3

Intertwining Innovative Teaching–Learning Practices in Classrooms

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Abstract

Education is the way to progress and lays the very foundation of society. Given the rapid advancements in knowledge, science and technology, the quality of education being imparted is of paramount importance. But with an array of information available online, imparting knowledge and information has become an even more daunting task for educationists, especially, those catering to the primary stage. The young mind is inquisitive by nature, i.e., full of questions and information. As teachers are the most effective interface between students and knowledge, they need to possess a desired set of skills and be updated at all times in order to cater to the myriad needs of the young learners. They need to use different teaching–learning methodologies and strategies in classrooms, apart from conventional methods like lecture and chalk-and-talk, so as to enable the learners to have a clearer understanding of concepts. This paper describes different teaching–learning methods like blended learning, peer learning and peer tutoring that would make the teaching–learning process more insightful, impactful, interesting and interactive.

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements and globalisation have influenced the present day education system, making it imperative to re-define and revisit the curriculum and pedagogical practices in place so as to prepare students to successfully face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Many research studies suggest that the 'lecture model' of teaching is highly ineffective in addressing challenges that relate to imparting the twenty-first century competencies and skills but it still

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prevails as a dominant instructional approach in education and is used worldwide (Saavedra and Opfer, 2012; Scott, 2015).

Today, being an era of knowledge explosion, one can access a gamut of information, using one's mobile phone, from almost anywhere. The world has become a global village for children of the Z–generation (Rosen, 2011). They are all connected via the Internet and social media sites. Therefore, they are aware of many local and global issues, and real life problems compared to children of the previous generation. Leadbeater and Wong (2010) argue that worldwide successful reinvention of educational systems depends on renovating pedagogy and reframing learning tasks. They emphasise that learning strategies for this century will not be limited to school but also include learning with peers, inter generational partnerships and community relationships. The contemporary system of education seeks learners to possess communication, problem solving, critical and reflective thinking, and collaborative skills.

INNOVATIVE TEACHING–LEARNING PRACTICES

The traditional practice of classroom teaching may be transformed by incorporating 'constructivism' as an innovative teaching–learning strategy, which would help develop necessary competencies and skills in the learners, enabling them to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Some of the innovative teaching–learning strategies that may be implemented in classrooms are as follows.

Peer learning

It is an instructional method that involves active learning. Students are given opportunities to frame questions, discuss issues, explain their opinions and viewpoints, and engage in cooperative learning by working in teams on problems and projects. Peer learning is based on Albert Bandura's 'Cognitive Social Learning Theory'. It is a form of cooperative learning that enhances the value of student–student interaction, and results in various advantageous learning outcomes. Peer learning refers to students' learning with and from each other as fellow learners, without any implied authority to an individual. It is based on the tenet that students learn a lot by explaining their ideas and understanding to each other and by participating in activities, where they can learn from their peers (Boud, 2001).

Hence, in peer learning, students get an opportunity to construct their own learning and knowledge. Besides, they are involved in researching, collecting, analysing, evaluating, integrating and applying the acquired information and knowledge to complete an assignment or solve a problem. Thus, they engage themselves intellectually, emotionally and socially in a constructive

conversation, and learn by talking and questioning each other's views and reaching a consensus or dissent (Boud, 2001).

Peer learning, thus, helps in developing many skills in the learners like communication and collaboration, organisation and planning, and analytical and evaluation, among others.

Here, the role of a teacher changes from that of an instructor to a facilitator. Teachers also raise questions and issues, prompting the students to think and reflect, and engage in meaning making.

Peer learning, thus, involves active assistance and support from similar social groupings, who are not professional teachers but help each other learn. The role of the 'learner' and the 'teacher' may change during the teaching–learning process as participants share their knowledge and work on common problems.

Peer learning is optimised when incorporated as an integral component in curriculum, paying attention to creating a conducive teaching–learning environment. Students must build mutual respect, trust and confidence in each other so that they feel free to express their opinions, test ideas, and ask for or offer help when needed (Boud, 2001).

Peer tutoring

There is an old adage — "To teach is to learn twice". Though not a new idea, 'peer tutoring' is gaining popularity these days. In peer tutoring, the students help each other learn. It is characterised by seniors helping out juniors with studies or intelligent students helping their classmates learn.

Peer tutoring is a term used to describe a wide array of tutoring arrangements. But most research studies refer to students working in pairs, helping out each other learn a material or practice an academic task. Peer tutoring works best when students of different abilities work together (Kunsch, Jitendra and Sood, 2007).

In peer tutoring, students help each other learn and understand a concept, and treat each other as a 'tutor', i.e., a resource person. It is the process by which a competent pupil, with minimal training and teacher's guidance, helps one or more students, studying in the same grade or of the same level, learn simple skills or basic concepts. It is used for various subjects, such as mathematics, language and science. In this, a higher performing student is paired with a lower performing student to review critical academic or behavioural concepts (Hott and Walker, 2012). However, it may be employed only for a small part of the school day.

Peer tutoring, thus, is a beneficial way for students to learn from each other in the classroom. While one student may excel in mathematics, another may be good at English. The two may work together and help out each other understand various concepts in their respective subjects of excellence. This will help deepen their own knowledge.

Peer tutoring may be categorised into four types—Instructional Peer Tutoring (IPT), Monitorial Peer Tutoring (MPT), Pair Peer Tutoring (PPT) and Structural Peer Tutoring (SPT). In IPT, older and intelligent students coach juniors in a one-to-one or one-to-group arrangement. Such a teaching methodology is employed when there is a major difference between the tutor and the tutee. In MPT, a class is divided into four or five groups, and the class monitors are assigned with the task to lead each group. In such a set-up, a teacher has more time to attend to each student. In PPT, two students of the same age group, one of whom is better skilled than the other, plays the tutor's role and helps out the other with studies. In case of SPT, the assistance of a trained tutor is required.

Some other types of peer tutoring are unidirectional, bi-directional or reciprocal, class wide and cross-age.

In 'unidirectional peer tutoring', a trained peer tutor teaches another student. The peer tutor carries out this responsibility throughout the entire teaching–learning programme.

A dyad (pair) is important for 'bi-directional' or 'reciprocal' tutoring. Each participant in the dyad performs the role of a tutor and a tutee, reversely.

'Class wide' peer tutoring is a teaching strategy, wherein, the entire class is divided into groups, consisting of not more than five students each. The tutoring happens during the regular class time, and is led by students. The groups must include students with different abilities as well. It is a unique way of teaching–learning as all students are given task cards, which help them to stay focused on the objectives a lesson tries to achieve.

In 'cross-age' peer tutoring, an older student is chosen as the tutor. The student has to teach a younger student, who is selected as per one's willingness, and physical and intellectual abilities. The tutor gains teaching experience, while the tutee gets effective individualised instruction and feedback. However, the teacher needs to be careful while selecting the tutor, i.e., an older student from a higher class. It must be taken into account that the tutor is more skilled and knowledgeable than the tutee.

Implementation in classroom

Peer tutoring, thus, helps both the tutor and the tutee to learn better and faster. In other words, it is a flexible peer mediated strategy, where students serve as both academic tutors and tutees. In peer tutoring, one-to-one interaction takes place, which helps in promoting the academic and social development of both the tutor and the tutee. As both the tutor and the tutee are (usually) from the same age group, it becomes easy to communicate. It, thus, increases their self-confidence and self-efficacy (Spencer, 2006, as cited by Hott).

Research studies indicate that peer learning activities are beneficial

for both the tutor, as well as, the tutee. They develop team spirit and forge supportive relationships. Besides, such exercises boost their confidence, improve their psychological well-being, personal and social relationships, and communication skills, leading to improved academic achievement.

Thus, the tutor and the tutee understand a concept better as they both work together through assignments and projects. The tutor not only learns the way to pose questions but also develops listening skills in the process, as one is required to listen to the responses of the tutee. Moreover, peer tutoring gives more chances to students to interact with each other and clear doubts. Besides, it enables both the tutor and the tutee to inculcate values like compassion, cooperation, caring and sharing, honesty, respect towards each other, tolerance for each other's faith and diversity, etc. Peer tutoring motivates the participating students and helps to improve their academic achievement and relationship with peers. Besides, it fosters their personal and social development as well.

When the students help each other, learning gets strengthened. They begin to recognise that they do not always have to wait for a teacher to explain a concept or clear their doubts. They have their peers, sitting right next to them who are ready to help. When these peer tutors are prepared to utilise most of their time teaching or tutoring each other, everyone in the class gains from the knowledge shared.

The teacher, too, benefits from this model as one gets increased opportunity to individualise instruction, facilitate inclusion or mainstreaming, and reduce incidences of inappropriate behaviour among students.

Blended learning

Students, today, are full of information and have an unquenchable thirst for acquiring more knowledge. With the rising technological advancement, they collect information from the Internet, apart from accessing other media like textbooks and related books, newspapers, magazines, etc. The present generation is techno savvy and often takes part in online communities to share opinions, critique ideas, swap insights and comment on each other's plans and aspirations (Davidson and Goldberg, 2009). Moreover, penetration of social media in the life of people has transformed the teaching–learning process. Therefore, the need of the hour is to synchronise all information and present it to the students in a systematic manner. This may be achieved only by combining the conventional method of teaching with Internet information. This new method of teaching is known as 'blended' or 'hybrid' learning. This method helps in modifying the way knowledge and information is conveyed to the students.

Blended learning is a type of learning that mixes various event based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning and

self-paced instruction (Valiathan, 2002). Therefore, incorporating blended learning, as a reflective teaching practice, in education is important in the twenty-first century in order to create a learning environment that would contribute towards the development of necessary competencies and skills in students. It would enable the students to learn according to their time and place, thereby, advancing the quality of learning. Thus, this method of teaching–learning is student centred.

Such a learning strategy includes integrated learning activities like online and face-to-face learning. Information and communication technologies offer a mix of face-to-face interactive facilities, allowing individuals to learn anywhere and anytime (Singh, et al., 2016). Blended learning supports benefits acquired from e-learning, which focuses on cost reduction, time efficiency and location convenience for the learners, as well as, the essential one-on-one personal understanding and motivation (Brown, 2003).

CONCLUSION

It may, thus, be said that classroom teaching approaches need an urgent reform. Teachers and educators need to shift from the conventional lecture and chalk-and-talk methods of teaching. They need to adapt reflective teaching practices based on constructivist approach, such as peer learning, peer tutoring, blended learning, etc., in order to make the teaching–learning process more interactive and effective. Such teaching–learning practices would help to develop analytical skills in students, enabling them to understand different contexts and respond accordingly. Besides, they promote teamwork and foster students' creativity.

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