
MY EXPERIMENTS WITH IMPARTING SKILLS THROUGH TEACHING

LITERATURE – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Education, it is indisputable, is what is retained by the learner, when most of the academic inputs gathered through all other sources are forgotten. A teacher, like Mahatma Gandhi, did with truth, has to go on experimenting with different methods continuously till she/he evolves her/his own strategies of imparting skills, an integral part of life, and not merely theoretical knowledge but add a functional dimension to it. Having been into teaching for four decades, this paper presenter has evolved her own devices of driving skills into students, overtly and covertly. Values and skills absorbed by students through literature, different genres. Each genre has its own value and contains ample possibilities of an inherent source of skills. 'Women's writings', American and Post Colonial literature sensitize students, especially women in the context of Maris Stella, too many issues faced by the world. They develop autonomous and critical thinking about life, the world, and gender. This paper takes a few samples of such experiences and experiments to prove the point and describe the benefit derived by students. Genres of poetry, prose, drama, and fiction and non - fiction would be looked into.

Keywords: experiment, genres, autonomous thinking, critical thinking, interpersonal, experiential, gender equity, social responsibility

In the close-to-four-decades of my teaching experience, I have grown gradually from step to step in not only equipping students with the academic knowledge required to pass the year-end examinations and become graduates and post-graduates but emerge as fully qualified empowered and individuals before leaving the portals of the college. In the earlier years of my career, the focus was more on external facets of academics while internalizing the factors associated with learning has come to the forefront along with the mellowing down of the self with age, learning acquired, fast-changing trends in the society, ever-growing needs of an individual towards employability, self grooming, adaptation to real life situations, sustenance to the positive and negative impact of Technology Revolution, Social Media is a part of it, vulnerability of the weaker sections and fair sex, assertiveness and self esteem, to mention a few . It is mandatory that the onus of the responsibility is on teachers who have to prepare their wards to face these challenges without batting an eyelid or with composure, as the flux of life is but natural.

If Poetry is taken into concern, a teacher can instill mention-worthy skill set into the learners. Gone are the days of teaching-for-teaching sake and such stuff is forgotten normally within a short span of time. I use Poetry to promote the basic language skills of listening and reciting besides the ability to relate it to any nearer experience or episode the learner has come across. When I read the poem, not only the sound of the poem is taught but the inner voice oeuvres caught. Critical appreciation of poems helps learners to develop analytical skills and sharpen perception. When parameters like theme, vision, rhythm, rhyme scheme, diction, tone, persona, imagery, use of Figures of Speech style are examined from a close reading of the poem, learners develop reading skills, both swift and deep. It, in turn, makes them so alert as not to miss any overt or covert references or nuances employed by the poet deliberately. Reading aloud without losing the essence between the lines, intonation and modulation is to be imparted for the beauty of the poetic piece to sustain and be appreciated. Pinpointing to the exact image or Figure of Speech used is an art by itself and should be given to the learner. Besides aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, the learner is trained to crack such questions in the other competitive examinations. Getting into the shoes of the poet, the student can either empathize or sympathize or simply take a neutral stance. Teaching Poems like Tagore's **Gitanjali** or Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' or Keats' Odes or Gieve Patel's 'Killing a Tree' or Mamta Kalia's 'Tribute to Papa' or Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy', any poem for that matter, opens a box of opportunities to give a skill apart from mere examination oriented teaching. It could be about patriotism or spiritual awareness or sheer appreciation or environmental awareness or gender issues, whatever, it is conducive to the growth of comprehending and application-oriented abilities. It is not uncommon for teachers to come across the same poem at different levels but the skill to be taught varies according to the level of the learner and the resourcefulness of the teacher. For example, Robert Frost's poem with the beginning lines 'Whose woods these are, I think I know' is prescribed frequently for students at different standards but the comprehending skills aimed at the move from the peripheral to the spiritual and internal.

Coming to the genre of Prose, my experiments have mainly on imbuing reading, comprehending and composition writing skills besides reading it with the right stress, intonation. Here is the scope to introduce quick reading, skimming, scanning along with the skill to capture the right answer in comprehension exercises. Rather, the skill to be precise, to the point. With prose even writing skills like note taking, taking, paraphrasing, précis writing could be made part of learning. If non-fiction is clubbed with Prose, autonomous thinking, critical and logical reasoning could be imparted to learners. I had to teach Arundhati Roy's, 'Ladies Have Feelings... Shall We Leave it to the Experts', to undergraduate students of Literature? How many important facts to teach! India's conventionality, unity despite diversity, uniqueness in certain aspects, corporatization, globalization, privatization, poverty, economic problems rampant, Narmada Bachao Andolan, environmental issues...so many. Students listened always with rapt attention and used to discuss various issues related to the progress of the nation. This, surely, trained them into critical thinking about their social responsibility and citizenship roles. This gave them ample scope to debate the current scenario and express their opinions. Aren't these skills of articulation, fearlessness and free thinking?

The drama has provided a platform not only to grasp the gist but understand the undercurrents thereby promoting perceiving skills. Involvement into characters, chance to role-play, an exhibition of theatrical talent, designing costumes, stage setting, auditioning for the proper role, body language suited to the role could be cultivated and these are skills, aren't they? Mere teaching on the part of the teacher and mere listening for students are boring but when the skill set is inserted into it it becomes interesting, application-oriented and fruitful. Take a play like *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill, an American playwright who gives all cautions to be observed while trying to perform the play. Being a play hinged on Expressionism it provides scope for different skills to be trained into. An absurd play like Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Students

grasp the intricacies in marital life and the need for nurturing mutual adjustment to nurture peace and harmony whose absence can cause havoc in a couple's life going to an extent of bullying each other and playing psychological games to unnerve others involved in their life too. These are Management and interpersonal skills without which life is impossible. Especially for women students who will soon settle in lives, premarital counseling is essential to safeguard their future life. False prestige, pseudo value system and outwitting for vicarious pleasure, self-centered nature, ego clashes, bossism, jealousy, falsehood are some of the traits students' attention is drawn to. Shakespeare's plays need a special mention as they contain a multitude of skills which one can absorb if read intently.

Fiction sets the right stage to imbibe as many skills as possible, whether it is short fiction, novella or novel. I intend to refer to the paper on Women's Writings for final year undergraduate Special English students where short stories by Sashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Ambai and translated version of Telugu writer Kuppili Padma were prescribed for study. Each one had some skill to offer, one on decision making and accepting life as it comes and moving on despite misfortunes, resistance to injustice, the assertion of rights, awareness to one's basic fundamental rights, management of power struggle, gender equity issues, handling these with poise and soon.

Similarly, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, a novella, speaks of the skill of maintaining perseverance and will power, come what may. RK Narayan's and Paulo Coelho's writings stop the teacher and the taught for a while to introspect, relate themselves, analyze and apply it to their case. It happened several times when I paused and so did students, sometimes in awe, fear, restlessness, despair, hope, pity, a sense of purging, whatever. This is part of skill development. Examples are numerous. Each class is an eye opener for teachers and learners if both are motivated, interested in experiential tutoring, meaningful education and applying the knowledge to their life operation. To make or mar it...it is in our hands.

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