

Proceedings – Why, What & How of Learning

National workshop on Alternative Learning organised by Sanchi University of Buddhist-Indic Studies

Date – 18th – 20th June, 2015

Venue – SUBIS academic campus, Barla, Raisen

A national workshop based on the essentials of alternative learning "**Why, what & how of learning**" was held from 18th to 20th June, 2015 at our academic campus at Barla, Raisen. Sanchi University aims to revive the great tradition of knowledge creation of university of yesteryears. One of the objectives of the university to "**Contribute to the improvement of the educational system in India by providing new perspectives on alternative systems of education**", it is important for us take first step towards this direction. The workshop was conducted as SUBIS intends to establish a centre on alternative education and we wanted to have a clear understanding on the subject regarding the feasibilities and prerequisites on alternative learning. SUBIS always views philosophy as the core of any thought, intention and action it pursues because it provides meaning, fulfilment and direction to our thoughts and actions. The wholeness of anything in this world is not achieved unless it reaches the philosophical orb. The ambiguity of thoughts in any ideology will lead to dubious actions. This vagueness results in the impediment to grow and prosper at social, emotional and spiritual level. Thus, improper and inappropriate culmination of human beings at social, national and cultural level occurs if learning is devoid of morality. Philosophy is that tool which lets us feel and experience the genuineness of this world the way it exactly is, not as it is pretended to be. Therefore before taking any step, we wanted to understand the philosophy of learning, more precisely we wanted to understand what are the context, content and processes of learning. We also wished to meet people who are engaged in this domain and can add something from their experiments and experiences. There were 62 participants who registered and a dozen more who joined either voluntarily or due to mouth to mouth publicity. The workshop was intended to raise as many issues as possible in relation to the subject so that the aftermath of the workshop is pursued by concrete issues, constraints, modalities and rationalities of alternative education. The framework of alternative education is not defined; it is a loosely held notion ranging from the traces of agriculture to the extremities of technology. Undoubtedly, it is the need of the hour. Mainstream education in India till now was the only option but owing to its conformist nature and failure to shape society according to more humanitarian parameters, the search for a fruitful option took pace. Thus, people pursued the path of their own choice. Even the names given to this phenomenon depend on the choice and methodology – some call it de-schooling, some natural learning, some call home schooling and some simply learning.

Basically, the "why, what and how of learning" were supposed to be discussed in the workshop during these three days. But a lot more issues surfaced when the discussions started. Alternative learning doesn't have an algorithm or an umbrella organization which can look after its working and progress. Second problem comes when alternative schools or methods are rendered no place in RTE. the alternative methodologies are not even recognised in the government policies though they are a much better stake for learning than mainstream. It is blamed of having no defined structure, syllabi and standardised parameters. It is rather very conducive to indigenous culture. Precisely, Indian culture is such that it encompasses every variation of life and environment generating a highly creative and innovative culture. It is a pride for us that learning existed in our culture long before writing and printing was introduced to human civilizations. Have you ever heard of any other parallel trend of "**Shrutis**" which later transformed into Vedas thus becoming the most celebrated work of knowledge? This was certainly alternative learning!

The inaugural session was presided by the Vice Chancellor of the university Prof. Dr. ShashiPrabha Kumar and the chief guest of the ceremony was Shri Manoj Shrivastava, Principal Secretary, Govt. of M.P., Dept. of Culture. The OIC & Registrar of the university, Shri Rajesh Gupta was also present on the dais with the deemed guests. All three respectable dignitaries spoke to the audience on why is learning necessary, what should be learnt and how learning took different forms in different times? That was indeed a good beginning for the workshop with the three notable personalities speaking on one topic but with entirely different perspectives.

Given below are the key points of the speech –

1. Shri Rajesh Gupta, OIC & Registrar of the university, added a totally new dimension. He questioned the relevance of education from the grand social drama which is going on. He emphasised on our collective understanding or collective consciousness, "Education might be a good intervention & alternative version if any, might be even better". He highlighted that the importance of thought process, ideation, imagination, visualisation, conceptualization, hypothecation, abstraction and verbosity and on learning posed a deeper question related to cognition and innateness. An alternative in learning and education is the need of the hour. But it is as complicated as a jigsaw puzzle. Our creativity needs cognition but to create we will have to cremate the redundancies filled in our minds. For example, we have left the beautiful dimension of communication by language and have ended up becoming verbose. Isn't silence the best conversation sometimes? (Annexure 1 – Draft of welcome speech)

2. Shri Manoj Shrivastava, Principal Secretary, Govt. Of M.P., Dept. of Culture, expounded on how the tribal trends are closely embedded with the secrets of nature though we may call them superstitions. He highlighted the importance of context in the text (especially in regard to nature, culture, society and individual), saying that education should be properly relevant to nation and period. Portraying example from his life, he explained how the perception of a child is collective and it is us adults who sow the seeds of division in their pure souls.

3. Vice Chancellor Prof. Dr. ShashiPrabha Kumar emphasised on the importance of traditional learning in Indian culture. She explained about the trend of education in ancient India. How education in those times stressed on leading a harmonious and peaceful life, rather than only earning a living. The gurukulas in ancient India taught not only mundane lessons but also philosophical. There was no word as Teacher; the word was Acharya which connotes a person living life the same way as he is teaching it. Similarly, there was no word for student; instead Brahamchari was used. She added how education has changed its implication from सा विद्याः या विमुक्तये to सा शिक्षाः या नियुक्तये. Previously, education laid importance on human being as the part of a cosmos, not treating him selfishly as an individual being and disregarding the nature.

The brainstorming sessions resumed after tea break and a common session was conducted to set the flow of the workshop in tune with the theme. The first day of the workshop revolved around the WHY of learning. The three basic questions to discuss during the day were -

- What is purpose of learning in Nature?
- What is purpose of learning in Human Society?
- Why do we actually learn?

The three key speakers for the day were Shri Jinan K.B., Shri Narendra, Shri Ajith Basu. Shri Jinan K.B spoke on how learning is very natural to all natural beings and it is an inherent quality of every living being to learn. Learning is innate as compared to being taught or instructed. Learning has no curriculum, no limits and no restrictions but teaching has. It is not dependent on language, mode of

instruction and framework which we human beings always mistake for. All living beings have their proper cognition which is always functional. Proper cognition succeeds to proper recognition in a being and hence, our sensibilities such as aesthetics, creativity, art, etc. are developed. Learning is a very vulnerable phenomenon. Thus, it should be free of any medium. Mainstream education lays unnecessary stress on books, syllabi, exams, etc. which result in the damage of natural instincts of learning in human beings.

Second key speaker of the Narendraji, who has an extensive experience of tribal life and people of Abujhmaria in Chhattisgarh talked on learning without the use of medium. His talk majorly focused on how the folks of this tribe learn as there is no medium of instruction, no school, no curriculum and no adequate exposure. People learn what they have to and the presence and absence of medium hardly plays any role. The abujhmaria have no high criminal records, the society is based on pure humanitarian principles and they have a very peaceful and joyful life. They learn the basic lessons of life in the cradle of nature and strongly communicate their feelings despite of a very inadequate vocabulary of the tribal language.

From the tribal ambience, there was a sudden shift to science and technology. Shri Ajith Basu who represented Agastya International foundation, Bengaluru explained how science and mathematics can be fun with the use of hand-on models and experiments. In today's world, the utility of science and technology cannot be bluntly denied. Neither can we eradicate the presence of philosophy and nature from our lives. Children learn easily while playing. So, if they are provided the liberty to touch, feel and experience whatever they are given in the books, they will learn faster. This is what Agastya International Foundation does. It facilitates learning by letting a child experience and experiment. Stress is laid on balancing natural, contemporary (science & technology) and spiritual aspects in learning so that the child learns tangible and intangible facets easily.

After this session, the participants were divided in six rooms where parallel sessions of brainstorming were conducted on the **why** of learning. Though the participants were briefed about the themes to discuss, there was a variety of issues and concerns related to alternative learning which came into sight to seek concrete solutions.

In the summing up session, participants from different groups briefed us what they had concluded from the discussions during the brainstorming. In nutshell, we can draw the following inferences on the WHY of learning as per the discussions. We learn

- as it is very natural and an essential part of our evolution.
- due to our instinct of survival.
- to fulfil and sustain our daily needs (food, shelter, rest, etc.).
- to express and communicate our feelings, emotions, dangers and fears.
- to prove ourselves better than others. Competition.
- for sheer joy and pleasure.
- for satisfaction & achievement.

After drawing conclusions, a small discussion followed to introduce the theme for the next day.

An open house discussion was conducted in the evening and many suggestions regarding the themes, conduction and participation in the workshop flooded in. It was commendable to see the enthusiasm and motivation of participants. The pattern and themes "what & how" of brainstorming sessions were consequently modified as many participants had many stories and suggestions to share. The young aspirants had their own side of stories, and some of them who have worked enthusiastically and sincerely wanted to share their portions.

So, the second day was to focus on the **What** of learning. We made some changes in accordance to the suggestions of the day before as many young aspirants wanted to add their side of stories. The key questions for the day were as follows –

- What is to be learnt?
- How does one decide “content”?
- What do we actually learn?

During the tone setting session, the discourse assumed the shape of logic and reasoning in regard to learning, especially in the Indian context. The key speakers of the day were Acharya Vinayakrishna and Aseem Shrivastava. The sessions were conducted by Shri Shashi Bhushan Singh and Shri Rajinder Raina. During their speech, the necessity and utility of the content for learning was underlined. The speakers highlighted the need of philosophy and spirituality in the content of learning in human society. Secondly, the content of learning should be in harmony with the culture and society of the region in question. It should be strong enough to raise the consciousness of the learner to the level of spiritualism. One's life should be a balanced blend of spirituality and materialism. Learning should retain, safeguard and promote pluralism of ethnicities and cultural diversities. What we learn today is not enough to raise the level of our consciousness. For example, the food we eat today is unhealthy and we know that but we still consume it. But an insect such as housefly does not even sit on the food if it knows that it is toxic for her. So who has a higher level of consciousness – we humans or a tiny insect? Our learning previously was a summary of life. We were taught the great and subtle lessons of life in the simplest ways. We were taught to save and protect nature by making them venerable. Our culture, psyche and history taught us much deeper, even to go beyond the limits of mortality and rise above but instead of learning lessons, we adapted the occidental outlook, the history of which is war oriented. It is not wrong to adapt the western values, but what we adapted was unsuitable for our culture and left the best of the west.

During the brainstorming sessions, apart from the "**what**" of learning, different groups discussed the issues, problems and constraints related to learning from alternative methods in India. The main themes of discussions revolved around the topics like learning from animals, e-learning, learning from nature, indigenous methods of learning, right to education etc. During all these discussions, the content of learning was majorly discussed. Learning should be so that the personality, character, self-esteem and confidence of a child are strongly developed. There should be a feeling of equality among all beings. We have to think does our administration have a child friendly approach or does it only persuade the completion of syllabus and has no regard whatsoever about the creativity and talent of a child.

The summing up session fulfilled the ambience with thought provoking concerns on alternative education. Some of the participants showed us the videos on their methodologies of learning and some of them also shared interesting stories and recollections from their vast experiences.

The evening was followed by a cultural programme. A children drama based on the gamut of learning was presented by **Vihaan** group. The play, title of which was "Nyuto '*aur*' Pluto", brilliantly sifted learning and cognition from the mundane education system. It was a half an hour long play presented in Hindi presented by the children of the age group four to fourteen years. It was as if the whole essence of the workshop had dribbled in the play.

The final day of the workshop was more collective and conclusive. The sessions were again conducted by Shri Shashi Bhushan Singh and Shri Rajinder Raina. The key speakers of the day, Surya Narayan Kumar Bhaskar and Ajay Kumar spoke on the alternative ways of learning, balancing mind body and soul and inner peace and joy which is the obvious outcome of learning. Loosely, that was

basically the "**how**" of learning. In addition to this, many issues related to the monitoring, regulation, administration and working of the alternative schools/institutions were raised by the participants. Participants talked about their methodologies, institutions that have played a pivotal role in the field of alternative education, possibilities of different institutions/organizations coming together as a combined synergy and so on. During discussion, participants suggested many issues and also provided the names of notable people in this regard. (Please see annexure 1, 2 & 3)

The final day of the workshop was to focus on the **How** of learning. The key questions for the day were as follows –

- How learning happens in Nature? (Cognitive)
- How do Human beings learn? (Psychological)
- How are we learning today? (Ground Reality)

Post lunch session focused on how SUBIS can play a significant role in providing a platform and resources for the subject and initiate a significant step towards changing the scenario of learning. It was basically a round table session which consisted of questions and answers, queries, confusions, constraints, concerns and future perspective in relation to alternative learning. A small yoga session and discourse was conducted by Acharya Vinaykrishna.

Before drawing any conclusions, it is worthy to remark that the workshop had a good representation from nearly all streams which claim to be alternative. Some worth notable are – Waldorf education, School without walls, Agasthya International Foundation, Eklavya, Multiversity, Krishnamurti Foundation International, Barefoot college, Swaraj University, Delhi University etc. Secondly, many individuals/institutions anticipate/expect that SUBIS can play a key role in creating a strong platform or a think tank which will work considerably towards the strengthening of alternative education. We were also expected to be an umbrella organization for all organizations and thus provide sufficient support and recognition on behalf of the government.

Learning is important in life. And as natural as breathing! But we always commit mistake by indulging into the context, content and processes of learning before considering the basics of learning which are, "**What** is learning" and "**who** learns". And we are certainly talking about the subtlety of what and who. Learning is pursued for a permanent change. Besides, the indispensability of society, culture, nation, environment and individuality in learning cannot be ignored. Thus, the intricacies of these aspects should be included in the process of learning. Some aspects which are common to everybody's learning can be learnt uniformly but someone having a flair for singing cannot learn with a scientist. We have to think deeply how human beings grasp the intricacies from nature rather than instructing them to conform. It is not that our educational framework is totally frail but it does restricts a learner to redundant frames of thinking and hamper his cognition. Learning should be pursued in a joyful and playful environment such that it becomes a hobby not an exercise. Secondly, it should be allowed to learn, not instruct. Any negative approach in the form of information, words or action may render a slight harm to natural cognition. This is a matter of high diligence, indeed. An alternative is an imperative for the human society who always shouts to teach morality but fails to learn it! We may conclude from this workshop that

- The collective understanding on learning is preliminary and ambiguous. Thus, we have to devise an algorithm on learning along with a proper strategy to implement it. We should also work on carrying out these strategies at ground level.
- Approach on alternative learning should be highly meticulous otherwise there will be more chances of failures. Learning is not experimentation and thus, it should not become an arena

of trial & errors. We can come to a conclusion only from experience which is altogether different from experimentation.

- An intense research should be done based on the experiments and experiences of alternative learning in order to understand better the context, content & processes of learning.
- There's a need for a strong and sincere platform for organizations working in this field which form a strong network and work collectively. Secondly, resource mapping must be done with utter diligence.
- Paradoxically, institutes/organizations working for alternative education want to be free from the impact of governance but at the same time seek the state's support for survival. Hence, it should be made very clear what are the stakes that should be free from the government niche and which should be not.
- Unfortunately, there is a very paltry response from the side of students, parents, schools, etc. in regard to alternative education. An inclusive approach should be built in society.
- Sincere efforts are required from the side of government to lay a helping hand. The ongoing projects should be supported by both government and private sectors.
- An exhaustive list or databank of information related to this domain should be formed.
- SUBIS should form a core group which will work towards alternative learning methods. This workshop has proven to be a strong initiative in this regard and thus, the further tasks should be planned.
- SUBIS should assist the initiatives in alternative learning by providing all possible support.
- Alternative learning is not merely an exercise nor is it a child's play. It involves a lot of thoughtfulness, mindfulness, creativity, experiments, experiences and above all, commitment. Thus, SUBIS should also act as a strong experience sharing platform so that the gains of the play are not lost and the motivated ones are not deviated from their path.

These inferences indicate that this workshop was only a stepping stone to one big aim. The real issue is a lack of clear understanding of the algorithm learning & the tools to carry out. There remains a lot to work and a lot for homework to do & this can be accomplished only through sustained collective efforts.
