A LEARNING EXPERIENCE, NOT A LESSON PLAN: WHAT MAKES TEACHERS INNOVATIVE?

ABSTRACT: This paper raises a few questions, none of them new. But they are all raised at one place in an attempt to encourage the well-meaning academic to think about them one more time. The questions are supported by anecdotes, the nature of which the reader is familiar with. So the anecdotes are not new either. They are drawn from a study, conducted over a period of ten months, including school teachers and students of three programmes – Ph.D, M.Ed, and Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE). Based on the findings, I argue that there appears to be only a vague understanding of the competencies a teacher must have in the ESL context, and this has led to the designing and carrying out of training programmes which do not seem to prepare trainees to learn and grow. The findings highlight the need for operationalizing the key concepts of pedagogy, and evolving a detailed framework of competencies. The question central to this study is: What kind of training makes teachers innovative?

KEYWORDS: innovation, learning experience, teacher competencies, technology

0. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a great interest in and discussion about the role of digital material in teaching and learning. Teachers are urged to use web tools, do online courses, create websites, write blogs and digitally-enhance their pedagogy. The modernisation of education has come to be synonymous with buying kits, laptops and tabs; and all these efforts are supposed to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

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30 years ago, teaching and especially ‘practice teaching’ involved searching through volumes of ‘authentic material’ that included selections from newspaper articles, cartoons, characters like Blondie, Charlie Brown, Snoopy and R.K. Lakshman’s Common man. We asked ourselves: Are they culture-friendly? Will they generate a discussion? Can students relate to them? Is the language level-friendly? As young teachers, we followed our teachers and their advice and kept our eyes peeled and collected anything that might be a helpful resource for teaching and learning. While some of us stopped this activity after getting a job, some others continued to ‘cut’ and use anything ‘remotely’ interesting even after becoming teachers.

The questions that this study raises are: was it this store of material that helped some of our teachers (and, some of us) to be innovative? If so, and if the Internet is the treasure trove of knowledge it is acknowledged to be, are today’s teachers more innovative than we were or are? Related to these questions is the question central to this study. What kind of training makes teachers innovative?

The observations in this paper are drawn from a study conducted over a period of ten months. The participants included school teachers and students of three programmes – Ph.D, M.Ed, and Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE). Some of the students were going to be teachers; others, teacher educators. Different groups participated in different activities that yielded rich data. There were workshops, interactive lectures, formal and informal discussions, and practice teaching sessions. The study also included visiting schools and observing training sessions.

1. WHAT IS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

The explosion of technology in communication and the availability of the Internet have made our children curious and creative. Little children in the upper kindergarten (UKG), and classes 1 and 2 can operate the computer and google for information. They seem capable of processing and assimilating a
good deal more than we credit them with. This was our finding when we went to observe how smart classrooms are used at a private school of high repute.

As we were being introduced to the school, we interacted with some children from class 1. We learnt that most of the children in the UKG and classes 1 and 2 use smart phones and the internet quite frequently not only for listening to music but also for information. It was evident that their parents encourage them to do so. The school had smart classrooms and we were informed that these were used regularly. As researchers we wanted to know how the learning context was created. As the children were young, the principal informed us that they played nursery rhymes and songs in the smart classroom. On our request, teachers of all the three classes agreed to play rhymes and ushered the children in.

As the class began, these digitally savvy children sat quietly and, I felt, listlessly, watching the screen as the rhyme “If you are happy and you know it …” started playing on YouTube. It was an animated rhyme where animals moved following the instructions in the rhyme. The teacher stood by the screen and watched the children.

We went into class 1. The teacher changed and so did the students, but it was a repeat of what had happened in the previous classroom. The children sat and watched silently as the rhyme played on. After a careful consideration of my place as a stranger, and the teachers’ position, and weighing these against the nature of the learning experience, I decided to intervene.

I was told that students were familiar with the rhyme as they had seen it before and learned it by heart. I asked the class if they would like to stand up and act out the rhyme. “Yes, teacher!” They were too excited to wait. So, we replayed the song and they kept clapping and stomping and nodding all through. Then I asked them to listen to the song carefully and note when, at what point, they were supposed to clap and stomp. All they needed was a gentle reminder, and by the third time the rhyme was played, they all knew when to do what. They were fully involved in listening for the cues and moving their limbs accordingly.
1.1 Not an isolated incident
One of the M.Ed students who participated in our study said that her child is unhappy with her school, because her experiences are no different. Another student from the same M.Ed class had taught at a Gurukul school and he informed us that there too the children were advised to listen silently to the rhymes in the smart classroom.

Watching these children from different schools, I began to recall my own (which were quite different) experience with learning. Unlike most of his colleagues, one of our writing teachers used to bring excerpts from newspaper articles and encourage us to analyse the discourse. This was followed by writing in and after the class. Although, initially, we dreaded his classes, we soon learned how useful they were, unlike the ones that gave us the theory of writing and grammar. In his class, we wrote limericks, filled in speech bubbles, and related anecdotes. He taught us not only how to learn (to write), but also how to teach. He thought about learning, and his teaching practices reflected an in-depth understanding of student needs and capabilities. He thought, and he also made us think.

The smart classroom teachers I have met, know their English. They have their training qualifications. Then, they had the web tools at their command. What prevents them then from creating a good learning experience in class with the knowledge they have at their command?

The question of using learners’ existing knowledge is usually stressed in discussions of less privileged populations. Interestingly, our experience shows that it has to be stressed in privileged contexts as well.

1.2 An attempt at creating a learning experience
I have narrated how in using action with the song, the children in the school we visited learnt to “listen (for specific information)!”. This allowed their actions to be tuned in to the appropriate cues in the song. After this, five children from each of the classes joined us for an experiment in learning to think.

We showed the children pictures that reflected happiness. In mixed groups, they had to choose which picture they liked most and give reasons for their
choice. One of the groups said that they liked the picture where children were playing ball, and that playing is synonymous with happiness.

Then, they had to think of doing something which reflected happiness, and pose for the cellphone camera. Each group thought about different things. One group, in fact, moved away from the class, stood with arms around each other in a circle, and thought about what they should do. Finally, they gave captions to their pictures. They had never worked in groups before. They had not known each other before. But they worked as a team. It was a pleasure watching them create an ideal learning context where learning was exciting. What struck me was that the concept of the ‘huddle’ used in cricket training, and group work used in management training, had spontaneously evolved in the primary education scenario.

1.3 May not be a common experience

Two of the respondents of the study, who are doing M.Ed, told us how their attempts at creative lesson plans were dismissed; how they were strongly advised to write all the grammatical structures on the blackboard. They had selected samples from poems, stories and cartoons to teach the tenses, and planned to try something engaging.

One of my poetry teachers was highly creative. She would use different strategies to make our learning exciting. One of them was to replace the original words in a poem with words which seemed not to belong. After a good deal of discussion, we would arrive at a consensus on how the new words acquire a meaning in the context and how they changed the whole context of the poem itself. We appreciated the meaning of a context and contextual connections, when we learned what the original words were.

*Imagination and creativity?*

What is it that discourages our teachers and educators from being imaginative?

Why do we teachers not use innovative strategies and technologies to stimulate young learner’s minds?
2. WHAT IS A CREATIVE TRAINING EXPERIENCE?

Year after year, teacher trainees express similar fears and concerns. How do I make a lesson plan? What should I write in my observation report? These trainees ‘know’ all the ‘important terms:’ facilitator, rationale, reflection. They then (re)produce exactly what their seniors have produced – they use highlighters, prepare colourful charts, collect interesting pictures, and showcase their craft to include paintings, pots, and models of the Taj made from waste material…

The classes, too, are not very different from what they have been year after year in the practice teaching sessions. It is only once in a while that we get to see someone who is critical of ‘all of the above,’ and works differently. Let me briefly narrate what I see demonstrated in the class, year after year. My purpose is to illustrate how the ‘training terms’ are misunderstood, and hence, I will also discuss how they may be understood.

Facilitator: The teacher brings a set of pictures to the class and asks the students to “tell” or “write” a story. They may work in pairs or groups. Each story is heard with a few or no interruptions. Most often, the feedback is ‘good’/ ‘very good’. Sometimes, it includes a few comments on grammatical accuracy.

The trainee/s “observe/s” that the students thoroughly enjoyed the task, as they were able to easily relate to the pictures. Story telling is a favourite activity and they had an opportunity to use their ‘passive language repertoire’ in an authentic context. They practised all the skills, LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, writing). In other words, the teacher followed ‘an integrated approach’ to the teaching of English.

The question “What is the learning in this context, and what have the students learnt?” is painful to discuss, as most trainees have very little background knowledge of this context of enquiry. The lesson plan may have explicitly stated the “aims and objectives,” which are always considered to have been
achieved, either partly or fully. Most often, these “aims and objectives” are in relation to items of vocabulary, grammar, and macro skills.

There is hardly any awareness of what the teacher may do to facilitate learning, nor is there any awareness of learning in a particular context. As a result, there is no understanding of what challenges may be created. Evidently, creating an opportunity is identified with facilitating learning. What are the inherent challenges that prevent the proper use of the opportunity, how they may be anticipated, and what kind of text and language help may be built into the task, are questions that are completely overlooked.

For instance, the teacher could bring samples of the various components of a story -

- beginnings of various stories
- conversations
- descriptions of events
- descriptions of characters
- and ends - ways of concluding a story.

The teacher could ask challenging comprehension questions such as, Which part of the story could have been developed further? What strategies did the narrator use to keep you interested in his story? What did the narrator highlight through his story? Did the story end the way you thought it would? Questions of this kind keep the class focused on learning.

Alternatively, the teacher could draw the class’ attention to the stories in the prescribed textbook and make the students analyse them so they could think of how they themselves could plan their narrative.

Trainees, especially young trainees, are enthusiastic and they are eager to learn. However, their limited understanding of the concepts jeopardizes their opportunities to experiment with teaching. One of my trainees chooses to encourage her class to discuss the issues related to girl-child education. She plans to take to the class pictures of Kalpana Chawla, Mary Kom, and Mother Teresa. She wishes to use them as “ice breakers,” ask questions about the pictures, tell the students how girls are victimised and then ask them to
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discuss in groups the issues related to girls’ education in India. The aim is to give practice in language skills.

What are the challenges inherent to a task like this? Do the students have the language, for example, the topic-specific vocabulary? Do they know how to construct an argument? Prabhu’s (1987) discussion of information-gap and opinion-gap activities is a useful reminder of the challenges in such tasks.

As a trainer responsible for a few sessions of “practice teaching,” I have evolved a strategy which has never failed me. I ask the trainees to first themselves do the activity they mention in their lesson plan, guide them to reflect on the challenges involved, and plan the learning experience accordingly.

The question to reflect on is, what challenges and what support do I incorporate in the task to create various learning experiences, which in turn facilitate language learning?

Reflection: This is another word which is heard as frequently as the word facilitator. The trainee and the peers “reflect” on the lesson and note down their observations. Most often, their responses are limited to: what went right and what went wrong? Why something went right or wrong is not looked into in detail. How something may be improved is another important question which is glossed over. The observation sheet does not demand a response in that direction.

Although the trainees are expected to ‘practice’ teaching, the discussion of the ways to improve practices during the post-class analysis does not seem to leave any lasting impression on the trainees. Inadequately equipped to handle anything new, the trainee and the peers start planning the next round of teaching. The gaps in understanding grow wider, what with the never-ending sessions of ‘theory’ with no opportunities or guidance to test any theory through practice.
3. HOW CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP?

To return to where the study began, there appears to be a strong belief that equipping schools and other educational institutions with computers/laptops/ipads will help improve the quality of education. What follows is a brief description of two training sessions where the trainers used technology.

In one of them, the trainer played a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk by a native speaker of English, and made the trainees listen to it. The talk went on and on. The participants, I realized, were reasonably proficient in English. Were they staring at the screen or listening to the talk, it was not easy to tell after a few minutes. The trainer asked them to listen to a talk but did not specify why they had to do it. At the end of it, he said, “That was a good speech, don’t you think?” He made no attempt at highlighting or discussing the ideas in the talk that was on the role of technology in education. Nor did he share the link with the trainees.

In the second workshop I observed, the trainer downloaded different questionnaires for evaluating teaching. He showed them to the participants saying, “This is about...” and reading the title. There was a bored expression on his face and he was in a hurry to show them all. The trainees appeared interested in the beginning as some of them leaned forward and the others tried to take notes. However, no sooner did they realize his ‘purpose’ than they sat back and closed their books. No links were shared. There was no discussion of any particular questionnaire or part of it to help the participants develop or use the instrument on their own. When I asked why he had to show so many questionnaires, his reply was, “Oh! There are so many more of them on the net!”

Sessions like these highlight what one of my M.Ed students told me about how different people make use of the same clay to make different figures. Some may just leave it promising to return to it one day.

The Internet is a storehouse of supplementary material, a huge mound of clay. What we do with it depends on our creativity and imagination, and more importantly, our enthusiasm to give a wider perspective on the subject on
hand than what the prescribed text may. This was what some of our teachers did without any tech tools at their disposal. Perhaps what gave them the right perspective on teaching was their commitment to exercising their own creativity, discretion and imagination to carefully study each piece, be it an object or idea, before they used it to create a rich learning experience for us. In the process, they grew as professionals too.

The abundance of material available on the Internet and the web tools seem to create a false sense of security for most of us in the field of education. We do not study the material to make a careful selection like our counterparts of yesteryears did. Maybe, we do not even understand the principles of selection although we read and teach about them. Our teachers not only read and taught them but also tested them through their practice. Words like *facilitator* and *reflection* might not have been a part of their active repertoire but their practices reflected how carefully they thought about even the minutest detail.

5. TEACHER TRAINING - THE WAY FORWARD

Teacher Preparation is a priority, with or without technology. Advocators of technology may not consider it so if we can go by what we often hear and read. The most thought provoking feature of the article *E-ducating India – Technology* (Business Standard 2014) is the picture of the girl with a laptop in her hand. She looks more anxious and confused than happy or pleased. Guidance in the right direction is what students need. Information, they may find but to turn it into useful knowledge, they need teachers who enjoy teaching and channel their intellectual energy in the right direction. According to the article writers,

there are... at least three frontiers to consider while mainstreaming technology in education – access and infrastructure, the technological innovations market, and the measurement of impact. Particularly in the third area, technology may be leveraged to resolve a much larger and
significant challenge, nudging the education system from a focus on inputs and investments, to quality and outcomes.

(Business Standard, 28 September 2014)

More important than any of the three ‘frontiers’ that the article mentions is the preparation of our teachers. Teacher preparation is the key to quality and outcomes, and this should be the input to invest and focus upon. The Internet may provide us with material and information but very little guidance for customizing pedagogy. “Teachers need both time and guidance to experiment with ideas and theories,” – all the respondents of this study observed. They are trainees and researchers, specializing in education, who sit in class after class trying to understand theory backed by no application.

6. THE IMPLICATIONS

Most often, the syllabus of a training programme for English teachers is woven around the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and the major skills. This does not seem to help. In light of the respondents’ observations, the gaps in the trainee’s understanding seem to be a result of the lack of focus on implementation or the relationship between theory and practice, and building a conscious awareness of teacher competencies.

1. Can we shift some of the (excessive) focus on theory to its implementation? Surprisingly, very few training programmes include the study of experiments and practices in pedagogy although the aim of any programme is to offer ‘practice’ in teaching. Very few trainees have not heard of the banking concept of education, but they have little idea what the alternative could be. Trainees who are expected to develop materials, to teach and test them through three or four half-an-hour rounds of ‘practice teaching,’ desperately need help with understanding what practices illustrate learner-centred teaching, before planning and executing them. Most often, trainers themselves cannot demonstrate a replicable model, let alone the participants of this study.
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What is the ratio of theory and the implementation of the theory in practice? This is an important question programme developers seem to overlook. How often are principles studied through practice? Do trainees get to see a good deal of principles demonstrated through pedagogy? Instead of developing a lesson plan, can the trainees develop a learning experience?

This is where the Internet has a significant role to play. It provides the trainer and the trainee with innumerable opportunities to study lesson plans and research reports of pedagogical practices which help them see theory in action and understand the issues inherent to the implementation of any theory in a specific context.

2. Is it possible to operationalize concepts essential in pedagogy? This will help us approach them with mathematical precision both for training and assessment. For example, what is facilitating learning? What does a trainer or trainee do to be considered a ‘facilitator’? One of the things that comes to my mind is, can the trainee anticipate the challenges learners may face while doing a task? How does the trainee build the support into the task? It must be possible to list the teacher’s responsibilities/activities, and the list may guide everyone concerned, trainee, trainer, observer, examiner. We need similar help to understand the nature and role of rationale, reflection, supplementary material, teacher talk, and most importantly the text in the classroom. Each one of them has to be broken down into teachable/measurable behavioural components.

In this context, the respondents raised a very important question, how can there be a great difference between the scores of two examiners when they evaluate a trainee’s performance? Can the examiner, trainer, and trainee be given a rubric of competencies to guide training and evaluation? Is it possible to consider these two criteria while evaluating a teacher training programme?

In sum, the two questions any programme of teacher preparation may address are, What is a learning experience? and What competencies does a teacher need to be able to create the experience? Providing digital tools is important but more important is, training in competencies.
REFERENCES


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