

# Education as an inclusive and integrated experience

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## Context of Education

We have moved into a knowledge era, with free access to information, and apparently large array of choices. The rules of learning that applied in an era of constraints and limited choices, lack of access and information, cannot apply to our era. While almost everything around us has changed in the last 25 years including the way we live, work, play, entertain, make friends, build relationships, travel, holiday, our education systems have largely remained the same – this causes a disconnect between the outcome of our learning systems and expectations from the real world.

The consequences to education are too many to list. Loads of NGOs and third party organizations report the abysmal level of skills in Maths and English, that's common knowledge now. They don't report the students' knowledge on Indian History, Current Affairs, Geography, or logical thinking; those are not good either; there is no redeeming feature. What's not understood is that our children are not write-offs, just victims of an antediluvian system. Nor are the faculty the villains, they are equal victims of teaching practices that are an anachronism in today's society. We can seize this opportunity to create an inspiring and effective learning ecosystem that represents the future of education and delivers the India of our aspirations.

## The role of Centurion University

Centurion University is focused on social inclusion. Social inclusion really happens when we empower the marginalized; there are many aspects to empowerment and social inclusion – one obvious path is meaningful education.

It is not enough to just open a college and produce degrees. We need to be careful that education is custom delivered to fit the context. We must ensure our children are prepared, and confident for the new opportunities that an emerging India is throwing at our youth.

Centurion's target base includes the under-privileged districts of the country in eastern, south-eastern and north-eastern India, addressing students from the deprived socio-economic sections. Many of these regions are not just behind the rest of the country on technologies and social change but are also witness to social and political unrest.

Based on our experience with educating students of this background, we believe there are 3 problems we need to address: **Motivation**, **Exposure**, and **Self Confidence**. The three problems are related:

- Unlike the teenager in a city like Bangalore, Chennai or Pune, students from this region are not exposed to the realities of the world. Their exposure to current affairs, to the opportunities in India, or even their knowledge of Indian History is very poor.

- Given this context, these students cannot comprehend the range of opportunities that are open to them, nor the emergent India that expects them to come forward and lead. They need to look to this future with optimism and energy, but only if they are aware of the realities.
- In the absence of such knowledge, they are trapped in antiquated views of the world and society. This impacts their confidence. Sending them to school and college is not enough. They need to be understood through their perspective; however, they are evaluated through alien lenses – consequently, they are wrongly judged and labeled, and such conclusions help neither them nor society, thus depriving our country of its huge potential.

To make an impact to our society and its future, we need to understand and appreciate our diversity, and the complexities that result from the skewed progress made by different sections of our country.

This leads us to the first principle in **Education for Nation Building**:

## 1. Inclusion over Reservations

Often we confuse reservations with Inclusion. Reservations have provided quotas, but not focused on different approaches based on context, leaving all sections of society to be taught in the same manner, with the same evaluation. This is both unfair and ineffective.

How can children from different (and often unshared) context, with varying depth and breadth of knowledge and exposure be served with the same offerings, and we still expect consistent consequences?

### Are we doing this to our children?



(Acknowledgement: Pictures taken from the net, used here only to illustrate the concept.



Often, unknown to us, we discriminate against students from specific backgrounds. Whenever we do an online test, anyone who is not computer/tablet savvy is at a disadvantage. Aptitude tests are a test of speed and hence test practice, thus eliminating those who could not afford the coaching. Any competitive exam that has spawned a coaching industry has left out large segments of our students

from that opportunity. Any organization that insists on a “65% career” rewards those regions where state boards are generous in their marks.

As discussed in the beginning, we need to understand the specific context of our students, and serve them with the most effective and empowering tools in the learning journey.

## **2. Meaning and substance score over uniformity and metrics**

Traditional education programs in India are syllabus-bound and examination driven. Examinations are necessary, but the drive towards “standardization” of the examination system has led to predictable questions with unambiguous answers. When the quality of education is measured primarily by marks or grades, it could lead students, faculty and education administrators to single-mindedly focus on good grades. That results in students acquiring enough nuggets of information on the subject, not necessarily with much wisdom or fundamentals. If you are trying to assess the quality of relationship of two human beings madly in love, and in trying to get objective about it you measure the number of concerts and movies seen together, or the evenings spent in restaurants, you will find some metrics that will make an interesting normal distribution, but you might risk missing the romance, or what makes each relationship tick. Worse, if the couples try to focus on those metrics to the exclusion of mutual caring, love or romance, it may lead to unfortunate consequences.

Education must not also become a meaningless chase for numbers. Some academicians sport over a 1000 publications in their resume, and we celebrate them. Is that humanly possible? Professors with credibility will confidently say they must have plagiarized. Why must we put recognition goals so far removed from real value creation that we end up celebrating plagiarism?

We also lament we lack patents. The concern is good to the extent that we must nurture research and knowledge creation. But why patents? Is that in tune with Indian philosophy? Can we stand up and say our Universities stand for open sharing of knowledge – in fact, that should be the purpose of education? Can we start that sharing movement in education, and be what Open Source did to software? Prof Anil Gupta (NIF, IIMA), among the greatest thinkers of our times, has been instrumental in creating an open database of around 200,000 Indian grassroots innovations, so others can’t patent our very Indian knowledge. Let’s follow his footsteps and nurture our own creation journey – can we say let’s create knowledge for the world, and let’s not stifle its application with patents? We understand that out of all the different paths we are pursuing, this one is probably the most difficult.

Before we discuss the next principle for Education in Nation Building, I must confess we have not understood the race towards “uniformity” or standardization. Do we want to create a nation of robots? To build a vibrant nation, we need to recognize, celebrate, and nurture our diversity. And if that makes our evaluation a little more difficult, it’s a good price to pay for a worthy cause.

## **3. Impact and Effectiveness over Conformance**

The contemporary engineering syllabus has crammed course upon course in the students’ curriculum. They must do differential equations when their concepts on basic arithmetic are not clear – or must learn three or four languages at a leopard’s pace before being able to write 5 lines in one language.

There's lecture upon lecture of "theory" with no focus on how that concept can be applied in real life. Exams check for ability to memorize. To top it, new courses get added: Ethics, Environment Science, Cyber Security, Disaster Management, all are very important. We get into an academic debate on the importance of all the courses we introduce without realizing the camel's back was broken long back, and it cannot walk any more...

This leads us to the next principle:

#### **4. Motivation comes before content**

Large proportion of our students is just not motivated. This is a topic large enough to be discussed on its own. It's easy to agree here we need to focus on inspiration. Once our students are inspired, discovering the right material to absorb, or learning and applying the concepts is easy. And when one is not motivated, no amount of focus on content will help.

#### **5. Collaboration and Community**

Nation building is not a competitive exercise. Yet we find academic institutes resistant to collaborate. Even industry-academia interactions are limited to the formal transactions of recruitment and internships. We must join hands, and come together – freely share information, ideas, development programmes, and exchange faculty and students.

At Centurion, I learnt the term "first generation learner" the first time; and with it, I also learnt the challenges of a first generation learner. Focus on inspiration, aspiration, exposure, make teaching more effective for the first generation learner. One cannot bank on family support or community support either, in times of need – rather the focus must be on educating parents and community as key stakeholders in education. This takes us to the next principle:

#### **6. Education is 360 degree**

The uncertain future necessitates that students learn cultural aspects of living away in an unknown society that throws unexpected challenges at them. Can such challenges be anticipated? How to live in a big city and its consequent challenges, or how to work in a corporate environment with an impatient and sometimes insensitive manager, are necessary elements of such learning when we take a holistic view of education. In one case, youth from rural eastern parts of India were sent to work down South, where food habits are different. This initiative saw huge attrition, and the core reason was nailed down to the food not being to their liking. Once the problem was diagnosed, the solution was simple. The employer was requested to select in batches of 35, and one local cook accompanied every group of 35.

When education is residential, students get adjusted in campus first, and get acquainted to living with different and diverse people – getting acquainted to an urban toilet is probably the least of the challenges.

It's also difficult to convince parents to take their daughters off to some learning excursion. In an era of Justice Ganguly and Tehelka Tejpal, such concern is understandable, and responding to such anxieties is a necessary part of holistic education.

The transition from an innocent rural environment to the big city corporate culture is facilitated by residential education. Such education stretches beyond academic hours, and focuses on culture, curiosity and cooperation. In Centurion University, students from underprivileged backgrounds who study free, co-exist with students from privileged backgrounds pursuing sought-after professions. These lessons in inclusion are critical enablers to their success as professionals and in building responsible citizenship for our future.

## **7. Environment to fail**

A few months back, I was taking a viva in a programming course where they had to write lots of programs. The objective of the viva was to ensure they wrote what they claimed, and to avoid giving credit to copied code.

Once I had finished, I realized I recognized and encouraged students who wrote code that did not work or partially worked (but still wrote their own code) while often not giving credit to many students who showed me flawless code. The habit of writing your own code, of making mistakes, of discovering those mistakes and struggling with them, of finding those Aha moments when you found the bug, are always more important to the learning process than finding the quickest way to the right answer.

It is the job of educators to provide an environment where students can try, learn, experiment, make mistakes, and fail. The job of the teacher is not to show the right answer, but to ensure the student is motivated to struggle and gradually move towards the right answer, possibly after exhausting a variety of options that do not work, and with the understanding why they do not work.

Efficiency is very important in business, but speed in getting to the correct answer not be the biggest virtue in a learning environment. In real life, there may not be one correct answer, and no perfect answer. Teaching such thinking is a part of real education that is often missing today. How can we design content, experiments, and evaluation processes that focus on learning such imperfect real world situations? Such objectives make “structure” very difficult, and how can we evaluate if our students have learnt from failure? When we believe this is important enough to teach, we end up discovering the right measures.

## **8. Ethics and Empathy score over Speed and Efficiency**

In Centurion, we have a respected former CEO and MD who has joined us as “Life Mentor and Coach”, with the goal of mentoring our students, and mentoring our faculty so they can mentor our students. Prior to joining us, he explored the education landscape and met founders and heads of many institutions. Some of them bluntly told him “what role does ethics have in an educational institute” (sic)? He works here because he found a value match with us.

If education is about nation building, ethics (and the teaching of ethics) must play a critical role.

## **9. Innovation in Education**

We began with the premise that education must change. And if we must change, we must explore, take risks, pilot, innovate. Centurion is the hub for a variety of innovations in learning methodologies – from

our experiments in teaching English, to courseware in a tablet, to the practice of foster parenting, or accelerated learning initiatives to nurture the joy of programming, it's a crucible of several innovations that are always cooking. Not all of them succeed in equal measure, but when we go to depth with understanding and empathy, both students and faculty get something out of it.

If we want our next generation to create an Apple, 3M or a Disney, we need to learn to innovate, learn, and change. And if we are scared of innovation in our education institutes, we are merely fulfilling Macaulay's dream of creating a nation of clerks. Probably in 2014, even Macaulay will think differently.

## **Parting Thoughts**

As a nation, we need to have the courage to set our own goals and our own path. Harvard and MIT serve one end of the spectrum pretty well but America has its own problems with education, and we need not copy them in everything. When it's education for nation building, we need to have clarity on what is good for the India of 2030 (or 2050, if you can think that far ahead) and have the confidence to choose the path best suited for us. Besides, leading lights like Amitava Ghosh or Amartya Sen say that American-style education is unaffordable for most of us – that provides another motivation to think and frame our own route to educating India. Let us also not make education a chase for doctoral degrees or papers, let's instead focus on how education can make an impact to the well-being of our next generation – this includes focus on values, relationships, finding purpose in life, and a lot more. And let us pursue the different route with courage and conviction.

These nine principles are built around the belief that all sections of society have the potential to be nation builders in emergent India. The pathways to that future also seem to jump out of our experiments. If we do not frame the rules of learning and the environment of education in an equitable manner, some sections will remain forever discriminated against – and that can have disastrous impact on society. However, if the environment is framed to motivate, to inspire, and takes into account individual strengths and weaknesses, we can ensure every student meets her potential and together we create an inclusive, just and vibrant nation. After all, the auto world could progress even without following Ford, so let it be with education.