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Learning How To Teach

How innovative teaching methods and technology are helping B-schools design new ways of learning

Business schools in India have transformed over the years and function as workshops for innovative business ideas. Class-rooms are no longer what they used to be at the turn of the century. Blackboards are used sparingly and the teacher has taken on a more mature role of a 'facilitator of knowledge' than just a tutor. Indian B-schools are restructuring their MBA curriculum as well as pedagogical approaches to remain relevant, as India becomes an integral part of the globalised business and economic agenda.

While computer labs, power plug points and Wi-Fi have become mandatory inside campus, multimedia in the form of interactive boards, digital highlighters, PPTs, animated infographics have become part and parcel of classroom learning.

The Course of Action

At B-schools, the focus is now on enabling the participants in decision making and analysis."While we have introduced new courses in Cognitive Business, Customer Experience Management, Analytics, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, we are using innovative pedagogical approaches like gamification, simulation, storyboard and music," says Uday Salunkhe, Group Director, LN Welingkar Institute of Management Development & Research (WeSchool). For example, in an accounting class, as teaching them Debit/Credit is quite monotonous, at WeSchool, the participants play a game of Monopoly to understand the intricate details of a balance sheet.

Core concepts are taught by way of application. While case studies continue to form an integral part of the pedagogy, live projects, empirical studies, working in groups to pursue areas of common interest, etc., are ways in which B-schools are stimulating the students to upgrade their skill sets.

Bala V. Balachandran, a J. L. Kellogg distinguished Professor of Accounting & Information Management at Northwestern University, Illinois, and Founder, Dean & Chairman of Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai and Gurgaon says, "We recognise the potential that technology has to offer and we use it to enhance the quality of the B-school experience." For instance at Great Lakes, attendance is handled

biometrically, quizzes and tests are conducted online, the evaluation for which is real-time, professors and students use 'learning management systems' to communicate, exchange study material, ideas and assignments. All these allow the students to translate lessons into invaluable courses of action.

Innovative methods of teaching aided by technology is an integral part at IIM Kozhikode too. Known for its pristine green campus, the institute caters to the students using a multimedia approach. According to Debabrata Chatterjee, Dean of Academics, two methods are being adopted here: multimedia and gamification of classroom experience. Earlier, it was not unusual for faculty to use activities in classes. But today, entire courses or modules are being designed around games or activities in or outside the classroom, with more traditional methods as supplements.

ISB or the Indian School of Business has come up with a tricky, yet innovative way to capture students' attention — and not just inside the class. The faculty here is using technology to engage students with the subject matter before they arrive in the classroom. "The technology allows teachers to post readings on mobile-friendly platforms, and embed questions inside the e-pages. The students read the questions in the middle of the reading, and cannot turn the pages, unless the questions are answered," says Arun Pereira, Executive Director of the Centre for Learning and Management (CLMP). Thus, teachers can gauge students' understanding and preparation before the classroom session starts.

Going Beyond Infrastructure

Classrooms are no longer just furniture. Technology is, indeed, a game changer when it comes to enhancing the learning experience dramatically. Nitish Jain, President of Mumbai's SP Jain School of Global Management, explains the innovations adopted at his classrooms which he calls 'learning centres'. "Each desk is fitted with a decision making clicker allowing faculty to challenge students by getting them to make decisions." Class participation is taken based on the quality of decisions. Imagine the impact it has on the student's critical thinking skills.

The top-down approach no longer is relevant today. Lecture rooms have given way to discussion rooms. There is now an increasing emphasis on small breakout rooms of just 4-5 students to discuss topics. Students are no longer limited to just what the faculty knows or teaches but can broaden learning by accessing online content, collaborate with students/faculty remotely, etc. .

Tapan Kumar Panda, Professor and Dean, Jindal Global Business School, OP Jindal Global University has a different view. "There are very few innovations in classrooms in an average B-school in India," he says. However, the good ones are bringing lots of changes into classroom experience of students. The 'one-size-fits all' standardised model is a passé.

Now, a 'choice-based credit system' helps students choose subjects they intend to learn during the MBA programme. While the basic deliverables or minimum competency levels for a B-school graduate can be fixed with a small set of core courses, the students are getting an option quite early in the programme on what choices suit their learning ability, interest and career options.

The nature of learning inside the classroom is also changing from 'comprehensive theory building' to 'immersion into content'. Professors are also gleaning information from different sets of students who have both 'subject awareness' and 'subject interest' due to self-selection. A like-minded group of students are together not just they are forced to, but they are interested in learning a discipline. This makes the involvement level of both faculty and students higher.

Bridging The Divide

Faculty members are driving classrooms to shop floors, market places and boardrooms. Students are focusing more on ground level learning, working with managers and entrepreneurs and absorbing market realities and thus bridging the divide between 'taught', 'learnt' and 'practiced'. "The major shift here is that learning is no longer confined to the traditional classroom. The Internet and social media are disrupting traditional pedagogical tools," says IIM-K's Chatterjee. For example, it is not enough to discuss a case documented last year. Students and faculty check facts and developments related to that organisation or the issue. Hence, there is an expectation to be constantly updated.

"While there is a concern about the potential misuse of the Internet in plagiarism, what is needed is to train students to use the Internet sensibly to enrich their learning," says Chatterjee. The social media — Facebook, Twitter — are becoming ubiquitous tools to leverage the natural tendency among students to connect with peers. Hence, properly tapped, social media can add immense value in enhancing peer learning experience.

Salunkhe feels that faculties now are more of 'experience designers' for participants. "The millennials are better informed and tech savvy. Unless, the classroom experience is made engaging, interactive and exciting, it is difficult to get learning outcomes from each session," he says. Hence faculty skill sets are going to change over a period of time.

Integrated Learning Is Key

B-schools have traditionally blended the science of management with the art of leadership. Today academics is not as important as performance. While a thorough knowledge of the fundamentals is mandatory, the specialised courses and the way in which they are taught have to be changed in order to keep the B-school offering current and relevant.

According to Balachandran, the future belongs to 'integrated' learning. "The times ahead are very exciting. Continuous executive development will mark a paradigm shift in B-school education, where, for instance, the alumni of a school will continue to be students and learning from their alma maters long after they have graduated and physically left the school) for which purpose too, embracing the full potential of technology will be a key differentiator between the B-schools," he says.

"In future, B-school learning will see major structural and curriculum changes. Going by trends, the traditional two-year postgraduate MBA shall transform into a one year training with emphasis on industry experience," says Chatterjee. This is a likely scenario as the cost of the two-year programme is becoming prohibitive, and, in India, at least, the two-year programme increasingly resembles an undergraduate course with emphasis on basic skills rather than strategic skills. "I also expect a renewed surge of students with more experience in the coming years," he says. The trend of undergraduation-MBA-jobs is an aberration that will pass. The classroom is likely to see more diversity in terms of gender as well as students' academic and experience background. This should translate into richer learning in the class. With the digital push by the government and better digital infrastructure, many classroom courses are likely to shift online, and the e-MBA is likely to compete with the traditional classroom courses.

Further, e-learning is likely to become modularised so that students may accumulate course credits or 'nano degrees' according to their need and pace, and then, apply for a degree once sufficient credits are accumulated. Platforms such as Coursera and Udacity are harbingers of this trend. "In terms of curriculum, emphasis will shift to social responsibility, environment sensitivity and ethics over and above the current stress on business skills," says Chatterjee.

In future as in western universities, more and more of project and assignment based learning would happen as opposed to full day lecturing. Contact sessions with faculties will be less and more enriching. For example, on an average there are 40 hours of lectures whereas abroad they have typically 5-8 contact hour sessions (lectures). "While technology is raising the bar of education, teachers will begin integrating technology to explain concepts. Infographics will replace massive notes. Presentations will become more animated. Student projects will become paperless and more tech driven," explains Salunkhe.

Future of classroom learning will be completely different than the way it was even a decade before. According to Jain, "As cars become driverless, classrooms will become teacherless." Learning analytics is new technology that can customise learning. It will no longer be a 'One to Fifty' model. That model worked well for 300 years but the future of learning is one-on-one, self selected and on demand (without the rigid structure of classrooms).

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