

Recreating Sustainable Societies Through Experiential and Peer Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Education System in India was based on culture, traditions and social practices that was passed on to the pupils through inherited values. It was learnt at homes as well in schools such as the Gurukul System, which was the centre of diverse learning. The cultural practices in the society, whether reading the scriptures or acquiring hopology skills, were needed for all round development of the individual. Art and craft; sports and yoga; and also, daily chores were given the same importance, for holistic learning. To some extent, they were also taught to have restraint on unearthy desires. This exercise was influenced by spiritual enlightenment, awareness about nature and self-discipline. It prepared them for their future life struggles, as well as psychological wellbeing. The modern education system introduced during the colonial era was aimed at competitiveness and exploitation of resources. They destroyed the culture and created social divides amongst children; and encouraged a consumeristic lifestyle. Gradually, these societies divorced themselves from ethical principles and were responsible for destruction of nature. The urban milieu vitiated further in this process, becoming centres of environmental degradation and pollution; and diminished social values. Although one associates education with higher level of consciousness, many modern societies have failed to prevent the ecological devastation. In fact, numerous traditional societies have lived more sustainably despite the people there being less literate. Thus, existing education system requires a certain change geared towards human awakening. The present study elucidates the importance of reviving some practices of the past within the modern curriculum by adopting experiential tools for a sustainable living.

Keywords: Education, unsustainable lifestyle, experiential learning, ESD

Introduction

A large number of people in India may not accept the idea of change within the present educational framework which have been part and parcel of this society since the colonial era. The purpose of this system was at the time, meant to serve the British industries. Despite gaining independence, the education system followed the British model that once destroyed our culture and dismantled the rich traditions. Macaulay, who initiated this schooling principle in his 'Minute on Education' in 1835 introduced the Indian citizens to modern English medium education which was thought to be highly superior. It commodified education and this commodification destroyed creative thought. In return the students started commodifying every single aspect of their life. This system did not provide equal opportunity to all and excluded children from non-affluent backgrounds, making them feel left out.

In the documentary ‘Schooling the World’ (2010), it was disturbingly highlighted that most native cultures were destroyed through change in education system that suited the colonisers. Innocent children were taken away from learning in their natural surroundings to the classroom mode in modern education. They stopped relating with nature and created an artificial world that did not value ecosystems. As soon as people were able to afford better education, they send their children to these so-called modernised schools, which also happened in India. However, a drastic behavioural change had been observed in these children towards their own culture. They started to disrespect rustic living and ancestral occupation.

In the path towards sustainability, the first barrier is lack of empathy for nature. The disconnection is clearly visible because people can’t see anything beyond its exploitation. The inability to understand and respect nature has borne out of their deculturation process. Education is only a tool to create labour force for the market; and then becoming consumers for the same market. This system lacks value-based learning and lures youth into non primary based activities as they are highly disinterested in their familial land. Over time fertile agricultural land is converted into commercial use. As net worth of those land starts to increase, gradually they all get concretised, devoid of any open spaces and gradually being assimilated into urbanised landscape.

The process in the urban areas is quite alarming as each person lives in an artificial world of immense wants without any concern for the physical environment. Although today’s society lives in an information era, there is absolutely no vision of the unsustainable societies that is being created. The contemporary society with its modern education is in deep slumber. It is equally disturbing to see the sufferings that young pupils go through due to stressful existence in this highly competitive world. The ecological as well as the socio-economic collapse is imperative.

Educators today are more comfortable with the usual set pattern and do not want to experiment with anything that deviates out of this system. Also, most of them would not dare to go beyond their comfort zone, knowing well that it is a system of rote learning and extremely rigid curriculum. One can clearly see that it is an obstacle to the mental wellbeing of the learners too.

The present study is an analysis of the concerns about the trajectory towards unsustainable methods and practices which have social and ecological implications. At the same time, society is going through an existential crisis. Poverty was always a concern but today’s youth are facing poverty of existence. They are getting benefits of privileges more than the previous generations, yet they are not happy and contented. The question is whether the modern-day education is able to create a world of knowledge with same efficiency as the world of experience. Or, whether it is preparing them only for jobs and manufacturing humans without the power to make the right choice in their lives. It highlights the role of educators and parents to lead the youth to follow sustainable pathways through mentoring, making them learn through experiences and also enable them to be future ready to face multiple crisis in this Anthropocene era.

Takeaway from UNESCO’s Roadmap on ‘Education for Sustainable Development’

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Sourcebook, give briefings to teachers and mid-level decision makers on Education for Sustainable Development. The aim of the report was to integrate various goals of sustainability in the local and regional context in the existing syllabi. Following steps can be initiated within the curriculums’ as per the given guidelines:

- a) **Re-orienting the Syllabus-** Integrating topics discussed in syllabus with sustainability challenges-economic, social and environmental. These should be discussed along with case studies in all subjects.

A lesson plan can be devised according to the topics to be discussed in the class, linking it with these issues.

- b) **Teaching Techniques and ESD Pedagogies-** To provide for different learning experiences and maintaining social equity, which is the core concept of sustainability. It should focus on giving every child an access to educational resources, without any discrimination to any type of learner and upholding gender equity. They can be engaged through simulation methods, learning through a given situation and reflecting on the relevance of these simulations in real world scenarios. Another technique emphasized would be classroom discussions which can be either led by teachers or by students. Issue analysis method can make them understand the implications of certain issues on the community. Other methods of connecting with such topics include newspaper articles, storytelling and various participatory approaches.
- c) **Peer Counselling-** These are mostly those sessions that can be done through outside the classroom or extracurricular activities. It helps them to learn from their peers by engaging in hobbies they are passionate about. This can even include community services or community outreach activities.
- d) **ESD Principles-** ESD should be designed keeping in mind the sustainability related issues to be included within the given curriculum. Its objective will be to provide for quality education, training and increasing public awareness. They should be made aware of values such as equality, inclusivity and care for environment. It should also include adjectival subjects that are necessary for skill development. It should have an overall aim for transformation within society.

Defining the Informal and Formal Process of Learning

There has been an effort to bring changes in the education system in recent times with the new education policy but it may take a lot of time before such changes start making an impact on the lives of the young people. Also, bringing a cultural and behavioural shift may have huge gestation period. Thus, some interventions are needed at an individual and institutional level to bring them out of sleep and make them realise that 'Business as Usual' cannot continue. As parents and educators, one can create a realistic image of the society so that they are not influenced by social media's make belief world.

According to David Orr, a critique of unsustainability, it is a myth that ignorance is a solvable problem. It cannot show us the right direction if we bring alternatives to the present crisis in haste without testing the ground. For example, green revolution meant to solve the crisis in grain production did help. But it is responsible for introduction of chemicals to the soil and vegetation that damaged the ecosystem, which was realised much later. And we are still reeling under its effects. Similarly, any surge in technology cannot reverse most of the problems introduced by the human race. There is a loss to vernacular knowledge due to globalisation and homogenisation. Before one decides to bring a transformation, it is absolutely noteworthy to understand the fallouts of the modern education. It will help us to assess the essential ingredients for bringing a conscious conditioning process for the students to appreciate the value of sustainability education.

Going by the principles of Sustainable Development, one has to continuously struggle to make trade-offs between the three components of sustainability (social, economic and environmental). This has to be done from the lowest level that is the family, localities, institutions, states and finally at the national level. Since the focus of this discussion is more about the role of the civil society or the institutions, it would be fruitful to look for methods that traditionally existed in the Indian society, to take lessons from those practices and

imbibe them in our day-to-day life. A simple beginning could be to embark on this journey with few changes in the pattern of learning which is based on experiential approach:

- a) **Start a Discussion-** The first step would be to emphasize on cohort learning. It would be the best practice to initiate discussions on important topics like values, culture and issues of sustainability. One can assess how the discussant/students participate in these discussions. They can also be taken for heritage and nature walks to build their connections with culture and nature.
- b) **Create a Journal -** Each student can be asked to maintain a diary of their sustainable and unsustainable practices. They should also be asked to calculate their local footprints so that they can realise the pitfalls of the Business-as-Usual model. Along with this, they can be asked to give their own creative inputs to improve upon the lifestyle changes.
- c) **Project work-** The students can be asked to develop their own projects related to ecofriendly practices and even learn basic art of carrying out those projects in the neighbourhood along with their peers. For example, they can learn the art of segregating, composting or even gardening.
- d) **Go back in Past-** They can be asked to study their own cultural practices from their region or localities which were more sustainable. They can even interview their grandparents and indulge them in discussions to provide local solutions. For example, every grandmother can give food related and household medical tips that were both healthy and instant.
- e) **Engage with the Community-** Each group of students can also hold workshops for their peer and neighbourhood communities about the lessons they have learnt through these projects presenting useful tips for future. For example, they can engage themselves by Door Step campaign, Social Media Campaign and Adopt your community campaigns.

The Formal Process

The colleges and institutes should start short term courses on sustainable living through experiential methods before Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) becomes an inbuilt feature in the curriculum. While discussing sustainability, it is extremely important to recognise the process as well as the end. Besides this, all learning process should be based on scientific principle of *Experiential Education*. This will not only bring value addition to their existing educational model; it will also make learning more enjoyable.

The training of teachers in Experiential Education (EE) is significant. Concept of EE is often confused with experience-based learning in some defined project or module. It is altogether an alternative learning method which can be traced back to the Indian indigenous system too. One has to realise that our ancestors always learnt through knowledge transfer from their gurus and other society members by way of practice. Nothing was learned within the four walls of the classroom but in societal spaces. Students were taught to live a frugal lifestyle and contribute to the society as part of their duties.

Similarly in today's time open and green spaces within the campuses can be utilised for experimentation and learning. They should also spend time with the community so that there is a cross sharing of knowledge. The whole idea should not be lost in hoarding certificates but genuinely move towards transformation in their lifestyles and inculcate a sense of stewardship. When they find innovative yet real solutions for the real problems, their coping capacity is also enabled. Instead of getting disillusioned by crisis, they become warriors and start looking for alternatives.

Many youths who are enamoured by the early startup culture are happy, as they not facing denials in job like their counterparts who are job seekers despite having education. The focus is on investing in skills

that can help them in future. Thus, they can be proactively occupied in self-employment. This would also help them to become entrepreneurs and not just become a slave for the industrial world. The transformation will mean a shift towards more 'out of classroom' exercises with hands on experience and applying all theoretical aspects into practice. In these frameworks peer learning and group activity is extremely important. They learn how to work with each other and not just be mere competitors. Teachers have to support their pupils to strengthen their learning process by their own experience and not by lecture-based methods.

Research Findings of the Experiential Learning Tools used during the Study

A thorough process-driven activities have been listed based on ten years of experience and ongoing projects. The researcher has been able to observe each process from close quarters as these have been designed by her. Every experience has been supported by a carefully planned activity and objectives.

1. ***Experiences of Students in Research Projects-*** Students have been part of three funded research projects; and many minor projects within the institute. Each project has given fruitful outcomes and an opportunity to learn from it. Some of them have been presented in other forums of regional and national repute. These projects also gave them a platform to deliberate, debate and research on various topics related to environment, disasters and sustainability. Many research forums were also held within the institute to present their studies to other peer members, who take value from these discussions.
2. ***Experiences of Students in Internship Programmes-*** All students who were given a chance to work outside their classroom mode for internship projects engaged themselves in research activity in an organised manner. A lot of peer-learning also happened during this time and with continuous input from the supervisors, they made excellent progress.
3. ***Experiences of Students in Adventure Programmes-*** The teams involved in trekking, learnt organisational proficiency, working under harsh conditions, and also their closeness to nature helped them appreciate the ecosystem services. They applied LNT (Leave No Trace) principles that limited their footprints. They carried these experiences to their institutes and these were shared with their peers through a presentation. The participants also appreciated the learnings that happened in the outdoors, and requested the organising team for similar experiences.
4. ***Experiences of Students in Extracurricular Activities-*** The society members working on Disaster Preparedness had better exposure to some relevant topics related to disasters, could show leadership qualities during sensitisation programmes and have also mapped the institution. They have studied the process of managing emergency situation and learnt the evacuation measures. Some of them had also been trained in first aid and working with differently abled. All these gave them power to understand their responsibility who can make a difference in the lives of their family members, peers and other community members.
5. ***Experiences of Students in Short Courses-*** Various short-term courses were designed on relevant topics related to Environmental Education, Disaster Vulnerability, Climate Change, and Sustainable Development. They all showed excellent results of learning outcomes. They reflected on the great experience they had with realistic results of application in their life, when students are involved in the process.

A Self Designed three months Course on Sustainable Pathways was introduced for undergraduates and above recently for validation of the above framework. The responses of the participants varied as per

the type of teaching style. With different formats of teaching, learning outcomes were different. Compared to lecture method, the experiential learning tools were much more effective as it gave better choices to the learners to integrate their own experiences with the topics they had chosen for presentation and research during the course of their study. Although the participants were not aware of the experiments they were put through, but there were stark differences in their learning process.

A similar experience was felt by the course coordinators also. It enriched their experience of conducting the sessions in more creative manner. As lot of time was devoted to reflection, it helped them to improve each module of the course. They themselves applied various forms of experimentation with their learners. Each result was different based on how strong the experience was and how well learning tools were applied.

- 6. *Limitations of the Study-*** All the outcomes of such learning are heavily loaded with experiences of various groups in the said programmes. However, the time limit is the major limitation especially due to semester mode where students have to take exams twice a year and lot of time goes into preparations and examinations. This breaks the continuity of the ongoing programmes. Secondly, students who are part of these programmes, once they leave the institute after graduating, the younger peers often miss out on learning from the rich experiences of their seniors. Most skill development programmes and upscaling courses are often expensive and if not done repeatedly, it reduces the effectiveness of such drives.

Developing a Framework for ESD through Experiential Education

In order to develop a framework for sustainability, the first step should be to build a consensus that all people of this world are connected to each other and hence everyone has to believe in care and share principle. At the same time, one has to take cognizance of the strengths of one's culture. Education, therefore should be able to promote the core values of any society.

It is essential to understand that one can easily be misled into believing that western education and lifestyle brings prosperity. On the contrary, it only promotes highly consumeristic existence that our planet cannot sustain. Finally, the present education system should be tweaked to include value-based learning if sustainability has to be taught to the present generation. All this can ensure a change in the mindset of the students in order to be pro active in implementing sustainable behaviour. Thus, the framework should include four core objectives-

1. *Education on Sustainable Development*

It would promote a systemic change within institutions or organisations that can contribute towards positive transformation in bringing about sustainable practices. These should include various types of courses, internship programmes and community outreach activities embedded with sustainability studies. There should be adequate attention given to an inventory of sustainable outcomes. This can bring a new set of thinking and action related to it.

The target groups should be made familiar with local and national issues, approaches to deal with them and also the skills required to address these themes. Along with this learning indigenous practices can add value to the lives of these young people and teach them the importance of upholding cultural ethos. The education should have impactful learning atmosphere for all sections of the society and across different kind of learners, different age and gender and should not expect stereotypical rote learning by the students.

In the present era that is driven by technology, solutions should also evolve by integrating technology with Education for Sustainable Development.

2. Vernacular Learning Tool

Learning can happen in the best form if it is connected with nature-based learning in one's place of abode. In the ancient times, references related to text, theatres, movies and even advertisement were all based on the deep connections with nature and one's place of birth. Every dimension of our life was in sync with nature, like festivals were related to seasons and harvest. Today, the new linguistic tool used due to the capitalist upbringing have lost the traditional touch. Even the *words related to nature* have been replaced by the new verbal references. Nature lover has been replaced by exploit nature, stroll in the woods have been replaced by hangout places, shade trees replaced by air-conditioned spaces, forest replaced by concrete jungles and many such mindless expressions. Picking wild berries are no more fun nor is playing in the dirt.

All forms of enjoyment now happen within closed spaces like malls and spas. The youth do not relate to springs, or bird watching or even walking in the natural surroundings. Bioregional associations are no more with landscapes but with markets and clubs. Tourism is also about living in luxurious resorts rather than enjoying the beauty of nature in mountains and beaches.

The great poets of yesteryears wrote effortlessly about their natural surroundings. William Wordsworth expresses his feeling for nature in his poem 'I wandered Lonely as a Cloud'. Robert Frost who did not have formal education wrote beautifully about nature's cycle in his poem 'Nothing Gold can Stay', or in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. William Blake, an ardent nature lover in his poem 'Heaven in a wild Flower' portrayed his affinity with nature. Our very own Nobel laureate Tagore wrote most of his poems about nature and humanity in his famous work 'Gitanjali'. Based on this vision of learning, he pioneered by founding Visva Bharti or Santiniketan, a residential school and a centre for art and culture in a village in Birbhum district in West Bengal, India. He always emphasised on learning in the outdoors and amidst nature. His idea of classrooms in the open and under the trees brought the pupils closer to nature. He also revived the Guru Shishya Parampara.

As one looks for revival of those practices and to stimulate the sensory experiences of the students, first step would be to unlearn the exploitative lifestyle approaches. Students have to be reintroduced with the concepts of nature walk, village excursion, picnic in the woods, and to some extent even accept the harshness of nature by trekking to inhospitable places and camping there. Nothing can enthrall the child then enjoying the wonders of nature. So, one can recreate sustainable societies through revival of vernacular and nature-based learning.

3. Methods of Learning

As John Dewey believed that *Experiential Education* should provide an alternative to the conventional method and not just contradict for sake of doing so. Each learning experience should be worthwhile and give an enjoyable experience for its participants. All this should be planned carefully by the educators who can continuously increase their knowledge base. EE should be both student centric and community centric. David Kolb another experiential educator, discussed learning style model in 1984 that talks about the learner's experience in four stages in a cyclic pattern. Although one can enter the cycle at any stage but it is believed that all stages are important for the learning to happen effectively. The combination of stages explains the variations in learning style of each individual. Conventionally one believes that all students

learn in the same manner, although in reality everyone has different ways of looking at the same knowledge, based on one's experience and perception. Thus, it is the responsibility of the educator to offer learning experiences of different kinds to the students. One should also distinguish the creative abilities of each student based on the theory of multiple intelligence.

Once these ventures become part of their regular learning habits, they can be associated with research projects as part of their curriculum. Their teachers can facilitate interaction with industry and other partners who can collaborate with them for developing employable skills. This way the graduates can find gainful employment, while the employer enjoys the benefit of an experienced and matured employee.

4. Promote Cooperation Instead of Competition

There should be an integration of educating about sustainability through powerful experiences so that it can mobilize the youth to follow what is right with logic and practical input and not forced by situations. Critical thinking should become the basis of their choice of a particular approach they follow; whether they consider business as usual model over environmental concerns or stewardship approach over individualistic goals. It should promote harmony, cooperation and reorientation of family over self.

In the Indian family system, there was a lot of learning that happened within families, within communities and social set ups. There was a common saying that "it needs a whole village to raise a child." Sustainable attitudes were part of the upbringing process and the children were not competing with each other to show off material wealth. Also, group activities and peer learning were initiated both in institutions and by the society members that helped in developing tolerance, atmosphere for sharing and caring and allow for socially equitable places to flourish.

Conclusion

Education on sustainability is the need of the hour and any further delay may affect the process of percolation to the young members of the community. If a sincere change is made in the curriculum, it can give favourable results which can be good for the society. Along with such addition to the syllabus, it should be supported by approaches and processes of inclusivity, quality and experience-based methods. The impetus here is also on learning outside the classroom which help in skill development and has employability prospects. At the same time, learning should not be a boring experience and learner positively contributes to the society.

The ESD tools should be given priority as these can be used for reorientation of the syllabus within the given curriculum. Finally, one has to realise that the civil society has to be made aware about the alarming issues related to the unsustainable practices which may be obstacles for growth and development. Our youth, by choosing the right pathway can be the role models for leading their peers towards a sustainable future.

In this globalised world the educators should aim to train the University students to prepare for future global challenges. At the same time, local and campus-based engagements should also be reemphasized. Debates and discussions can induce constructive inputs and eventually shape transformative spaces for educators as well as students. All this can also be followed up by meetings with policy makers to inculcate a sustainable approach in curriculum design. The way Environmental Studies have been compulsorily introduced in the curriculum; it should also focus on need for a sustainable approach through experiential learning to be part of this curriculum. There should be a pedagogical shift towards multicultural, multidisciplinary and action-oriented method to deal and learn from real world diversity. Every theoretical

lesson should be complemented with field visits, project work and innovations. Critical thinking should be encouraged in each educational module for positive behavioural change.

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