We need more creators

Educators must upgrade their engagement strategies while integrating technology into their approach

VIKRAM VINCENT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has rightfully identified 21st century skills as fundamental to developing creators. Critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, creativity and innovation, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interactions, and productivity and accountability all strengthen the individuals' abilities at the workplace. Relying on traditional literacy and numeracy alone will not suffice and tends to marginalise differently abled learners. Educators could consider a design-based approach where students concentrate on a subject for two-three weeks to examine how it can be applied in the real world. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studied happiness and creativity, said that creation requires 'deep work'. An individual must be motivated enough to remain immersed in a specific activity to be creative and happy.

Teacher training

But does our current classroom and content-heavy syllabus enable deep work? Also, how do we retrain teachers who have been trained in traditional systems? They know terms like 'constructivism' but do not know how it should be used in a classroom that is focused on exams rather than learning. And how ready are our future educators?

In a semester-long study that used Wikipedia as a pedagogical tool for teacher training, 65 pre-service (B.Ed) teachers were asked to improve the pages on Wikipedia related to educational concepts. Excluding a few, the content created by most participants was either sent back to them or deleted by neutral editors of Wikipedia. The content, it was found, was plagiarised, did not provide citations, lacked basic writing and grammar skills, etc. After three iterative cycles that were emotionally intense, the teachers were able to contribute content to over 75 Wikipedia articles in English and over 50 articles in Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati, Assamese and Punjabi. All the content was related to educational technology. The critical feedback from various Wikipedia editors was crucial because it was unbiased. This feedback forced the learners to re-evaluate their skills. This shows that constant engagement, an emotional connect, and immersive learning are important parts of education.

Using technology

EdTech apps can deliver content that caters to multiple learning styles, learning curves and pace of learning. The pandemic has shown that traditional teacher and brick-and-mortar schools may become obsolete if radical pedagogical changes do not follow. However, over-reliance on technology comes at a cost. Technology tools are forcing human beings to remain consumers rather than become creators. For example, social media forces you to scroll mindlessly rather than contemplate or engage meaningfully. Entertainment channels create addictive content that makes you suspend reality till all the seasons are done. And with the pandemic shutting down schools, children have lost all personal contact with their social group and parents are forced to rely upon technology to provide their children constant gratification to keep them engaged. With so many immersive distractions from deep work, is it even possible to develop creators? Can technology replace emotional and social engagement?

The disruptive nature of digital tools has thrown up interesting challenges to the traditional education system. Educators will have to find ways to upgrade their engagement strategies while integrating technology into their approach through hybrid learning. And while the NEP is catchy, policymakers will have to look again at the school education system if 21st century skills are to be truly actualised.

Vikram Vincent has a Ph.D. in Educational Technology from IIT Bombay