

**07**

## Innovations as a 'Teacher'

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It was nearly 15 years ago that I was part of this 'group' – a breed of human beings who loved doing what they did for a living though it was very unstable in terms of a career and paid a pittance! This group had one key thing in common and that was the thrill we got by interacting with students within the four-walls of a school classroom and interacting with them by exploring a certain domain of which we were supposed to be 'expert consultants'; well, isn't this what regular teachers do, then why am I trying to differentiate this group from that of teachers? Yes, we did have things in common with regular teachers, for instance, we did engage students within a teaching-learning framework, but we were quite different from being 'teachers' for many reasons of which I'll state three key ones. One, when we interacted with a group of students, it was quite possible that, that would be the first and last time we would ever interact with that group of students in a classroom setting (so, if we wanted to be successful, we had just that one hour or less to make a lasting impression unlike a teacher who would have the entire year if not more). Two, the teachers used a textbook as their key resource material and we used the daily newspaper as ours (yes, our resource changed every day). And three, unlike the teachers in a school who had their respective resources based on their subject, everyone part of this 'group' had the same resource (the daily newspaper!), whether we were dealing with physics or biology or music or theatre or history or anything else.

The group of people I'm talking of are in popular terms called 'NIE consultants' where NIE is an acronym for the phrase 'newspaper in education'. The consultants are spread across the country in all the major cities associated with many National dailies who hire their services. The modus operandi is simple – once a person associates with a newspaper as a NIE consultant, she/he is given a list of schools at the end of every week to go to the following week. The school list mainly consists of private schools of different kinds as well as the Kendriya Vidyalaya's (KVs) in some cities. The consultants' task is to conduct classroom based sessions with students of these assigned schools. These sessions are class-wise and a consultant could have any class from I to XII assigned in a school. When the schools opt for the NIE program (The program is today run by most of the National dailies across all the major cities of the country; the genesis of this program is an innovative experiment that New York Times started in the early 80's and by the end of the decade it had arrived in India under the aegis of the Times of India. The program soon caught the fancy of other large newspapers in the country such as The Hindu & the Deccan Herald), they decide which of their classes will be part of the program and each school comes up with its own logic to decide on the classes; for instance, for the KVs classes XI & XII was in the program because they felt these teenaged students will benefit the most out of a program of this kind by giving them different perspectives & providing a 'world view' of

many things; for some schools the higher primary students were ideally suited and not the lower primary ones, while some other schools felt that all elementary level classes could find this program useful but not the high school classes and so on. For many schools high school classes were not to be disturbed as their focus would be on preparing for the boards and in such schools it was clear that NIE program was looked at as some extra-curricular stuff. However, there were many schools who felt the program sits well into their plan of holistic development of their students. For the NIE consultants, all this variety meant opportunity to engage with different kinds of students in different kinds of school settings and in that was the challenge as well as the excitement. I was part of this group of ‘expert consultants’ in the city of Bangalore and in the four years that I was part of this program I got the opportunity to engage with more than a 100 schools and with students from class I to class XII. It is based on these four years of experience of interacting with students on a daily basis that I attempt to write this article from my memory of the exciting classroom experiences and all the preparation that went into each of these classes. My attempt is to share the kind of preparation that went into these sessions and how it all unfolded within the four walls thereby hoping to provide some insights to those who may wish to experiment with this pedagogical approach.

For most NIE consultants the day begins with a thorough perusal of that day’s newspaper and identifying stories that have appeared which can be used as the TLM for that day. Post this, the a fast - paced preparation begins by checking the school list to see which are the school(s) that have been assigned for that day and the classes in those schools which one is supposed to be engaging with. Once this is noted, the consultant consults memory or the diary to check if the school or the classes are first time visits or a repeat visit based on which the in-depth prepara-

tion of mapping of the stories in the newspaper to the class syllabus and competency level is done. An example will be in order here: the International news these days is dominated by the political confrontations in Egypt. Assuming that one of the lead stories in the paper is on Egypt and related to the President Morsy’s attempt to assume autocratic powers, and if one of the higher primary classes was part of the engagement on the given day, an automatic choice for a History consultant (which I was) would be to ‘take’ students into Ancient Egypt! Drawing references to the manner in which the Pharaohs ruled regions around Egypt for many millennia in the period before the Common Era, comparing it to the current protests in Egypt against the presidential decree and then engaging the students in discussions on current political paradigms we operate in would have been the plan. However, it is most important to keep the plan flexible as at most time the consultant would not know at what level to pitch the content because it could be a first visit to the school (yes, this gets taken care of in repeat visits when one has a fair idea of the level at which students engage in a particular school; so, in that sense, my experience tells me that usually it is at the school level rather than the class level, at which student engagement levels can be benchmarked). Interestingly, many a time, the plans fail sometimes moderately and at times com-



pletely. Hence, though there is a critical need to have a plan for the sessions, it is even more important to have alternative plans. For example, going with the above mentioned Ancient Egypt lesson plan into a class VII, one may find that the students have very little idea of anything that you want to talk about – they may not know what is the ‘common era’ and trying to explain the period one may realize they are unaware of the Gregorian calendar and what constitutes the period before Christ and so on. In which case, one begins by pitching it at a level far lower than class VII – explaining the idea of a ‘timeline’ and plotting various incidents on it beginning from the most recent mega events and then attempting to get them into a discussion on how things may have been many, many years ago in Ancient Egypt is one approach that could be taken. In some schools, this could be a level one pitches for students in class III! This, in fact is what made the consultant’s life exciting.

On the other hand, one could encounter students in a school who are completely clued into these aspects. The school could be an elite one with students having access to technology within the classroom and even their home background contributing to these high levels of understanding of the content. In such a scenario, it is imperative that the consultant brings to the discussion fresh perspectives and alternative thoughts to have an effective engagement. In fact, it is for these situations that consultants would have to do their ‘morning’ fast-paced homework diligently. There is nothing more embarrassing for a consultant than to get into a class and realize that the students know just as much or much more on the topic planned for.

The other interesting thing that many consultants did is to integrate different subjects in the discussions. To elaborate this point let’s stay with the same topic on Egypt. As a History consultant, it is a lost opportunity if we don’t weave into the discussions aspects which

technically would be studied under the other streams of social science such as Geography and Civics. For instance, the unique location of Egypt on the rim of the Mediterranean with the access to waters that lead to Europe and the desert that leads into African mainland are important geography related data points that connect into various incidents in History from the more recent Suez Canal related events to those involving the Roman emperors and Egyptian rulers like the tragic story based on Cleopatra & the Ceaser; similarly, the discussion on autocracy could bring into discussion various forms of Government, virtues of democratic models of governance allowing the students to explore and deepen their knowledge ultimately leading to emergence of fresh perspectives going much beyond what a focused discussion on history would have yielded.

There are many lessons I could take away from these experiences. I believed that my sessions left a lasting impression on students and my belief was reinforced every time I either had a student (whom I surely would not have remembered) or a staff member of a school (who also sat in these sessions many a times) not only identifying me as a NIE consultant, but also recounting the session I had taken in their school many years ago. If such a lasting impression can be left on both, young and old minds, with just one session, the question is how one could do this on a regular basis as a regular teacher. The answer of course is in the practices that are there to see by the many wonderful teachers that we have, who by their sheer diligence, hardwork, innovation and love for their students go that extra mile to understand their students before engaging with them. For the NIE consultants like me, that was the trick. To figure out as early as possible in the session as to what the students knew or did not know and build on it with things that interest them.

The hard work for the NIE consultants came in the form of the impermanence of the resource material

that we were allowed to use. One could argue that without this challenge and with a more permanent material like a text book, the consultants could have planned in advance and hence done even better in delivering this program. But the successful consultants were the ones who turned this handicap or the challenge into an opportunity by working hard & in fact made the ‘rest’ feel that using that day’s newspaper as the resource material made life easy! For a ‘history’ consultant dealing with the ‘dead’ past, using the daily newspaper as a resource did come

handy in one respect – students realized (without having to communicate explicitly) that the content we were engaging with had current relevance!

Well, the best part is that what is mandatory for NIE consultants, is an ‘option’ open for all teachers, irrespective of the schools they work in, syllabuses they follow or the students they engage with. How about making the newspaper your key resource material when you engage with an audience the next time around?



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