

Business Line

INTERNET EDITION

Financial Daily
from THE HINDU group of publications on
indiaserver.com
Monday, April 02, 2001

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The learning blocs



M.J. Xavier

The world is changing constantly and skills need to be updated continually to reflect changes in technology, legislation and practices. The importance of learning is widely recognised today and terms such as `the learning organisation' and `lifelong learning' are gaining in currency.

However, `learning' has meant different things to different people. Western thinkers have looked at learning as a process of instilling

cognitive and/or behavioural changes. The East, on the other hand, views education as a process leading to the emancipation of the individual. The difference is not only in the goals but also the process advocated.

The industrial age, for instance, encouraged learning of uniform skills and conforming behaviour as required by industrial organisations. Our present education system, which follows fixed curriculums, has been designed to meet the needs of old economy institutions. In the process, it has killed the spirit of enquiry and reduced people to human robots that carry out tasks as instructed.

The western model of learning came in for strong criticism from the spiritual leader, J. Krishnamurti:

“Wisdom cannot be replaced by knowledge and no amount of explanation, no accumulation of facts will free man from suffering. Knowledge is necessary, science has its place; but if the mind and heart are suffocated by knowledge, and if the cause of suffering is explained away, life becomes vain and meaningless... Wisdom is infinite, it includes knowledge and the way of action; but we take hold of a branch and think it is the whole tree...”

Krishnamurti questions the wisdom of de-linking life from learning; the separation of the mind and the heart. When we talk of ‘continuous learning’ or a ‘learning organisation’, we actually talk about imparting knowledge and skills for the survival and growth of the individual and organisation.

There is a clear demarcation between work and personal life. There is little concern for enhancing personal lives or creating better persons. Modern rhetoric merely attempts to cultivate the intellect and shows little regard for the heart and soul of the individual.

Of course, the western model deserves due recognition for the material benefits it has brought. The concept of breaking down a phenomenon into its components and then

studying each sub-component has led to the advancement of modern science. But it has also resulted in too many specialisations, leading to a situation where one specialist does not understand what the other says.

In pre-industrial times, there was a harmonious existence -- the body, mind and soul were integrated in every activity undertaken by the people. While sowing seeds, the village community organised poojas to invoke blessings of the Almighty. Similarly, in the gurukula system of education, the emphasis was on a holistic development of the person and not just skill development.

The holistic approach appears a lot more important in the post-industrial era as we need people who can invent the future rather than those who simply create the future that the founder or the owner-manager has envisioned for a company/organisation. Quite often the CEO himself is at a loss to understand how the future will unfold. What companies need are not conforming slaves but independent partners.

The new economy calls for people who can retain their individuality even as they come up with radically new approaches to organisational problems. The solution perhaps lies in a new approach to learning, a shift towards the holistic approach of the East.

Ideally, in a holistic approach, an effective learner must possess the following traits in order to become an emancipated individual:

* Free from conditioning

There is a familiar story about a Zen master who asked his disciple to pour water into a cup that was already full. The Zen master wanted to show that it would not be possible for him to teach the disciple anything until the latter emptied his cup (mind). The fundamental problem with many of us is that we think we know everything. Learning starts the day we get out of this conditioning.

Krishnamurti says. `` How does one free

oneself from this conditioning...? When you observe a tree, between you and the tree there is time and space, isn't there? And there is also the botanical knowledge about it, the distance between you and the tree -- which is time -- and the separation which comes through knowledge of the tree. To look at that tree without knowledge, without the time-quality, does not mean identifying yourself with the tree, but to observe the tree so attentively that the boundaries of time don't come into it at all...

`` Can you look at your wife, or your friend, or whatever it is, without the image? The image is the past, which has been put together by thought, as nagging, bullying, dominating, as pleasure, companionship, and all that. It is the image that separates; it is the image that creates distance and time. Look at that tree, or the flower, the cloud, or the wife or the husband, without the image...!

`` Now, to look without the observer! You do this when you are completely attentive. Do you know what it means to be attentive? Don't go to school to learn to be attentive! To be attentive means to listen without any interpretation, without any judgment -- just to listen. When you are so listening there is no boundary, there is no `you' listening: there is only a state of listening. So, when you observe your conditioning, the conditioning exists only in the observer, not in the observed. When you look without the observer, without the `me' -- his fears, his anxieties, and all the rest of it -- then you will see, you enter into a totally different dimension."

What Krishnamurti suggests is much more than getting out of the biases. He advocates intent listening and keen observation without ever passing judgment. This should enable one to transcend the obvious and get a vision of the unknown.

* Be aware

Different people have talked about being aware in different forms. For example, the Buddha calls it being rightly mindful. According to Osho. `` Examination is the first step:

becoming alert to what passes through your mind. And there is constant traffic -- so many thoughts, so many desires, so many dreams are passing by. You have to be watchful; you have to examine each and everything that passes through the mind. Not a single thought should pass unawares because that means you were asleep. Become more and more observant."

And Krishnamurti says, ``When man becomes aware of the movement of his own thoughts, he will see the division between the thinker and thought, the observer and the observed, the experiencer and the experience. He will discover that this division is an illusion. Then only is there pure observation which is insight without any shadow of the past or of time. This timeless insight brings about a deep, radical mutation in the mind. Total negation is the essence of the positive..."

It is only when one is totally aware and learns to look inward, a whole new insight unfolds which, incidentally, leads to new discoveries too. Additionally, the negation of what is known and the obvious will lead to deeper insights of the new and unknown.

For the mind trained in traditional scientific methods, this may appear rather contrary to the commonsense view of learning. Thomas Alva Edison had once stated that discoveries are 90 per cent perspiration and 10 per cent inspiration. The above arguments are not against the 90 per cent perspiration but instead emphasise on the 10 per cent inspiration. For example, Kekule apparently got the idea for the benzene ring in his dreams.

Socrates once said that ``learning is only a process of reminding". When his disciples challenged this view, Socrates called his maidservant and made her prove Pythagoras' theorem merely by asking the right questions. The idea is not to discount the value of traditional learning but prove the merits of looking inwards.

By digging deep into the inner consciousness one gets that special intuition for which one

needs to be fully aware and accept that one is a shunya (zero). However, the inward-looking process cannot start until an individual exhausts all that is externally available in his field of study. A person studying marketing may become an authority in his field. But his knowledge should not make him feel arrogant. If he goes deeper into the subject, he will realise that business is much more than marketing. This should launch him into the greater orbit of business strategies. It is this negation and the inward looking that helps a person come up with innovative ideas in his field of study.

* Become childlike

When a person becomes childlike, he/she has no inhibitions; there is no fear of failure and the person becomes inquisitive. Only when someone gives up his/her ego, the real learning begins. What comes in between us and our learning is the highly bloated ego about ourselves. We fail to see many possibilities when our mind is cluttered with our own notion of what is right and wrong.

Learning is possible only when one empties his/her mind. But this does discount the value of experience. Past experiences and knowledge are undoubtedly valuable, provided one has an open mind to learn from each new experience. Often, past successes turn out to be the root-cause for failures. The reason is that we tend to do more of what brought success to us in the past, leading to miserable failure. With an open mind, one can always learn and adapt to changing circumstances.

Osho defines intelligence as follows:

`` Intelligence is just an openness of being -- capacity to see without prejudice, to listen without interference, capacity to be with things without any prior ideas about them... All experts are blind. Expertise means you become blind to everything else. You know more and more about less and less and, one day, you arrive at the ultimate goal of knowing all about nothing..."

All of us have our cups filled to some extent. Those who manage to get off the weight of

prior knowledge and learn to look at every moment with the inquisitiveness of a child will truly become learned persons.

Another trait of children that can be learnt by adults is their playfulness. One should enjoy what one is doing. The joy of doing something in itself leads to great amount of learning.

* Have love and compassion

How can love and compassion enhance learning? Interestingly, love is the fundamental aspect of learning and life itself. For effective learning, there has to be love between the teacher and the taught.

Successful teachers are those who love their students. They go beyond the subject being taught and help students develop holistically. Children tend to like subjects that are taught by teachers who are lovable.

Many teachers tend to slight students when they ask questions. Some brush them aside as silly. In reality, there are no silly questions at all. Every question is important if only the teacher has the patience to understand its full meaning. If there is love, every question will be viewed with compassion and care.

Present-day students learn from a range of media such as the TV, Internet and so on. Teachers may despair that the traditional teaching method is a one-way process. But with love, they can make learning a two-way joyful experience.

* Meditate

Apart from concentration and contemplation, eastern philosophy advocates meditation for greater insights into any subject. Meditation helps one think outside the box and unleashes hidden, creative energies.

Often, information is considered as knowledge. People fail to understand that information needs to be digested by the individual and internalised before it becomes knowledge. Only then can the knowledge be applied to

solve problems and create opportunities. The next step is to examine the acquired knowledge and create newer knowledge. Meditation is one means of aiding the knowledge-creation process.

Convergence of approaches

The West has developed education as a means of acquiring skills for specific jobs. However, with rapid changes in the environment, the skills set required for survival are constantly changing. This has led to a debate on the need for continuous learning as also critical evaluation of the education system. Western thinkers such as Peter Senge, Chris Argyris and others emphasise the need for adaptive and creative problem-solving skills for survival. This is where the West meets the East.

When wisdom dawned in the West...

Western theories of learning can be broadly classified into three types:

- * The response strengthening model, which influenced the first half of this century, emphasises the role of feedback in enhancing learning. Knowledge is considered to be the associations people make between stimuli and responses. Drill and practice was the choice of instructional method.

- * The information processing model proposes that knowledge is a definite entity that can be transferred from one person to another. This assumption gave rise to didactic instruction and classical instructional design with lecturing as the prevalent instructional technique.

- * Constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own `rules' and `mental models' that we use to make sense of our experiences. Learning, therefore, is simply the process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences.

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