

Basic Skills Deficit in Post Graduate Students

Himadri Barman

Centre for Management Studies
Dibrugarh University

(An article that appeared in the Special Volume of Sampark 2016 ... the interface, published by the Department of Business Administration, School of Management Sciences, Tezpur University, Assam)

I'm putting up a disclaimer at the very beginning. This article is not about criticizing technology or modern methods of teaching but a sharing of my experience and what negative impact can overuse of both have in teaching basic skills. I've been teaching post graduate (PG) students for the last twelve years. And the scores I would give regarding the basic skill sets of students is moving south with every passing year. We have a massive 'basic skills deficit' in the PG students and this is a problem that is just getting bigger. Here, I'm talking about very basic skills like proper listening, effective writing, self-study, simple understanding & analysis, etc. Lack of these basic skills is further accentuated by absence of patience, inability to handle failure and/or pressure, attention deficit and so on which are also to an extent by products of modern education methodologies. I'm sure that many of my peers feel the same. And the paragraphs that follow will be an argument as to why I believe that the overuse of technology and over-reliance on modern teaching tools is preventing the learning of basic skills even though the PG students go through a minimum of 12 - 15 years in School and 3 years in College where they are supposed to learn these basic skills and master them.

With rapid technological advancements, technology has pervaded the classrooms also like never before. A teacher is today outdated if he/she does not use technology in the class or the pedagogy used is not technology based. Traditional methods of teaching have been junked in the face of the onslaught of technology. But are we overdoing it? If you ask me, we are in fact being over dependent on technology in carrying out the teaching – learning process. Let us look at the evaluation process. With most exams becoming Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) based, students are losing the ability to express their thoughts in writing. They have forgotten the art to build up their thoughts around a question and jot it down. The end result is that a basic skill like effective writing is slowly lost. Mind it that I'm not questioning the MCQ based tests as such, I'm just not happy at it's over use. In the class room, the lecture method is being replaced by PowerPoint (PPT) presentations. The students are then given the slides to take back home. Earlier, in the lecture based method, the students would hear the teacher, try to understand what the teacher says and even take down notes. When the teacher dictated, the students had to take down notes. The lecture method thus improved some basic skills like listening, comprehension, understanding and visualizing abstract concepts besides writing. All these have now gone for a toss. Again, it is the overuse of PPT that is the culprit, not the PPTs per se.

The use of calculating gadgets and smart phone calculation apps has become the order of the day even for basic and simple calculations. Today, the students are not comfortable with using some elementary tools like logarithmic tables. Now, again the problem is not with the gadgets or the apps, but the

propensity of the students to use them for even the most simple of calculations. The problem gets aggravated when there is no mechanism to limit its use inside the classroom in many cases.

The Internet has changed the world as well as education. Easy access to information has been a boon but how much of the information is being used judiciously. Say for example, students are given an assignment on a topic. The usual process is to type in the topic as keyword in Google. Now, it is very likely that some standard assignments will crop up on that topic and the assignment is complete. The information discovery goes for a toss. Technology has also made information retention redundant because everything is available at one's fingertips. The point I'm trying to stress is that for a student, memorizing information is also an important basic skill. Language comprehension is a big casualty casualty of instant messaging, chatting and social networking. It would not be an exaggeration to say that spelling, grammar or sentence construction skills are being nullified. It is not an issue in informal communication, but when the habit spills over to formal communication, there is an issue. It is not a healthy sign that the line between formal and informal communication is being increasingly blurred and there are serious consequences including miscommunication.

What I strongly believe is that there should be a balance between the use of traditional methods and modern methods of learning. Traditional methods have their own strengths and they must be exploited to teach basic skills to the students. Teaching at the primary level is the most important as far as teaching the basic skills are concerned. Learning should not be over-simplified that the essence of the learning itself gets lost. There are no shortcuts to learning and this should facet should not be lost out while using technology or modern methods of teaching. When the foundation is strong, the structure will be strong. In our quest to build a skilled workforce to man the Indian economy, incorporating basic skills should be the first priority. The industry suffers not because of the absence of sector specific skills but the basic skills. If the basic skills as mentioned are present, acquiring sector specific skills won't be difficult in a short time.