologies to maximize their learning. Tutors need to appreciate and use these distinctions better as excellent opportunities to reach the learners individually by targeting their particular individual styles. Experiential activities acknowledge the learners' cognitive/brain wiring[3] as they invite and involve them to transcend the moment. Such interesting and fun activities boost confidence, foster curiosity, develop a lifelong love of learning, and expand their capacity for learning by stirring their imagination as well.

> ➤ **Role of Educators in imparting Meaningful Education**

In the context of making education meaningful, an understanding of the points of difference between education and learning becomes an imperative as both of them are distinctly different from each other and hence can't be used synonymously. Education refers to the process of study where the learner is expected to read, observe, analyze, memorize facts, and understand, in order to try and master the subject that one has gained knowledge in. **'Learning'**, as a concept linked with passion, is a process that a human being goes through from the cradle to the grave and it involves an ongoing process of *acquiring* attitudes, knowledge, skills, and values whereas *imparting* the same through a process is **'education'**.[4]

While learning is a '*catch all*' phrase that propels all forms of human growth and development through a process of actual internalization of knowledge or skills, education could, at best, be a small part of it. Education, as a specialized form of learning, is mandatory, rule based, governed by a system, and fuelled by interest or compulsion, but learning is interest-based and life-long. Confined to textbook curricula, education is incentive-based and is pursued in formal settings such as schools, coaching centres, colleges, and campuses and gives us systematic instruction, knowledge, marks, and certificates. Learning includes acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being educated. It also gives us wisdom beyond just books and inside the classrooms. It quenches the thirst and quest of the learner by actively engaging with the material that he/she is exposing himself/herself to gain worldly wisdom, practical skills, or at least makes you street smart! Learning is a pull model to represent the act of absorbing and extending knowledge or skills basically to bring about a change in behavior while education is a push model that attempts to extend someone else's knowledge or

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skills. The *learning pull* can occur with or without the *education push*, which may or may not result in learning.[5]

> ### The Imperative of Transitioning from Passive Learning to Active Learning Mode

Passive learning is a teacher-centered method of learning or instruction where students receive information from the instructor and internalize it—often through some form of memorization or rote learning. Passive learning becomes the result or intended outcome of the direct instruction or lecturing where the learner receives no feedback from the instructor. Felder & Brent (2009)[6] define active learning as "anything course-related that all the students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening, and taking notes". As per Bonwell & Eison, "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" is active learning.[7] Both passive and active modes of learning have their own respective pros and cons and one is more effective than the other in particular settings and different scenarios. In cases where knowing definitive answers to problems is real progress, passive learning is deemed ideal as it promotes *convergent thinking*. Active learning strategies stimulate a subjective way of *divergent thinking* and can be as short as a few minutes long and can easily be integrated into a lecture or any other classroom setting.

Learning becomes active when learners engage in activities such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of content used in the class. Educators promote it through cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and the use of case methods and simulations.

> ### Changes in Learner's Personality along Immaturity-Maturity Continuum [8]

To make learning meaningful, there is an urgent need to bring in changes in a learner's personality through purposeful and relevant education. A learner's development is processed along a continuous break of an immaturity situation to a maturity situation. In academic pursuits, a student is generally found to be an immature person in the initial stages of the teaching-learning process. He is passive, dependant, has lack of confidence, and feels the need to be controlled by others. On the contrary, a mature learner is characterized for being active, independent, self-confident, and self-controlled. Tutors, who treat their learners positively and as responsible adults, will achieve higher academic attainments. Common problems such as learners avoiding work, lack of interest, alienation, and low levels of academic engagement may be signs of mismatch between teaching-learning practices and mature adult personality. One of the best solutions for this problem that is generally found in campuses is to make the learning process more active, experiential, absorbing, and fun-filled.

Once an attempt is made to successfully develop learners into mature individuals, one would be able to witness several changes in their personalities. For this transformation, infant-

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like learners need to move from passivity to a state of increasing activity and develop from a state of dependency upon others to a state of relative independence as adults. As they are expected to behave in many and varied ways as adults rather than only in a few ways, they should be in a position to develop deeper passion and stronger interests instead of pursuing erratic, casual, and shallow hobbies. Their very short time perspective involving only the present should get replaced by and widened to include both the past and the future. Moving to an equal or superior position with others as adults from a subordinate position is definitely a symptom of active learners. This change involves the learners to become not only aware of but also control their individual "self". Despite the fact that these changes in a learner's personality are only general tendencies, they do throw some light on how a healthy personality develops on a continuum from a state of immaturity to a meaningful maturity.

> ## 'Experiential Learning' as a Means for making Learning Meaningful

Experiential learning activities[9] are increasingly being used for their efficacy in enhancing the learners' comprehension and improved learning when they use their prior knowledge and personal experience. Einstein has rightly stated that the only source of knowledge is experience. Echoing the same statement, Aristotle said that *'For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.'* If learning were to happen in the flow of education, experiential learning mode is the most ideal choice for the learners as it revolutionizes the way they generally learn. Years of instructors' anecdotal evidence demonstrates that students learn best by "doing". It makes sense for the educators to invest their time and efforts in *'Learning via practice'* activities such as focus groups, case studies, and team building activities that can be facilely injected into and take place even within the classroom settings.

It is precisely for this valid reason that a host of experiential learning technologies are increasingly finding a way into the classrooms. Above all, it is personalized and can happen anytime and anywhere thanks to the technology and the use of portable devices. It helps learners become more agile and flexible. Even if it makes the learners fail fast, it puts them in the driver's seat and allows them to take control of their learning. In other words, fast failure equals fast learning, which leads to greater and productive learning and work-ready graduates. It makes learning fun, which can definitely motivate learners to take part in several initiatives to gain and share experiences. Learners enjoy an enduring appreciation for education through transformative experiences that peak their interests and stimulate their curiosity. Forward thinking HEIs that embrace experiential learning are uniquely poised to enrich a student's education through hands-on activities having the required range and depth. In smaller classrooms, students benefit from individualized attention. Educators who place practice-based instruction invite learners to investigate, probe, ponder, and discover through many and varied learning activities that are essential for their academic and personal growth. Academicians need to design lessons and

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pedagogy in such a way that young adults internalize them by immersing themselves in a series of interactive and collaborative activities.

Pursuits that embrace and integrate experiential learning activities at every level have the potential to stir their imagination, foster community, and encourage independence. This is a real hallmark of effective education that gives learners an edge as they prepare themselves for campuses and way beyond. Real learning extends beyond the school walls to the home, workplace, and the outside world. When learners begin to see education as a process of integrating attitudes, knowledge, and skills both within and outside the traditional classroom settings, they start preparing for life in a fast changing world as well.

> ### Role of Educators in imparting Meaningful Education

I hear, I know. I see, I remember. I do, I understand.' – Confucius (551-479 BC). So, to make learners successful and effective, educators need to become *champions* to promote experiential learning as a way of academic life around HEIs. They need to encourage students to learn something, whether small or big, on a continuous basis. It needs to be institutionalized as it has a slew of advantages to and beneficial impacts on the learners. It not only bridges the all-significant *"learning-doing gap"*[10] but leads to lasting behavioral change. Using skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, and problem solving dramatically improves the learning experience while lessening the *'forgetting curve'*. It certainly enhances the engagement levels of the empowered learners via interactions with each other while producing outcomes that are really problem-solving in nature. It is highly personal and effective as it leaves a positive impact on emotions and self-motivation which, in turn, enables knowledge retention and leads to knowledge transfer and delivers rewarding results.

> ### The Way forward for making Meaningful Learning a Reality

If educational institutions can bring in greater levels of parental involvement, families would be in a position to review and reinforce the lessons learned when the learners are at home. This is the best way for them to see learning as a social process beyond the classrooms. HEIs would be in an ideal position to produce impressive results if they can incorporate experiential learning activities by providing greater access to and effectively leveraging cutting-edge emerging technologies, creating safe and hospitable infrastructure, and employing highly trained and experienced faculty. Hands-on instruction could possibly include activities such as internships, studies abroad, field trips, field research, and service-learning projects, and classroom lessons incorporating experiential learning.

Such exercises should identify and target specific skills or *learning gaps* that students must work on and develop in a highly engaging, creative, and cooperative environment. Imaginatively combined experiential activities and trailblazing programs would definitely enhance self-awareness and instill confidence. They also stretch the learners academically while

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helping them forge strong bonds within the community. In this 21st Century, learners should be in a position to navigate the internet judiciously and begin to interact with social media with positive goals in mind. Such a *growth mindset*[11] cultivates their online research safely and simultaneously develops their multimedia presentation skills. By working in concert toward a shared objective and common goal, learners forge themselves into a cohesive unit that enriches the larger college and local community by appreciating and steering through the larger world. Life skills such as self-defence techniques help the learners to stay safe in the world. For this, specially designed activities that focus on both mind and body with lessons about decision making, boundaries, and standing up for oneself can be used for improving self-empowerment.

Most of the time, experiential learning takes place in a group setting, which means that it depends heavily on teamwork. However, learners need to look beyond themselves so they can serve others. This calls for fostering a feeling of community that promotes respect, communication, and empathy. By providing opportunities to work in large and small groups, learners practice their communication skills to project their voices, to gesture, or emote. Learning becomes relevant and meaningful when it empowers learners to succeed and prepare the future in entrepreneurship by generating a greater sense of independence while boosting their resourcefulness. It should also be in a position to sensitize the motivated learners about social justice to learn about the disparity that often exists between individuals and society. It should become an ideal avenue to identify needs in nearby communities and partner with agencies to find sustainable solutions for real-world problems. Learning of this kind would definitely develop leadership, including organizational skills, discernment, and courage to act among the independent and confident youth of the society. It can also amplify their knowledge to chart their own path in the context of a loving, supportive community. The goal of experiential learning has to be to ignite intellectual inquiry and to build the problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills so that curious and agile thinking-learners would be in a position to innovate, invent, and lead in HEIs and beyond later on.

Experiential learning is a process of doing and reflecting. The reflection part is crucial in helping the learner see, understand, and apply what they've learned from a specific activity. Any investment into the passion and emotional aspects of the learners lead to motivation and active engagement. If the learning activities are meaningful in some way or the other to the learner, they automatically get fully immersed in the experience. In other words, they should want to do it, not simply feel like they are being forced to do it. If carried out correctly, they have the potential to promote and result in self-discovery and act as catalysts for a lasting attitudinal and behavioral change after a careful assessment of their own values. Learners need to be able to form meaningful relationships with themselves, with their instructors, and with the learning environment they are in. As the instructor often places most of the learning responsibility onto the learners, the latter should be enabled to manage their own learning by stepping out of their

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comfort zones. This would enhance their learning curves as they are not told when or where to do what and they have the power to identify what he/she needs to or wants to learn and then acquire such knowledge for themselves.

> ### The Role of Educators in Imparting Meaningful Experiential Learning

'Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.' Experiential Learning has at least four components in it viz., (i) combining direct experience with focused reflection, (ii) building on past knowledge and experiences, (iii) actively involving in meaning construction, and (iv) encouraging collaboration and exchange of ideas and perspectives. Conversely, to form and complete the *Experiential Learning Cycle*[12], educators need to focus on four elements i.e., concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The teacher is expected to commence the learning cycle by assigning to the learners either individually or as a team where everyone is actively involved in doing and successfully completing the task. Instructors can use ice breakers, team games, interactive discussions and debates, and problem-solving in this phase. Then they need to perform a reflection of what all has been done and experienced through a process of observation, questioning, giving feedback, filling in reports, communicating with others involved in the task, taking time out, and having quiet times. This is followed by abstract conceptualization using presentation of theories, models, data, and facts.

This process involves making sense out of what happened *via* interpretation of the happenings, making comparisons, and using earlier knowledge to explain what has happened.

Concluding Comments

To ensure that knowledge is retained, tasks and discussions that are performed in teaching-learning processes need to have some meaning and relevance while having connection in some way to the real world. All team-centric activities such as focus groups and case studies, role plays, team building workshops, simulations with virtual reality, treasure hunts using iPad, team cooking, etc., are pretty much experiential in some way or the other. There are so many that can be tried with a more engaged group of learners in varied learning settings. Instructors can inject fun into experiential learning and try out several innovative pedagogical ideas and activities before they get started! Putting what has been learned into practice is referred to as active experimentation and should become absolutely important in learning settings. Experiential learning mitigates the *forgetting curve* and dramatically improves the learning experience as it uses critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision making.

Simulation exercises depict real-life scenarios and challenges while providing a secure learning environment and safe space for experimentation, fun, making mistakes, and applying this knowledge to the real world. They not only bridge the oft-cited and all-important *learning-doing gap* but also result in lasting behavioral change. It increases learners' engagement levels

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via interaction and learning with and from each other. They also feel empowered because they actively produce problem-solving and pragmatic outcomes. As it involves learning in the flow of education, experiential learning is ideal for developing strong leaders and for creating programs that revolutionize the way they learn. Finally, it is personal and effective, has a positive impact on emotions and self-motivation, leads to knowledge retention, enables knowledge transfer, and delivers solid returns on the investments one makes.

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