

COMMENT

Reforming education with student-centred learning

HEART OF THE ISSUE: They need to be given opportunities to participate in the process



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MUCH has been said about the importance of education and the knowledge-based society. Yet results appear to be elusive. Despite significant expenditure on education, graduates seem to lack important skills. One is a lack of proficiency in English. Another is a limited ability to communicate. A lack of confidence also seems to be a problem. Why is this the case?

One reason is the methodology of teaching/learning used. There is

excessive focus on the teacher and not enough on the students. Learning is teacher-centred rather than student-centred. Moreover, rote learning and memorisation are the order of the day.

At the heart of the issue is the question of how one learns. We learn not only by memorisation, but also by thinking, formulating and exchanging ideas. We learn to communicate by speaking and writing. In other words, learning is an interactive activity, not a one way process.

Students need to be given opportunities to participate in the learning process. Learning is a co-operative activity. Thus, learning needs to include discussions. It is through discussions that we learn how to think and express ourselves clearly.

Accordingly, students need to be given opportunities to formulate,

express and share informed points of view. These views can subsequently be “tested” in question and answer sessions. Constructive feedback can assist in improving the articulation of a given perspective.

Where discussions and opportunities to make presentations are absent, it will be hard for students to develop thinking, analytical and communication skills. It will also be difficult to develop confidence and leadership skills.

In the teacher-centred approach, the teacher does most of the talking. Students are expected to commit to memory what the teacher says, and later repeat what they “learned” in this way during exams. Some teachers even confine themselves to reading from textbooks or slides.

This kind of “learning” is mechanical. It places little emphasis on understanding. Even a parrot can memorise some words and repeat them. Yet the parrot has no understanding of what it says.

In the teacher-centred approach

the teacher appears like a sage on the stage rather than a guide on the side.

However, much of what takes place in this approach is closer to indoctrination than to education.

Indoctrination is similar to brainwashing. The student memorises without comprehension. He may recollect knowledge but is unable to apply it. This method is short on what are known as the “higher order thinking skills”.

“Higher order thinking skills” include recollection and the application of knowledge. They also include analysis (taking things apart) and synthesis (putting them back together again). They also include evaluation, the highest skill.

Evaluation requires pronouncing on a relative merit of a given text, presentation or an object. This requires not only thinking but also critical thinking. Evaluation is challenging because it requires not only reasoned judgment but also the application of criteria to be used in the evaluation process.

Peer tutoring is an effective and interesting way to learn. In this method, the students themselves become teachers. Presentations must always be accompanied by Q & A sessions. These help clarify all topics covered. They also reinforce understanding of concepts and help students to develop confidence and communications skills. Every student should be required to make at least one presentation in class. Group work should also be encouraged. In this way learning becomes enjoyable and more effective at the same time.

To be effective and to motivate students to learn, learning has to be interesting. It has to address students’ concerns. A teacher should never discourage students from asking questions. To do so would be tantamount to nipping the student’s desire to learn in the bud.

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