

Creating classroom engagement

ON JUNE 12, 2005 STEVE JOBS, THE LEGENDARY chief executive of Apple Inc and inventor of the Apple Mac, ipod and iphone (who never graduated from college), gave an epiphanic commencement address at Stanford University titled 'You've got to find what you love'. Addressing students of this blue-chip varsity he recounted how after formally dropping out of college, he continued to attend lectures that interested him without bothering about test results or a paper degree. He went where his curiosity and intuition led him, including calligraphy classes without hope of calligraphy having a practical application in his life. Many years later his dormant knowledge of calligraphy helped him design the best-selling Apple Mac personal computer. "It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts," he recalled.

There's a learning in this story that teachers, parents and educators need to heed. To bring the magic of learning into the life of children and students, it pays to encourage them to follow their own intuition and instincts. Currently most of the learning and teaching materials and pedagogies

employed in India are designed to improve test scores, whereas the objective of parents and teachers should be development of love of learning in young minds, which need to be opened up to the beauty and wonders of science, literature, mathematics and languages. The message in Steve Jobs' commencement address highlighted the vital importance of learners being engaged with learning.

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So how do we as teachers turn the current situation around to create engagement? For students to become engaged with learning history, math or any subject, they must be awakened to the meaning or purpose of the prescribed subject. For instance, history can no longer be taught as a subject requiring memorisation of a plethora of dates and names. Students need to be made aware that the study of history is a prerequisite of understanding politics, social structure and cultures. It's also very important for the teachers' community to understand that knowledge required in real life is an integration of several subjects. When subjects are taught or learned in separate, isolated compartments, they rarely seem meaningful.

In short, education and learning can only happen when there is willing attention and participation of the brain. So



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how do teachers make this happen?

Integrated instruction, sometimes referred to as thematic instruction, problem-based or experiential learning, is frequently used in pre-primary education. Most toddlers love going to nursery school because they are free to learn what they choose. So why not apply the same technique in our primary and middle school classrooms?

Integrated instruction combines strands of different subjects within one classroom period or unit of study. Strands of differing subjects are connected through activities and tasks in a logical manner so students are able to grasp the relationship between knowledge and the purpose of learning. An integrated approach to learning provides continuity and order for students. It helps them make sense of and discern the association between educational objectives and content, and through a gradual process helps students learn to construct knowledge. This is a much better way of learning than by assimilating disparate bits and pieces of information while the brain despairingly searches for patterns and connections to make sense of the world.

INTERFACING CONNECTED AREAS OF A CURRICULUM OFFERS a teaching option that reflects the inter-connectedness of the real world. A simple example illustrates this argument. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (by Roald Dahl) is the prescribed English literature text for grade III children in our Billabong high schools. Together with English grammar and usage, children learn about the history of chocolate, the geography of countries from where the cocoa bean originated, how cocoa is transported across the world and finally the research and science that is invested in the manufacture of chocolate bars.

Unfortunately even though most of us involved in education instinctively know that lesson plans carefully crafted and presented in an integrated manner can become an unending journey of discovery, knowledge creation and growth, we fear the implementation of integrated learning systems as the success of a school is measured by test scores in board exams, rather than the success of students after they leave school. Therefore we are fearful of walking the path less trodden, just in case it doesn't lead us to our destination.

In the early 16th century Italian philosopher Machiavelli observed: "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new."

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