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On the Art of Conversion of Teaching into Learning

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Abstract:

Despite many hurdles that stand in the way of ensuring access, equity and quality, India still banks a lot on institutional education. Even in this digital era, institutional education depends hugely on teachers many of whom, although otherwise equipped, sometimes fail to ignite the minds of their learners. This may be due to the fact they have little idea of the complex nature of the Teaching-Learning process. Success in teaching does not consist in flawless delivery but in enabling learners to extract the essence from what has been delivered. The article seeks to explore the role of metacognition and positive scepticism in the matter of conversion of teaching into learning. It also examines some of the strategies that may be adopted to face the contemporary challenge of beating Google and also of ensuring involvement of learners. Minus their attentive participation, any lecture is a mere delivery, and hardly a learning inducing action.

Keywords: Metacognition, Scepticism, Involvement, Paradigm Shift, Conversion.

Almost two centuries ago, Henry Peter Brougham summed up the value of education in the following language: 'Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.'¹ What the quote signifies is that the truly educated cannot be dictated but can be inspired to do something. The educated can be easily governed because they are generally law-abiding, but they will resist if forced to do something unapproved by their conscience. Education enriches human resources, and if a society is to be developed, the people inhabiting it need to be appropriately enlightened. The three goals of Higher Education, as identified by the planners of this country, are Access, Equity and Quality. It is assumed that in order to develop our society through education, the service of

education needs must be further extended (*Access*), the facility created must ensure justice through inclusiveness (*Equity*), and the standard of education (*Quality*) should not be allowed to be compromised.

What the word ‘education’ precisely means is not always clear enough; it signifies the acquisition of knowledge, information, skill, value, and what not. While articulating its 21st Century goals, a UNESCO commission under the leadership of Jacques Delors mentioned ‘four pillars of education’. These are related to the sharpening of intellectual skills (*To know*), the performing skills (*To do*) and the behavioural skills (*To be and To Live Together*).² Ideally, education assumes a holistic development through the coordination of the *head*, the *heart*, and the *hands* which represent the intellectual, emotional and manual skills respectively. An educated individual is like an expert cab driver who has some knowledge of the functioning of the parts of the engine, who has acquired the skill of operating the vehicle and who always values life more than speed.

Although the 21st Century has been envisioned as a century of knowledge-intensive societies, acquiring knowledge is challenging indeed. One cannot attain knowledge without negotiating several barriers and crossing many divides. As per Ethnologue data, about 90% of 7000+ languages of the world have no written form. As it is not just possible to create non-spoken resources of knowledge in these languages, the speakers of these languages must learn a language having an alphabet to access the same. Google, the most powerful search engine, can at present fully recognize 50+ languages, of which most are European. This means that access to the digital knowledge repository remains virtually blocked for anyone who is unfamiliar with any of these 50 languages. Even in the post-colonial world, about 28% of books printed annually worldwide are in English. Therefore, insofar as the acquisition of knowledge is concerned, one who knows English has an advantage over those who do not know it. English alone is not guilty of exercising linguistic hegemony. Statistically speaking, 84% of the cyber domain is in the hold of just ten languages. Moreover, internet connectivity is either non-existent or is very poor in the rural areas of the underdeveloped countries. This has created a substantial digital divide between the rural and the urban knowledge aspirants. In addition, if affordability is taken into account, the class dimension of the digital divide will further complicate the issue of universal access to knowledge. India has set the target of improving access cum equity graph by 1935. Pity is, even after the promulgation of the Right to Education Act and the glorious celebration of the 75 years of Indian independence, only the privileged now have access to education while to the rest it is still a remote dream.

Imparting quality education in the teeth of these odds is, therefore, a challenge indeed. However, our concern here is not the general policy of education, nor the challenges of its implementation. The pedagogic question that this paper wants to address is simply this: as an instructor how to improve one's performance within the classroom, physical or virtual? Despite the required knowledge-base, sincerity and commitment, many teachers often are poor performers because they fail to recognize the unique nature of the Teaching-Learning process. An educational institution is not a factory, nor is mind-development a mechanical task of manufacturing an object. The product in a factory will be the same if the raw material and the machine are the same and if the operators running the machines have equal expertise. Not so in a school, college or university. Same teacher, same process and same input – the learning outcome frequently varies. Why so? This is because, students learn according to their individual capability, and it is a fact that intellectual potential varies from learner to learner. Besides, Teaching-Learning is a complex process which waits upon a conditional interface between the instructor who imparts and the student who learns. When a teacher has something to share and is eager to share it whereas students are not involved, learning does not take place. On the other hand, when the students are motivated and are eager to assimilate the learning stuff but the teacher is unable to ignite their minds – teaching becomes a futile exercise. True, self-learning is always the best. But this does not insignificantize the invaluable role of teachers. Google may fetch for any learner 1000 terabytes of information in a second. Nevertheless, without the help of a teacher, it is almost impossible for learners, at least during the period of their early studentship, to tell chalk from cheese, that is, to pick up the right grain from a pile of husk.

An ardent zeal to explore further, a deep passion for sharing what has been acquired over the years, an avid eagerness to shape young minds, and a sense of accountability to oneself as well as to one's society are the four attributes of an ideal teacher. Incidentally, the term 'accountability' needs some disambiguation. Merriam Webster defines it as 'an obligation and willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's action'. It is not just answerability that calls for justifying one's action as per the provisions of applicable rules. One is *accountable* when one considers oneself answerable and performs a task correctly even in the absence of compulsion or external monitoring. Earnestness in evaluation work – that is, meticulous checking of each answer-script avoiding the shortcut of average marking – illustrates this accountability. An examiner is answerable for their failure in checking a certain number of scripts within a dateline. But accountability is there when every script is checked within the dateline with care and attention. Anyway, these attributes alone

will not qualify one to be very successful as a teacher. This is because *success in teaching does not consist in flawless delivery but in enabling learners to extract the essence from what has been delivered*. The conversion of teaching into learning is, metaphorically speaking, printing the negative of a film – the image is already there; it only waits to be *developed* into a photograph. Teaching is the negative, and learning is the photograph processed from the negative. True, there is no pedagogic formula for this conversion, yet educators may successfully overcome the challenges of converting teaching into learning if they recognize the value of the following and modify their teaching mode accordingly.

Metacognition:

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. In order to emerge as accomplished performers, teachers must admit the importance of metacognition. Metacognition signifies analysis of cognition or deep reflection on the entire trajectory of performance – from knowledge acquisition to the dissemination of knowledge. In teaching, metacognition has a tri-polar form related to garnering, grasping and sharing. First of all, teachers are expected to continually self-assess how much of the relevant information of a topic has been garnered and to what extent it has been comprehended. Insofar as teaching or knowledge-sharing is concerned, this self-evaluation counts most. Even learned teachers would be guilty of misplaying their role if they tend to be over-particular while dealing with young learners. For example, most learners of Standard IV or V would be utterly confused if they are taught that a year has 365 days, 5 hours, 49 minutes, 1.1 seconds. This bit of information, although correct, would undoubtedly be an overdose for their tender heads. Metacognition is thus a sort of feedback issued from self-analysis of one's performance. Without metacognition it becomes difficult for teachers to understand that learning cannot be induced merely by delivery, howsoever rich in content and impeccable in style. At the level of Higher Education, it is metacognition that helps one discover that teaching and research are not at all mutually exclusive components – they have a symbiotic relation. While research fuels the mind and recharges it for enhanced performance, teaching triggers a rapid societal spread of the new knowledge and thus prevents it from being a barren pursuit for its own sake.

Scepticism:

But how can a teacher master metacognition that is so useful in teaching? This can be done by recognizing the value of scepticism. In order to acquire a probing mind that inspires one to self-check one's activity as a teacher, one must sustain what Bertrand Russell phrases,

a 'rational doubt' (105)³ about one's level of knowledge as well as one's accomplishment as a performer. One of the 20th Century exponents of scepticism, Russell justly holds that cognitive absolutism closes the windows of the mind and blocks all scope for further probing or development. The absence of scepticism is inimical not only to a teacher's inquisitiveness but also to his instructive role. In order to continually improve one's teaching skills teachers must have some doubt in their heart that despite being outstanding, their performance might fall short of being the perfect. Not that one must always look Westwards for this gem of wisdom. There is a Sanskrit *shloka* that outlines the ideal attitude of a teacher-scholar in pursuit of knowledge:

नवसत्यात्परावृत्तिरर्धसत्येन् तोषणम्।

सर्वसत्यज्ञतागर्वो न ममास्तु कदाचन II (Font Mangal)

Translated into English this reads: 'Let me never be indifferent to new truths or be complacent with half-truths or be proud of having mastered all truths'. It goes without saying that teachers who refuse to make this positive scepticism the motto of their life, will seldom feel the urge for cultivating metacognition for further improvement of their teaching skill.

Sloughing off:

'Sloughing off' stipulates paradigm-shifting, shifting from delivery-centrism to ingestion-centrism. Teaching, as already stated, is most successful when it leads to learning – that is, when the learners can assimilate what has been made available to them by their teacher. While learner-centric pedagogy acknowledges the pivotal role of the learner, it does not allow a teacher to be *passive* or *indifferent*. Teachers are required to gradually tactfully withdraw themselves as the face of the learner becomes increasingly visible in the learning process. The principal task of teachers is not imparting a wagonload of instruction but helping learners in ingesting the learning materials. It is a fact that even the best lecture on a topic would fail if the learners attend the lecture in a *switched-off* mode. Instead of going to the class, one may deliver the same lecture standing before a mirror in one's own room. A recorded lecture, however excellent, is also useless unless anyone listens to the digitized version of a lecture. So any lecture delivered in the absence of an *attentive* audience is a *mere* delivery. It becomes almost a futile exercise for it fails to catalyze the learner's mind. Therefore, teachers must be prepared to abdicate the familiar role of an instructor if their foremost concern be how to convert teaching into learning, how to convert delivery into intake.

Involving:

Since teaching becomes inefficacious without learners' participation, the trillion-dollar question is – how to involve students in the learning process? The first step here is accepting with a smile the seemingly most revolting proposition that teachers *must stoop to conquer*. Only a bad workman would quarrel with his tools. Learners may often be deficient in basic knowledge meant for the particular course of study. Yet, instead of assuming pedantic airs, successful teachers always consider the deficiency of learners as an opportunity to lay the foundation before raising the superstructure. Secondly, students get intellectually involved when they feel that *they will miss something useful or interesting if they are inattentive*. As learners often like to grapple with new ideas, teachers worth their salt know how to make the familiar unfamiliar in order to grip the attention of the learners. One may cite here our former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's witty definition of birthday as an instance: 'the only day in your life, your mother smiled when you cried'. Kalam just changes the perspective and looks at the moment of one's birth from the angle of one's mother whose face brightens after the shattering labour pain when she hears the shrill cry of the new born and is convinced that the baby is not stillborn. *Value addition* is another way of involving learners. Incidentally, value addition is the enhancement of the worth of something through association or quality augmentation. For example, the old-fashioned cutlery and crockery may be worthless by themselves; but these become invaluable possessions the moment they are tagged to a great name, say Gandhi or Tagore or Tolstoy. In order to illustrate the point that value addition may be adopted as a useful technique for involving learners, one may refer to a Social Media video⁴ on stress management. The video shows a teacher asking the class to guess what may be the possible weight of a glass containing some water. Having taken all diverse responses to the question, the teacher makes his insightful comment. He explains to his students that what is more important than the physical weight of the glass is how it would feel if held in hand for a longer duration – the longer, the weightier. Analogously, the duration for which any stress is borne in mind determines whether the human mind would crack under the pressure or not – the longer, the more unbearable. An enlightening piece of wisdom indeed! Even the frequently absent-minded learner will be eager to profit from such deliberations. The fourth technique of involving learners – that is, *drawing the learners out of the cocoon of self-absorption and engaging them intellectually* – is presenting an idea in such a way as the learners find it easy to relate it to their lived experience. Consider, for example, the story about crediting Rs. 86,400 to one's bank account at the beginning of the day and taking away the entire unspent balance after 24 hours. As time

is intangible, one cannot always conceptualize the immense value of time and unconsciously wastes it. The allegorical equation of seconds with rupees concretizes the abstract and sensitizes one to the value of time. As learners can now relate it to their lived experience, it becomes easier for them to grasp the idea that time unutilized is time lost. A class where the teacher can successfully relate ideas to the lived experience of the learners must be singularly engrossing and thereby facilitate the conversion of teaching into learning.

Beating Google:

Students lose interest and tend to withdraw from the learning process when the teaching-session fails to equip them with anything that cannot be googled out. Indeed, teaching is far more challenging today than it had been ever before. This is because every bit of information that teachers collect for their class, is within the reach of adult learners, thanks to the mind-boggling power of the search engine and AI software. In other words, *beating Google* is the main challenge for teachers of our time. So teachers must try to deliver something that is impossible for any learner to gather from any common digital storehouse. This can be done not by looking for off-beat information, for nowadays there is hardly any uncharted, un-trodden territory. So, this is to be done through *innovation* that requires the application of one's mind to what has been culled from an open source accessible to all. Since human consciousness is unique to every individual, when an idea is processed in any reflective mind, it gets so transformed as to become original, non-identical, and duplicate-less. Google may be beaten if what has been fished out by the search engine is subjected to contemplation, problematization and re-examination. When this is done, the learners present in a class will feel thrilled that they are having an exciting learning experience and teaching will automatically get metamorphosed into learning.

Finally, however successful the conversion of teaching into learning, teachers must recognize the limits of this method of acquiring knowledge. They must not try to teach everything, for everything cannot be taught at all. There is a Sanskrit *shloka* that beautifully articulates how much one owes to one's teachers and how much to other sources:

आचार्यात्पादमादत्ते पादंशिष्यःस्वमेधया।

सब्रह्मचारिभ्यःपादं पादं कालक्रमेणचा॥ (Font Mangal)

In English rendition, it goes thus: 'One-fourth of one's knowledge comes from one's teacher, one-fourth from own merit; one-fourth from discussion with co-learners and the remaining one-fourth dawns over time'. So, a class is just one of the four doors that must be

crossed to enter into the vast hall of knowledge. Hence, it is the duty of every teacher to sensitize learners to the necessity of fruitfully exploiting other equally important avenues of knowledge with a view to having the satisfaction of fullest self-enrichment.

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