

Transformative Pedagogy: A Twenty-First Century Perspective Towards Improving Education

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Abstract

Education in the twenty-first century needs to break existing boundaries and adopt a new blend of teaching to meet the evolving demands of students. The need for teachers to unlearn instructional methods that were consistently being used over the last few years and move towards perceiving not just education, but their role as well, in a different way, lies at the crux of this paper. This paper critiques the current form of teaching and learning happening in institutions and emphasizes the need for a shift in this structure, outlining methods that are more likely to be effective in the twenty-first century. The methodology used to gather information for this paper was a survey of different people associated with the education sector. It followed a qualitative and quantitative approach towards obtaining information to prove that there needs to be a transformation in the pedagogical approaches towards education in the twenty-first century. The study unearthed the necessity to cater to the diverse needs of students by making education specific to individuals rather than providing a one-size-fits-all form of instruction. A focus on individuality and skill development is essential and a shift towards a mixed method of outcome-based education coupled with choice-based learning will be beneficial to promote all-round development and make them capable of adapting to the changing world.

Keywords: Mixed Education, PROSPER Framework, Outcome-Based Education, Technology, Choice-Based Learning

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Introduction: The Evolution of Learning

When communities were nomadic and relied entirely on hunting and gathering to meet their daily needs, the process of learning for children was centred around their ability to explore the world around them. They would entertain themselves with stones, leaves, sticks, and other resources that they could access. Post the Middle Ages and the onset of feudalism, this self-exploratory lifestyle of children would take on a drastic change. With agriculture soon becoming the dominant form of survival, children were required to work in fields to contribute to feeding the family. This shift resulted in wandering communities settling down and the arrival of permanent housing structures. With these changes, the exploratory freedom children once enjoyed began to wane. They were now expected to develop knowledge about the land they lived in, the type of animals they could rear, crops that would grow – all of which would facilitate this new lifestyle that they had evolved into (Gray, 2008).

With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-18th century, the poorer and disadvantaged children were required to work in dirty, crowded factories as labourers. Thus, their innate tendency to learn and discover things on their own, came to be replaced by the need to adhere to instructions. “A good child was an obedient child, who suppressed his or her urge to play and explore and dutifully carried out the orders of adult masters” (Gray, 2008). As industrial development gained momentum and the need for child labour began to decrease, the idea of childhood as a crucial time for learning began to circulate. Public schools surfaced, each with the idea of indoctrinating students with values that the elders of the time considered important. While some focussed on teaching the histories of the land, others believed morals and lessons of mathematics and Latin would turn them into scholars. By this time, the idea of education was considered a system of inculcating certain truths and facts into young minds. The idea of leaving children to their own devices to learn was long forgotten. Children were now taught things that the adults considered important and their intellectual prowess was determined by how well they regurgitated that matter back after a few days. This system slowly made students grow out of their inherent creativity instead of growing into it and this was where the problem began.

Education today follows the same paradigm as it did back then. Despite the incorporation of technology, the purpose that education aimed at achieving so many years ago continues to persist. It continues to train students to learn things not for the bigger purpose of creating better equipped individuals that are society-ready, but to reproduce content at the end of the teaching term, thus showing its limited progress despite the gap of time.

The Merriam- Webster Student Dictionary defines education as “knowledge, skill, and development gained from study or practice” (Webster, 2007). While education has always attempted to provide knowledge of an academic specialty, the need to foster independent learning and an enquiring spirit in students has often been side-lined. With compact syllabi and a structured system of teaching laid down, the need to think critically and creatively is not given enough emphasis.

The main purpose of education has always been to incorporate values into the lives of people and stimulate their intellect. However, the current system of education seems to be failing when it comes to catering to the needs of the twenty- first century. This paper

attempts to throw light on pedagogical transformations that can be utilised to produce better results, enabling teachers to cater specifically to the needs of individual students rather than continuing to test all students on a simplistic, unvaried scale.

Challenges of education in the twenty-first century

The needs of the twenty-first century demand that teachers move away from a system that merely inculcates knowledge towards a system that inculcates skill-based training. A report released by The World Economic Forum in 2016 stated that by 2020 “more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today” (James, 2016). According to the report, complex problem solving and social skills needed to be given more attention to create individuals who are ready to face society. Being in 2020, this prediction is seen to carry truth in it. Keeping a uniform scale to ascertain the intelligence or potential of a child does not make sense in a world where students are exposed to so many different skills.

For a long time, education systems have been driven by a system of conformity-conformity to a prescribed syllabus, conformity in testing methods, in assessment and so on. It is now time that this approach towards learning changes. There needs to be a shift in the kind of assessment being done. A system that shuns those who are not *academically* ahead is no longer a system that makes sense. Academic excellence is no longer being seen as the main focus of education and allowing such an archaic system to persist will serve to be detrimental to the growth and development of students.

Another potent challenge that needs to be tackled is in the teaching-learning process. Right from an early age, students have access to a wide variety of information at their fingertips. Thus, the role of teachers in the twenty-first century needs to undergo an upheaval. In these constantly evolving times, teachers must transform into something greater. With technology providing students easy access to knowledge, the role of a teacher can no longer be limited to knowledge provider, but requires the adoption of a greater responsibility – which encapsulates becoming a guide, mentor, and facilitator.

Another major challenge for teachers, particularly in a country like India, is the vast number of students in a classroom which makes it difficult to utilise varied strategies to make classes more engaging due to paucity of time and the demands of an over-packed curriculum. Embracing the use of technology by moving towards a system of blended learning can help tackle this issue. Students of the twenty-first century are an exploratory generation, eager to question, challenge, and even prove their greater knowledge of the subject. The responsibility of the teacher should be to fuel the fire that drives this generation. They should avoid belittling students who do not conform to the norm that was being followed all these years. Instead, teachers should attempt to identify the skills and interests that drive today’s students, as vast as they may be, and push them towards developing in that direction.

Until recently, the job market still valued good grades over skills but the world is experiencing a drastic shift from this mindset. Today, the upcoming start-up industry is openly opting for people with certain skillsets and the capability of performing, irrespective of their educational grades.

Analysing the way forward

A survey of about fifty people was conducted to ascertain what they felt about the current education system and whether it should be revamped to better meet the needs of young people. The sample included teachers, students, parents, and other working professionals from rural as well as urban areas. It employed a qualitative and quantitative approach to obtain in-depth responses to the questions posed in the questionnaire. The hypothesis was that the education system is ill-suited to meet the demands of the twenty-first century and needs to undergo a major change if it is to better prepare students for the future. The responses were varied but augmented the hypothesis and emphasized small yet impactful changes that need to be incorporated into the system.

A majority of those surveyed felt that education needs to focus more on imparting practical knowledge. Essential topics like managing money, doing taxes, dealing with people, handling stress, developing good interpersonal relationships need to be given greater importance in today's world. Respondents further opined that a regularly updated syllabus that collaborates with the requirements of the working world was essential.

It is important to note that the children of the twenty-first century are growing up in a world where very often both parents are breadwinners, single parenting is becoming more the norm than the exception and families are constantly on the move for better jobs and educational prospects. These issues of increasing individualism, forced displacement, and digitalisation affect the mental health of children and in turn, hamper the process of learning (University, 2019). Thus, it is imperative for teachers to look beyond the covers of their textbooks and understand students for who they are, helping them tackle and battle these insecurities that research indicates is becoming increasingly prevalent in twenty-first century adolescents (University, 2019). By addressing these issues from a young age, it will lead to the development of free-thinking, intelligent people who will transform into well-rounded members of society.

On being asked what education in the twenty-first century should include, many felt that research and self-learning should be given priority. Instead of merely assimilating information, developing in students the need to question or critically analyse situations and problems was prioritized. A few were of the opinion that, particularly in today's world, classroom learning needed to include the imparting of values and morals while ensuring that individuality and creativity are not stifled but given sufficient priority. This opinion holds weightage as society is far from its best, which indicates that education is not serving the purpose of creating better individuals. The need to teach values so that people become better human beings, before all else, seems to be the need of the hour.

Educationist Ken Robinson once said, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original" (Robinson, 2007). The fear of being wrong is dominant from the moment students enter schools because schools follow a strict 'factory line' system of grading and categorising potential. The current education system is so disruptive that it "stigmatises mistakes" (Robinson, 2007). This attitude needs to change. Students should be encouraged to speak their minds and voice their opinions without the fear of being chastised. Teachers must understand that intelligence is

diverse and creative and should not restrict but be open to the array of multiple intelligences that students possess- be it in music, art, problem-solving, etc. A recent situation in a Class 9 English language class proved this point. Students were instructed to come up with a two-minute speech on an 'artist' for a class exam. While some chose the likes of Picasso and Michelangelo, others surprisingly picked classical writers like Wordsworth and Shakespeare. When questioned, their rationale was simple – writers are artists too. They paint pictures with their words and create something beautiful from their imagination. Thus showing that while some students understood the term 'artist' as it is generally used - a person who creates paintings and sculptures- others tried to expand this term to mean "someone who creates things with great skill or imagination" (Dictionary, 2020). These are small ways in which creativity is manifested right from a young age. When this is suppressed and students are told their reasoning does not make sense or are outright chastised for not following instructions, it gives rise to fear or self-doubt that prevents future experimentation thus slowly killing that inherent spark of creativity and individuality.

This indicates that there is a need to revitalize the way in which learning has been happening over the years. When exploring the role of an educator, teachers need to take a personal interest in students to ascertain strengths and weaknesses, individual learning needs and thereafter craft a lesson plan that can be utilised to meet those differing needs. The process is not easy but by adopting technology it is certainly possible. Students possessing moderate and higher intelligence can focus on problem-solving, experimenting, and learning through pre-created tasks and assignments given to them through online resources, while the teacher can focus on the weaker students in the class who are in need of individual attention.

Classrooms need to be turned into collaborative zones where students are put into smaller groups and allowed to take charge of the learning process. In the earlier days, teachers played a central role in the learning process but the twenty-first century demands a different approach – one where classrooms are more student-centric. With the help of technology, personalizing education can become a reality. Teachers can utilise technology to varying extents to guide students in the process of acquiring knowledge. This can happen effectively if learning becomes a more proactive process.

To foster individuality and skill development, the existing mode of assessment needs to be relooked at. Utilisation of digital assessment options will enable teachers to analyse the comprehension and concept grasping capacity of students through different forms – whether it is pop-up quizzes, essays or virtual presentations – each assessment being tailored to the skills and strengths of individual students. All of these changes need to begin at the grassroots level. The current system judges a student's memory not their understanding of concepts or their skills, which is a step in the wrong direction. There is an essential need to devote more time to proactive, self-driven learning rather than assessment being the crux of the education process.

Educationist Joe Ruhl emphasizes the need for choice as an essential component of every classroom (Ruhl, 2016). Students of today have landed right in the midst of a technological boom, in a world filled with distractions but also, a world full of options. Right from receiving phones at an early age and having technology dominate so many spheres of their lives, to the availability of diverse job avenues after their education – the options are numerous. The moment choices are provided in a classroom, students

feel a sense of control. They will choose the option that they best like to work on thus making them more active in the learning process. By providing choices and conducting technology-rich activities, teachers will be able to hold the attention of students, making the process of learning more personalised to meet individual needs (West, 2013).

The PROSPER framework proposed by Noble and McGrath, which focusses on inculcating Positivity, Relationships, Outcomes, Strengths, Purpose, Engagement, and Resilience, into students is an ideal way forward. (Noble and McGrath, 2015). This model focusses on fostering positivity, developing good relationships, yielding concrete outcomes, developing strength to tackle life's hardships, having a well-defined purpose, facilitating better engagement, and developing resilience – tools that are essential for students to deal with the ever-changing world around them. If teachers are able to attend to these needs within the confines of the curriculum, it would boost student well-being which in turn, would cause education to become more purpose-oriented creating students who are well-equipped to face the changing times. Using these seven components of PROSPER within the classroom space will create a new and different learning environment – where goal-attainment is achieved through cooperative learning tasks which better prepare students for the real world (Noble and McGrath, 2015).

Once students have purpose, the process of learning will take on a new meaning. This development of purpose or an objective prior to the imparting of knowledge is also at the core of the Outcome-Based Education proposed by William Spady which is being adopted by some institutes of higher education. It focusses on students attaining certain concrete, measurable skills by the end of their academic journey. By researching and understanding the demands of the future, teachers can create a course that is aligned with the broader objectives of the discipline or area, and will focus on developing measurable performance outcomes, that is, things that can be 'done' by the student rather than just 'learnt' thus preparing them for effective adult functioning. The proper planning and implementation of outcome-based education as conceptualised by William Spady will automatically enable students to learn the skills that prepare them for life, which is currently what education systems are criticised for not catering to.

Conclusion

To address the concerns of education in the twenty-first century, it is important to recognise that all human interaction is based on diversity thus the need to move away from a system that demands conformity. Extending education beyond the classroom is important to transform education. Technology and online learning make this possible, enabling students to access notes from home, communicate with teachers and work at a pace they are comfortable with. It also addresses the challenge of having diverse students and catering to the interests of each one. Numerous methods of constructive teaching can be applied to the classroom setting with the help of technology, however, the lack of appropriate infrastructure in educational institutions, improper internet connectivity and a packed syllabus are the limitations likely to be experienced when moving towards such a system.

Thus, the transformative pedagogy that is needed for the twenty-first century is not something new and innovative, it is merely developing a new outlook towards education and what it should seek to achieve. The methods and models to make it impactful already exist but the success lies in the implementation of an effective blend

of methods that can foster not just the academic but the holistic development of every student, irrespective of where their talent or skill lies.

By combining elements of outcome-based education and aligning it with the concepts spoken of in the PROSPER framework with equal attention paid to individual needs and choice-based learning, education will take on a newer and more meaningful dimension that is well-suited for the twenty-first century. Moreover, the use of technology will enable educators to find unique and personalised ways of getting students to contribute in class and in turn, achieve the outcomes set out for them. Utilising technology to ensure that no student feels that they are incompetent will help boost feelings of positivity, which in turn, will turn them into resilient individuals as since “people who frequently experience and express positive emotions tend to be more resilient” (Noble and McGrath, 2015).

To conclude, education in the twenty-first century needs to adopt an integrated approach to foster holistic learning which includes the proper usage of different methods that already exist. Education needs to be personalised where content is customized based on the passions, interests, and learning capacity of different children. This is undoubtedly a challenging task and would demand teachers being trained anew to understand such a system. However, the need for skilled individuals is surpassing the need for knowledgeable students in today’s workforce and it is the job of educators to ensure that education achieves this outcome. The move towards positive innovation in the classroom begins with a teacher thus it is expected that teachers dedicate themselves to catering to the holistic needs of students- developing skills, values and an attitude of enquiry that will motivate students to become life-long learners. Only by doing this will we create students who are well-balanced and ready to take on the challenges of the real world, thereby transforming education.

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