

Did Learning Happen?

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I had been a school teacher for quite some time. Today I am not talking about those experiences, rather I wish to pen a different kind of teaching experience.

I had been conducting workshops for groups of young men and women at the Azim Premji Foundation, for some time; this time I was to work with the members of Shorapur DI (District Institute). My work was mainly to develop the 'Perspective of Social science & content knowledge' of the participants. It meant that I would develop modules on such themes and facilitate to this group in workshop mode. Most of the workshops had a duration of three to five days.

Background of the participants

The participants were a group of young men and women aged between 27 and 38 years and were Masters Degree holders in either History or Political Science. Most of them had never been school teachers but had been working with the Social Science teachers of various Government Schools for quite some years.

They were quite conversant with the both political science and history as per the syllabi of Karnataka State Board but were not as familiar with geography. The two reasons they gave for this should be noted. In Government schools the Social Science teachers themselves found it difficult to understand the concepts of geography; most of the time it was not their subject; also the language of the textbook reveals very little about the topic for self-learning. As a result the geography portion was not taught at all.

When I asked my group about their expectations from me, they specified their main concerns, understanding of the need for teaching of history, understanding of the various concepts in geography, getting an idea of the Indian Constitution and of course how to teach all these in classroom. They expected me to create appropriate activities which could be taken to the students aged between 12 to 14 years.

My challenge

I have very little knowledge of the Kannada language. I can speak, read and write English and Hindi while all the participants were most comfortable in Kannada and few had some knowledge of English and Hindi.

My role as a facilitator

I followed a structured method while delivering the module, with a good mixture of ways to help self-learning, keeping in mind the challenge of our language barrier.

I tried to introduce a topic with a story to bring clarity, showing a video or asking a question. Sometimes I would dress up and act. I included interesting reading material related to the subject in English, and created activities and games around the important concepts. To do all this, I spoke both English and Hindi.

While facilitating, I made members who understand Hindi and English, discuss the points in Kannada. We used maps and diagrams, drawn both by me and the others, labelled in English and Kannada. We moved at a slow pace, no doubt. The readings being all in English, in the beginning, it was really a challenge for them. There were certain rules. These were individual tasks of taking down notes in Kannada and drawing diagrams, and to be used in group activities. This would help self-learning later.

I made sure that all concepts and terms I used were repeated in Kannada by groups who understood Hindi and English. I made them write the points in Kannada on the blackboard and encouraged them to ask questions that cropped up in their mind unhesitatingly. I worked conscientiously on each and every doubt and questions they asked. This gave the person who asked question a sort of advantage over the others in the group, this somehow helped others to come forward with their questions. I would often listen carefully to their understanding of the topic and their experiences as well. At the end of each workshop an elaborate report was prepared which included every example, references

and questions that were discussed.

Group reading, jig-saw reading and presentation by each group also helped to build up confidence in the participants. As a rule their coordinator led the members to sit together, shared their notes and learnings and create modules after every workshop.

What really worked?

The participants were able to learn through the process of self-learning, group-learning and peer-learning.

I must say in this whole activity my role was secondary. It was truly of guiding the learners towards their goals, which they have set for themselves.

The most interesting part is that we shared a very cordial relationship as is the culture of the Azim Premji Foundation. Here we all respect and accept each other as we are, have complete trust and faith in each other's abilities and share the common goal of the Foundation for everyone to achieve - 'imparting quality education' to school children.

I was working with adults and hence I did not face the issue of motivating them, all I decided to do is to make them interested, curious, and kindle a light for the quest of knowledge; as a teacher I knew it's not the delivery of the sheer content of the subject that will help the participants. After the third workshop, I started asking them about what their requirement was and created my modules based on their suggestions.

Was learning happening? The question always haunted me

Some participants grumbled as they couldn't follow me, or grasp what I was trying to say and were not ready to go through the readings in English. As I could not get appropriate translations of the readings, I insisted on English readings. Initially the participants were struggling together to understand the readings, but they never gave up, and slowly started enjoying the readings. It seems they were not only understanding and building knowledge at personal level but also were able to incorporate it in their own work.

How it all happened

Perhaps the power of feeling competent or enhancing one's ability through gaining knowledge sustained the participants. Their urgency, interest and curiosity in understanding or gaining the knowledge of the theme or topics, which were asked by the school teachers with whom they converse regularly, motivated them. They themselves were interested in learning what they had asked for. They felt happy and satisfied when they got what they wanted. Lastly, and importantly the learning was done collectively by the group, so no one carried the burden of learning individually.

I was happy, despite the language barrier, because learning had blossomed.

Tapasya is presently working for Azim Premji Foundation, and has been in the organisation for the past 8 years. Prior to this, she was a geography teacher at the middle and senior school level for considerable number of years. At the Foundation, she works with members in different Field Institutes as a geography resource person. She tries to present various abstract geographical concepts in a simple manner. She is passionate about Geography. She may be contacted at tapasya@azimpremjifoundation.org