Where Teachers Learn

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In "Continuum of Ignorance in Indian Universities" (EPW, 28 November 2015) Rajesh Misra and Supriya Singh raise a number of critical questions. Their article, a response to V Kalyan Shankar and Rohini Sahni's piece "What Does an MA Know?" (EPW, 1 August 2015), does not, however, focus on remedial measures.

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Rajesh Misra and Supriya Singh ("Continuum of Ignorance in Indian Universities," EPW, 28 November 2015) rightly highlight a number of deficiencies in Indian universities. But they have focused only on a possible framework of solutions for degeneration of the quality of faculty members interpreted by this author as degeneration of teaching quality; anomalies in teaching methodologies; and obsessive orientation towards exams.

The possible framework of solutions is threefold: by incorporating learning outcomes while planning for courses, by working out graduate student attributes for degree programmes, and the institutionalisation of teaching–learning centres (TLCs). This note is thus divided into three parts: first, the "what and why" of learning outcomes; second, the relationship between learning outcomes and graduate student attributes; and third, the rationale and role of TLCs.

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are what a student is expected to learn on completion of a module within a given course of study; or in a course as a whole, or for a degree programme in its entirety. These outcomes must necessarily be distinguished from the aims of a course. Learning outcomes could vary from being modest to being scaled up, but, these should preferably be measurable or quantifiable. The idea of quantification is often resisted by scholars and pedagogues in the humanities, and sometimes, rightly so. In such instances, learning outcomes should be evidence-based and these could be documented in the teaching dossiers maintained by individual teachers as part of their course files. A teaching dossier is a repository that reflects, among other elements, the teaching philosophy and pedagogical dissent of an individual teacher.

When evidence-based learning outcomes are incorporated into a course plan, the aims of teaching and learning become tangible to both the teacher and the learner. Both would thus know what is expected of them in a given class session of 50 minutes or during an entire academic term. When the learning outcomes become ever more tangible, the evaluation process too would be rationalised. Thus, any given question in an exam would correspond to the learning outcomes, or at least, to one of these outcomes. The learning outcomes of any given course must be reflected in all the evaluation components of that course, and specifically, to each query in an exam, whether oral or written as well as in other evaluation components, including take-home assignments and study in situ outside the classroom, like a trip to a museum or an archaeological site. If the evaluation process is rationalised, the obsessive orientation towards exams could be curtailed and evaluation could even become a learning activity for students.

Graduate Student Attributes

Learning outcomes are, however, located within the larger scheme of the teaching and learning process. In other words, learning outcomes in a particular course of study within a programme are determined by the attributes expected of a student on graduation. Therefore, one has to look at the graduate student attributes while designing the learning outcomes for a course. One characterisation of graduate student attributes is that these are

> a set of individually assessable outcomes that are the components indicative of the graduate's potential to acquire competence to practise at the appropriate level. […] Graduate attributes are clear, succinct statements of the expected capability, qualified if necessary by a range indication appropriate to the type of programme.[1]

The above characterisation and similar ones are made in the documents prepared by the International Engineering Alliance in their Washington, Sydney and Dublin accords. These deal with "Graduate Student Attributes" of engineering graduates. The graduate student attributes

could vary across programmes, and thus, attributes of a student graduating as a civil engineer could be different from those of a chemical engineer. For ensuring that a graduating engineer has these qualities, the learning outcomes of each course of every programme or department should match with the graduate student attributes.

For realising the learning outcomes, every course that forms part of a degree programme must have clearly spelt out learning outcomes. Similarly, every department must have a document of graduate student attributes for students opting for one or more degree programmes in that department. Correspondingly, the university or its internal divisions, like the Faculty of Liberal Arts or the School of Aesthetics, could also outline the expected attributes of its graduates. The learning outcomes of individual courses and the graduate student attributes of the department and the university must be synchronous.

In many Indian universities today, the graduate student attributes for degree programmes are often not specified. Certain accreditation bodies in India, like the National Board of Accreditation, might be already aligned with this process of incorporating graduate student attributes. However, irrespective of whether accreditation bodies in India assess the efficacy of a degree programme on the basis of graduate student attributes or not, such graduate student profiles could be created by individual departments of a university in consultation with constituting colleges as well as with individual faculty members corresponding to a particular discipline.
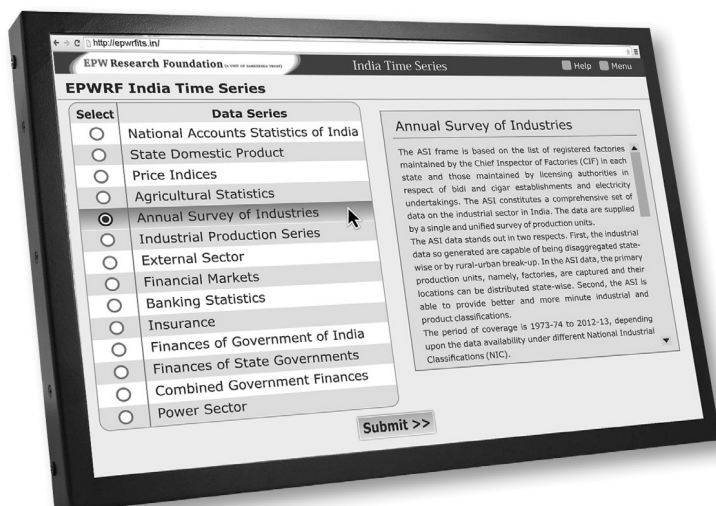
A question that stares at us for those in the Humanities and Social Sciences could be: what is the graduate student profile of one who is graduating with a degree in History or Politics? The task of arriving at a feasible response to this question need not be left to accreditation agencies or regulatory bodies alone, but could be worked out at the level of individual departments, colleges and universities. But, learning outcomes for courses and graduate student attributes for a degree programme must be necessarily worked out simultaneously.

A good spot for change is when individual faculty members begin designing learning outcomes for courses they teach. For example, the aim of a three credit semester-long elective course on the Indian Constitution could be to introduce an undergraduate to its salient features and the debates that went into its drafting. One specific learning outcome could be how Article 21 of Part III of the Constitution (Fundamental Rights) was applied in the case *Additional District Magistrate of Jabalpur v Shivkant Shukla* (1976), popularly known as the *Habeas Corpus* case of 1976 (SCR 172), and how this article may now be interpreted in the ongoing case regarding *Santhára*—the traditional Jain practice of extinguishing one's life that is arguably distinct from suicide. The analysis and evaluation of the application of Article 21 by the Supreme Court in the *Habeas Corpus* case of 1976 may aid the student in creating a judicious response to the aporia created by the clash of Article 21

with Article 25—where the former alludes to the natural right to life while the latter refers to the fundamental right of freely practising one's religion—in the current legal conundrum regarding Santhára.

For collegial, non-hierarchical, non-prescriptive discussion by teachers on the teaching–learning experience in general, and specifically, on learning outcomes and graduate student attributes requires a forum. The staff rooms, college cafeterias, university corridors, or even, the office or home space of a colleague are the common fora for such informal discussions. These informal discussions could nonetheless be documented and shared via TLCs, if such centres are institutionalised, and where credibility is key rather than administrative efficiency.

Teaching–Learning Centres

It is an irrefutable truth that if universities are to excel, these must be research driven. However, the received assumption that good research concomitantly leads to good teaching may not always be correct. Ever increasing focus on research could, and sometimes does, lead to perfunctory teaching. Consequently, young eager minds are disillusioned or disoriented by their teaching–learning experience at institutions of higher education. Even for the world's leading universities, research alone may be insufficient to maintain their reputation as an excellent place for learning at the

first-degree level. To address this lacuna, a few Indian universities have already founded TLCs. These centres aim at discovering and learning the best teaching–learning practices across the world so that these may be incorporated into our classrooms, labs and other sites of teaching and learning.

Teaching suffers, partly, because there are few parameters for assessing its quality, unlike research. Teaching often happens within enclosed walls of a classroom while research is evaluated by peers in the public domain. If teaching has to improve, the quality of teaching must be reviewed, not only by students but by peers as well; for that to happen, teaching must be brought out into the public domain, away from the cloistered classroom. TLCs could become an effective institutionalised mechanism for making teaching–learning a public affair through peer review and for encouraging teachers to reflect deeply upon student feedback and course-correct oneself as may be required.

TLCs are best founded through a process of benchmarking, as one Indian university recently did, with universities in Australia, India, North America, Scandinavia, Singapore, South-east Asia, and the United Kingdom before founding a similar centre. In doing so, nascent centres must be wary of merely emulating others elsewhere as we might run into the same blind alley as our predecessors.

TLCs may organise within a collegial, non-hierarchical and non-prescriptive environment teaching workshops for newly inducted faculty, lecturers, teaching assistants as well as for established faculty seeking professional development. Facilitating research in pedagogy, hosting educators-in-residence, and training teachers for technology enhanced learning modes—flipped classrooms/blended learning/massive open online courses and the employment of learning management systems could be other prominent functions. As the learner, and not the teacher, is at the centre of the education paradigm, TLCs may also envisage an exceptionally proactive role for students in improving the teaching–learning experience.

The teaching–learning process is more than an intellectual experiment. It is also a social activity, founded on good will towards students, trust in teachers, as well as the mutually shared qualities of humility, compassion and wisdom. Ensuring quality in the teaching–learning experience is an onerous way of improving learning, fostering quality research and empowering the human resources of the future—in India and elsewhere.

NOTE

1 International Engineering Alliance (2013): "Graduate Student and Professional Competencies," version 3 updated on 21 June 2013, http://www.ieagreements.org/IEA-Grad-Attr-Prof-Competencies.pdf, accessed on 29 November 2015.