

Catalyst Students - Moles to fill the Holes

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The Issue at hand

The learning process is a queer one. As one progresses on the learning curve, it would be of interest to note the changes that occur. For instance, one observes changes in the teaching methodology adopted, the administration of theories and practices and even in the motivations for learning.

If one considers these changes to be mere events, it would appear that many of these are independent events. Independent or not, these are without doubt, not isolated. Each one of these changes affects and in turn is affected by a change in the other. It is not difficult to visualise the change in the learning behaviour of a group of students if their algebra professor suggests a walk in the park while discussing Poisson distribution. Or to speculate how your operations research professor might approach Deming and Juran if you all unequivocally mentioned that you enrolled for the course to help you get a cushy job.

By delving a little deeper into the learning process one might notice that these changes may just be effects of a cause - the attitude of the student towards learning. While many reasons are attributed towards the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process, it would be a worthwhile exercise to understand how attitude affects the success of knowledge transactions.

To make a breakthrough in the impregnable walls of student behaviour, one tries to understand the manner in which group attitudes are formed. This process would involve a study to evaluate if and how individual mind-set gets subordinated by group attitudes and thereby understand the contribution of individual attitudes to the group attitude.

Going further, one cannot help but wonder if attitudes are difficult to amend. Teachers need to consider the option of altering student attitudes to create an atmosphere that not only supports the teaching-learning process, but also enhances the same, by creating an environment that nurtures the thinking process.

The Learning Curve - Twists and turns

More often than not, it is expectations that decide the fate of our actions. There is more than meets the eye in the saying - 'there is no limit to what can be achieved, if it doesn't matter who gets the credit'. The knowledge transaction process is also not free from expectations from all the parties involved.

Almost all the expectations in the teaching-learning process are attitudinal in nature. While teacher expect sincerity, dedication, respect, discipline and obedience from their students, the students expect empathy, flexibility and camaraderie from their teachers.

Of course, content, methodology, tools and techniques, ambience and a host of other issues exist. But these structural issues often get clouded (in some cases), the attitudinal inadequacy and deformity enhances the enormity of existing problems.

At the embryonic stage of the learning process, the expectations from the learner are largely functional in nature. The focus on attitude is virtually nonexistent and attitude towards learning is never an issue with either kindergarten children or their teachers. But as we grow up, there is a palpable shift in the significance from functional to attitudinal areas. Finally, as we reach the echelons of higher education, attitude towards any sort of knowledge transaction assumes paramount importance.

Needless to say, in non-learning structures too, the role played by attitude increases in importance with the power and responsibility levels associated with a particular post in that structure.

Measures - Do They Measure Up?

Teachers, managers and team leaders, to name a few all spend sleepless nights and exasperating moments trying to figure out what unmentionable crime they possibly committed to deserve such an unreasonable reaction from their students, subordinates or team members in that order.

In these desperate moments, it is not uncommon to see both positive as well as negative motivational

measures being resorted to. Some of these measures, such as counseling and mentoring being mild in nature and application to punitive threats and material offerings being at the other end of the spectrum.

In organisations, human resource managers have been known to consult the expertise of behavioural scientists and psychologists to get access to the psyche of their employees to be able to customise their services and working conditions to achieve a win-win situation. This phenomenon is increasingly being seen even in sports, wherein we have qualified psychologists as part of the team.

A very penetrating statement is attributed to Eliyahu Goldratt. He said, 'tell me how you measure me and I'll tell you how I'll behave'. Though the statement was put forth in a different context than that of this article – Goldratt was expressing his reservations about the inadequacies of the efficiency measurement systems adopted in production and operations circles nearly two decades ago – the same has far reaching implications in behavioural sciences.

To elaborate, all of us can broadly categorise our acquaintances into two groups – one that we avoid and the other that we prefer to be with. Have we ever thought why repulsive individuals behave as they do? Goldratt's statement would show us that the culprit could probably be the yardstick for measuring personal success. A person who is termed as a nerd or geek could have been evaluated since childhood by his grades or even by the number and kind of books that he reads. The 'life-of the party' could have been conditioned consciously or otherwise that his existence on earth is to spread joy and cheer.

There is no 'T' in TEAM

Taking off tangentially from the train of thought that was introduced in the previous section, we venture into the area of teamwork and group dynamics. Almost always, it has been noticed that all other resource factors being common, the success of a team depends upon – what is commonly known as – the team spirit.

To briefly touch upon this subject, team spirit is known by a host of terminology such as camaraderie, co-ordination, professionalism, unity, so on and so forth. There are a lot of factors contributing towards achieving, maintaining and developing this spirit, but now team leaders and project managers would agree that it is commonality of purpose is the most critical

of them. It is this that determines the team's success. In other words, a team's success is measured by how efficiently and effectively it has achieved its objective.

A hidden truth here is that the existence of a common objective and its pursuit with a clear focus is key to success of a team. And to build this spirit would involve two things that would have to occur simultaneously. First, a subordination of individual motivations and ideologies to a group cause and second, a realignment of individual motivations, ideologies and attitudes towards the achievement of the group objective

The Catalyst Student – a Placebo Experiment

Before we proceed with the how's and why's of administering the catalyst student, it would do us good to understand what the catalyst student is. If you, as a teacher in a college based in south India have had the opportunity of having on your attendance rolls, couple of enterprising students from the interiors of a north Indian state; or if you were an American student on an exchange program in a Middle East nation, then you are part of an ever-growing population that has had the opportunity of experiencing the catalyst student phenomenon.

To elaborate, a catalyst student in theory and practice is analogous to his chemical namesake. In chemical terminology, a catalyst is defined as any substance that is added to a system to bring about certain desirable changes (such as hastening the rate of reaction) in the reaction. In the process the catalyst does not react with the other chemicals and remains neutral.

A catalyst student similarly is proposed to be an agent who infiltrates a teaching learning system. His or her role would be to affect certain desirable changes in the teaching learning process. These changes can be anything ranging from initiating a proactive approach towards questioning in a docile student group; to activating a relevant thought process. Or these changes could be associated with the acceptance of or constructive criticism, rejection and subsequent transition to a particular methodology. Or the objective of a catalyst student could be constructive criticism of concepts and thoughts.

A catalyst student could also prove to be valuable to the teachers by way of gauging and analysing the pulse of the student group. This would enable the teachers to fine-tune their strategies to minimise

pedagogical wastes. The teacher can customise his or her approach based on the mood of the student group towards a particular discipline or teaching methodology.

To partially digress from the topic, a parallel thought process that enters the mind is the possibility and applicability of TQM principles in the knowledge transaction process. The idea is to use catalyst students as agents to gauge, measure and increase the operational efficiency of the pedagogical process.

Coming back to the topic at hand, the discussions in the previous paragraphs make it clear that most of the objectives of introducing a catalyst student into a knowledge transaction system are concerned with bringing about attitudinal changes among student groups.

Implications – A Final Word

Puritans and conservatives might raise questions about the ethics and morals of keeping their students in the dark; about introducing a spy amongst them. Naturalists and Behavioral experts might question the intentions of doctoring or engineering the thought process of students.

These questions are not tenuous. They are in no manner baseless or unsubstantiated. However, it would be worthwhile not to make value judgments before analysing the implications and consequences of such an exercise. The argument in support of the catalyst student concept would be that as long as there is purity in purpose and intent, efforts towards improving the quality of the teaching-learning process should be pursued at all costs. ■

