

Creating Win - Win situation in education

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Education is one of our most formidable challenges today. Though we have some of the best schools in the world, we are unable to deliver quality education to all our children. Though we have a policy of “education for all” and schools are mushrooming rapidly, there is a great dearth of good doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, scientists and teachers. Though we believe that education should foster values without ulterior motives of profit we have a huge industry that has fully commercialized education. Unfortunately, as Ivan Illich said the pupil is “schooled” to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence and fluency with the ability to say something new.

Recently the CBSE has initiated many measures to help overcome the challenges we face. Still we often find ourselves seeking solutions with the indomitable hope – there must be a better way to do things. In this scenario the role of “communities of practice” which have a “shared repertoire of ideas, commitment and memories”, assumes significance. While Lave and Wenger coined the term in the 1990s, such learning Communities have always been in existence with people belonging to the same domain informally sharing their experiences and seeking solutions to problems in fresh, imaginative ways. They have been given various names, such as learning networks, thematic groups, technology Clubs or even the CBSE’s Sahodaya School Complexes. “Classroom dynamics”, “Class spirit”, etc, refer to similar issues.

“Communities of Practice” in education

While production units deal with tangibles like machines, education is concerned with intangibles like teaching- learning, with notions such as lifelong learning, multiple intelligences and so on. Moreover, in the education sector, learning is not only a means to an end: it is the end product. Our students and teachers are not like blank slates that can be molded in any way, but come with a background of experiences, perceptions, memories and interact in classrooms which are like miniature societies where relations between teacher and pupils play a central role. Learning is, thus not merely the acquisition of knowledge by individuals as much as a process of social participation. The situation impacts the process.

Moreover learning is something more than simply ‘learning by doing’ or experiential learning. Pupil and teachers are full participants in developing meaning. There is a strong sense of group identity, of belongingness which leads to a rejuvenating sense of well being and also lessens the disappointment of failure. The sense of camaraderie resulting from collaborative work can be encouraged. School lessons are a special form of a CoP where along with teaching, non-intentional processes go on side by side.

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Members are effective channels of information and experiences. Studies have shown that workers are five times more likely to turn to a colleague for suggestions than to information culled from a book or database as this saves their time.

Challenges faced by CoPs in the formal school structure

Teachers are under pressure to complete programmes and to raise student's performance, prepare and organize course work and monitor and evaluate the progress of students. This leaves little time for the average teacher to seek CoPs for development purposes. Moreover the traditional hierarchical structure in schools characterized by excessive supervision and interference impede the success of CoPs. Schools expect students to be critical, independent thinkers, but teachers expect them to conform and do exactly as they say. A Community member may be thought to be "difficult" and be sidelined for his deviant views even when he is engaged in positive criticism. This needs to be overcome by openly acknowledging different viewpoints. More seasoned colleagues and those with a higher educational level, tend to foster a more collaborative culture. They need to intervene in such situations.

Implications for schools

Since learning occurs in social contexts, theoretical beliefs must be combined with the time-tested "wisdom of practice" taking into account different levels of participation and of interest. Teachers should be able to break learning into small "chunks" and weave them meaningfully and contextually. Teachers also need to encourage the ability to ask controversial questions and seek imaginative solutions. Instruction should be based on children's interests. Practice can be provided in a variety of ways. The important topics in one's subject area, the most powerful analogies and illustrations, apt examples and explanations, and effective demonstrations need to be discussed by interviewing students, comparing different curriculum materials, studying the practices of different teachers and their effectiveness. Seeking alternative perspectives in Communities of Practices, can add value to the search for common understandings and make learning dynamic.

Other areas in which CoP can contribute

Many communities of practice have emerged among teachers and administrators in the direction of professional development. They interact regularly, in workshops and via blogs on the internet etc. with a passion to impart better education. The motivation to become a more central participant in a community of practice can provide a powerful incentive for learning. They can help in developing alternative materials for differently abled students, experiencing difficulties either with regard to family relationships, friends, health or concerns about their future. They can help build an environment that is safe and discuss how to deal with the increased problem of bullying in school and promote inclusive education by working with young people to accept others. They can provide support to curriculum extension efforts by assisting those seeking extra tuitions. In fact the type of information that is shared and learned in CoP is boundless.

CoPs can contribute positively to curriculum enrichment by encouraging and supporting groups which cater to common interests such as performing arts, science and technology, environment issues,

theatre, debating, literature etc. through the different clubs and societies in schools. For a child who is not gifted academically, such CoPs offer a sanctuary and a platform to showcase their talent in the art or sports and enhance his or her self-esteem making him less prone to negative peer pressure. Students can have fun, increase creativity, improve organizational skills, learn time management, and develop people skills.

CoPs creating win-win situations

CoPs create supportive learning environments by engaging students in rigorous and relevant learning. When an Odissi dancer of international fame, conducted a workshop for the dance club of our school in August 2010, under the aegis of Spic-Macay (another CoP) such was the enthusiasm of students and so quick the learning that they were able to give a small performance after just three days! She too appreciated their high levels of motivation and talent sharpened through formal and informal practice sessions as a CoP. Undoubtedly CoPs can create win-win situations by being an effective hothouse for the germination of new ideas, methods and practices. Students who were initially novices become experts and are teaching others who assume the role of novices in real learning situations leading to cascading effects.

Go to the People

Live with them

Learn from them,

Love them.

Start with what they know,

Build with what they have.

. . . But with the best leaders

When the work is done

the task is accomplished

The people will say,

'We have done this ourselves.'

~ Lao Tsu