

Preparing Students for Professional Communication

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Abstract – Communication is a vital aspect of skill building, and it needs more the fluency of a language. It needs a thought process that is innovative in information processing and application based. Traditional educational systems don't encourage strong skills for unique communication, further weakened by a tendency of consuming ready-made material from easily available online courses. This article provides an approach to systematically develop an ability of self-unique expression instead of a copy-paste attitude.

Keywords – Self-Esteem, Confidence, Metacognition, Reflective Dialogue.

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PREPARING STUDENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

The educational exercise is an essential component of human life not just because of certification but also because of the development of the most necessary life skills in human beings. That is an area that many a time gets ignored in traditional school systems, which focus more on rote memorization and quantitative scoring of memory based paper pencil tests. The skills of information processing, knowledge structuring and communication, absolutely vital for survival in modern day society, are not encouraged at all. In fact, typical board examination answers, even projects, have to be not only in a prescribed format, but also in a prescribed structure and language. It would not be possible for students to reach the level of understanding and comprehension of knowledge, so that they can apply that knowledge effectively in their daily life, if they cannot process that knowledge in their own words, in their own way. The humanist Carl Rogers describes every human as a unique personality and a unique intellect, and concomitantly, cognitive psychology refers to the process of knowledge development as 'metacognition', which is the unique processes that occur in every human brain for processing information. They cannot be expected to have the same way of processing and expression of knowledge, as no human being is physically, intellectually or emotionally identical to each other. This difference needs to be celebrated and encouraged through education, as does unique thought processes and free discussion amongst students and teachers. Not only will such exercises help in improving the skill of communication and language amongst students, but it will play a vital role in developing the confidence of the students to be able to face real-life situations without fear or

hesitation. For after all, where does the fear have it's origin? Educationists would say lack of self-esteem. But then, what is self-esteem? It is the belief of an individual in his/her abilities and thoughts. And where does this belief come from? It comes from their voice being heard, their ideas being accepted in their own unique way and their views being expressed in educational forums. It is difficult to generate high self-esteem amongst students when they are straightaway categorised as high or low achievers on the basis of quantitative scores provided on a very narrow concept of expression, where writing is about reproduction from text books, answering questions demanding hardly any unique application or the individual's own structure of words.

Any student's educational task need not be to conform to a certain set of expression or behaviour for the sake of scoring marks, but to be comfortable enough to constantly question and process knowledge the way it appears to them, the way it appeals to them. There can be no better way to prepare students for their professional life than to encourage and cultivate a culture of free expression and free discussion in writing and speech. They need not be asked to speak what is considered correct, what is considered desirable or for that matter, text book compatible. The professional world, in India as well as abroad, of today has changed over the years, the basic skills of the 3Rs, on which employment was provided even 20 years back, have indeed been taken over by machines. So the professional requirements of humans have changed too, the foremost of them being creativity, clarity and expression. The ability to analyse a problem and present a solution, in

one's own unique way, is valued by all professionals. So what kind of communication skills are required for success? Very fluent and elaborate English speaking? According to management psychologists, absolutely not. It is more to functionally make one's point in the right context, with the right examples and the right audience. Let us try to analyse the various aspects involved in preparing students to do so.

We begin with a quote by BILL COSBY "I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." Well, that is actually easier said than done, and requires a lot of education and encouragement. Even a cursory glance at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs tells us that all humans, without exception, need to please, need to belong, need to be given the occasional pat in the back. It is what makes the quantitative score and a comparison with others so very very important for students, that they become some kind of an obsession with them. So the unavoidable truth is that:

- √ Humans need approval
- √ Praise and prize are powerful motivators
- √ Avoiding unpleasantness is important too

But such an orientation always leads to a point where students will communicate what is 'safe', or 'tried and tested', in other words, copy paste from textbooks or online. Their own thought processes take a backseat as that is considered risky, liable to earn disapproval or rejection or ridicule. It is only when they enter professional life do they start realizing the error of such action, as first of all, they tend to get labelled as copycats, as people who are lazy and don't make the required effort for original communication. Also, it leads to a lot of the frustration in the individual him/herself as they constantly denying themselves the satisfaction of making their own unique ideas, viewpoints known to others in their own unique way of expression. These are, after all, the higher rungs in Maslow's Hierarchy and every individual strives to reach there, as otherwise an adult might feel intellectually and emotionally stunted. These are not groundless fears, more and more professionals in this day and age are suffering from stress, ill-health and the reason is that they have been brought up to become intellectual and communicative parrots, in a way. Somewhere along the line, the least important thing is doing what is right to oneself, having the satisfaction of having made their point, having expressed oneself in the way one feels is best, without constant prescription. Many a time, we need to just think about how to exactly convey our message, without any pre-decided categories, we establish what's right after a reflective dialogue with ourselves or with others, just to weigh the pros and cons of a particular way of communication, and this process is most essential

for the development of effective professional communication skills.

So what is it that the teachers need to concentrate on, when preparing students to be good professional communicators in the future? One cannot deny the importance of memory, but memory need not be looked at in terms of rote or reproduction. Having a good memory and recall of words, facts, punch lines, strategies etc. and using various permutations and combinations of them according to audience and requirements, is one surefire way of pleasing oneself and others. The following steps are essential to follow if that is to happen:

- **Prepare ahead, no overconfidence** - the one thing that needs to be always concentrated on by teachers is emphasizing the fact that there are no completely natural or infallible speakers. This is a skill developed by constant practice. Events like interviews and group discussions, even extempore speaking are vital in the professional arena, and to make students comfortable, a lot of oral classwork needs to be there, a constant process of brainstorming and exchange of ideas. Problem solving viva-voce is a better way of preparation and evaluation. Practicing and preparing for speaking will become part and parcel of a student's behavioural repertoire, that way.
- **Ask questions to yourself and try to answer them** - this process is also very limited in the traditional school systems which concentrate more on telling students how to answer a set pattern of questions. Such people will keep being deficient as professional communicators and ineffective as problem solvers. Instead, they need to be asked to formulate questions from a body of knowledge, and discuss amongst themselves for the best answers, the teacher being in the role of a guide a facilitator.
- **Clarify any doubts** - there should never be a tendency in any students to memorise concepts without properly understanding them. They will find it very difficult to utilize them in even the basic professional communication in that case. So the emphasis in the classroom should be of encouraging students to present concepts in their own words, which always indicates a more thorough understanding. It may not work very well in the prescriptive format of written communication and evaluation prevalent in traditional education systems, but this becomes valuable to students in

the long run, once they embark on their careers.

- ▶ **Associate facts with theories and individuals** - essentially, this means always providing relevant examples from real life, to corroborate what is being said. There is nothing more boring than pontification on the basis of theory, particularly in this day and age where such information is available at the touch of a button. People tend to even copy-paste examples, instead of providing their own unique viewpoints, leading to a failure to be effective professional communicators. What can be extremely impactful is the use of anecdotal knowledge, interesting episodes and famous quotations, for which, again, every student has to experience the subject matter in his/her own unique way.
- ▶ **Keep repeating main points to oneself** - this will help to establish the logical order in which a verbal or written communicate needs to be presented in a professional situation, because a fluent communication is absolutely the basic essential, which will not be possible if one needs too many pauses to order their thoughts.
- ▶ **Write notes, main points, summaries, quotes** - writing and note-taking in the classroom are indeed passe these days, with students expecting to be given ready-made handouts, dictations or power point presentations which they can then conveniently memorise and reproduce in examinations. Psychologists warn of the danger associated with these practices, a Harvard study actually indicating that PPTs are producing more idiots in the academic world these days. A piece of knowledge, structured by someone else can never become part of the cognitive map of the brain, thus causing its memory to decay after a little while. Note-taking is an important skill as it makes students develop their own summarizations, creating a much stronger understanding and memory.
- ▶ **Use should be concise, not long-winded** - the most valuable commodity in the professional world is time, and that is why brief communicates covering the main points is always desirable. Filling in reams of paper may get students good marks in examinations, but long communications will not help them professionally as this generates boredom and attention lapse. Humans are gradually reducing their attention spans, thanks to a myriad electronic distractions, and thus conciseness in communication is very much in demand.

One may conclude by saying that educational systems need to keep pace with the times not just in terms of content but in methodology and structure. The world today is sounding the warning bell in a lot of aspects, one of them being the employability of its youth, and a certain attitude of resistance to change by the educational systems. The thoughts expressed here are a way to start addressing that issue.

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