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## My Experiments with Language across Curriculum : Teaching English with the Project Approach

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A bunch of thirty eager faces confronted me on my first day in sixth standard. Then they were bolder and clamoured around my desk with cries of miiis, miiiis, miiss! Shall we open our text books? What lesson are you going to do? Where is our teacher? Are you going to teach us English? Arhan does not learn his spellings. Seema gets poor marks in dictation. Will we have dictation every day? Atul learns his questions and answers by-heart.

What was I doing here? I wondered. Why wasn't I in Class 12 discussing persuasive writing or styles of letter writing? How would I handle a bunch of motley kids? They could not even sit in their places! Would I shout at them, bring them to order, instill fear in them? What should I do? In the few minutes of indecision while the children increased volumes of uproar I had a sudden flash of inspiration. "Let us go to the school lawn under the Bodhi tree," I said. "You are my army I am your general. Let's go down the stairs in complete discipline". The idea seemed to appeal to them. Here was something new to do instead of learning the spellings of words. So they marched behind me while my brain chalked out a plan. We sat under the tree of knowledge and while the chatter subsided I told the children that we would work through the entire text book doing projects. Each lesson would be a project and each one would be different. There were many queries – about questions – and answers, about learning the meanings, about spelling and dictation. We decided we would do all that but first we would do projects.

### The First Project

What was the first project? The first lesson was Columbus and the discovery of America. We decided

to dramatise it. So we made groups. One group did the posters, another group the props, the third group linked up the dialogues with narration and still another spelt out the costumes. What did people wear in those times? What did they eat? What did the ship look like? What did they carry with them? These questions troubled us and we went to the library and solved some of them. We poured over books and drew diagrams and wrote dialogues. Atul cried because he wanted to be Columbus. Veena did not like the way the posters were done with the group so she fought with them. I had to arbitrate, shush and set rules but we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. We then put up a small skit. We floundered, we fluttered, we scrambled to look at the dialogues and we learnt, but HOW!

### Other Projects follow smoothly

One of the lessons was on evolution. In those times there were no LCD projectors. We had an overhead projector so we made transparencies on the stages of evolution and had a seminar. Each group took up one stage of evolution and did a presentation. I doubt if University students can make better presentations in this day and age of cut-copy-paste. Of course we had our problems, where would we find the material, the diagrams, simple explanations? The librarian was roped into our plan. He became a kindred soul. He was informed in advance about the next project and the next visit of these book locusts. He would then keep all possible information in all the books he had, ready for our invasion. As the year passed, and I was given additional charge of the computer laboratory, we introduced ourselves to power point and explored its possibilities by making slide shows from dental

health to mental health! By this time the children and I became co travelers in this journey.

### Co-travelers on the Journey of discovery

What should we do with the next lesson? What is it about? Health and Hygiene. Let's have a party! Let's have a salad show! This led to a discussion - group making, types of salads we could bring, foodstuffs and calories, healthy food and junk food. The children made groups, listed ingredients, consulted their parents, brought the ingredients, discussed and created recipes, finalized and tried them out, changed them, fixed them, tasted them, made recipe charts, wrote calorific values and held a salad show for teachers to taste and enjoy! Hungry teachers were well fed that day and we hear that all the classes had a better day!

### We are masters of all we survey!

Then there was a time when we did surveys : A survey of the dietary habits of teachers, a survey of parents who smoke, a survey of TV viewing, a survey about plant lovers. After this we represented results graphically, in the form of pie charts and bar graphs. We wrote small reports and circulated them. We put these reports in the school magazine to raise awareness about issues like the detrimental effects of smoking, poor eating habits or mindless T V viewing.

### Problems and Solutions

We began to observe all sorts of problems and tried solving them by writing letters to newspapers. Our school was flanked by two slum areas and whenever the school administration tried to build a compound wall for the school grounds, it was broken down by the slum dwellers in the middle of the night as it obstructed a thoroughfare between the two slums. Moreover the extreme end of our school ground was used for defecating by the slum. We wrote letters to the Indian Express describing these conditions. One of the students lived near the newspaper office. She

offered to reach these letters to the editor. When the editor found a handful of letters written by Class VII students, - for now we had moved on- he was stunned. He reciprocated by publishing parts of them with photographs of the breached compound wall. Soon there were toilets in the slums. The compound wall was rebuilt leaving a thoroughfare for the slums, the children from the slums had a standing invitation to play cricket in the compound! Some moves were by the corporator, some by the army unit which our school catered to, some by our friends. And all this was inspired by a poem by Robert Frost!



### Children need to go 'live' and experience a slice of 'life' for learning to happen!

Were my children learning English? Were their spellings improving? Were they writing questions and answers? Were they writing essays and letters? Yes and no. We knew we had to do all these things for these were the things that would appear in the exams. So we had a compromise. We would do all this sometimes in the middle of a project and sometimes afterwards. But now I wonder whether spelling dictation led to any learning or were spellings imbibed by my children while writing reports and letters about real people to real people. What use are questions and answers that we ask children to write regularly after

a lesson? Isn't it better to express one's views and write original pieces like dialogues, posters and narratives for skits, questions for surveys and recipes to understand health and hygiene? An original piece of writing even when done in groups is a production which is taken off from the text. We do not cover the text. We uncover it! We discover it! We recover it! And then all this has connection with what is happening in the rest of the classes. Health and hygiene is not just a story or an article to do dictation on. It is a living piece to be connected with what the science teacher said, what newspapers say, what we hear on TV.



What were my children learning? They were learning to work cooperatively, to accommodate diverse abilities, to argue a point, to write reports, to search for information, to present information in various formats. Were these skills useful for other subjects, I wondered. "What have you been doing with my children?", asked Rajani, my colleague and their class teacher, one day. "Why, are they becoming totally unruly?" I asked in trepidation. Many teachers had complained about the noise in my classes. The Principal had once asked me what I was doing and I explained. She did not seem convinced and sternly told me to be prepared to face the parents if there were problems on Parent Day. But Rajani gave me a

sweet surprise. "No, she said, "but I wondered why you were teaching them statistics!" I wasn't doing anything of the sort but analyzing surveys and doing diagrammatic representations had equipped them with the principles behind analyzing data by comparing things and mapping them on an axis. This had seemed to help Rajani deal with the same topic in her Statistics class. So, in the next few days we had this whole line of little monkeys sit on the compound wall during the lunch time counting the heavy vehicles and the small vehicles polluting the environment so that we could talk about the effects of pollution. Rajani and I had decided to collate science and language whenever we could. Our discussions with the children produced reports supported with data. Our children had just learnt how to make and write a good factual argument. Observation, data collection, analysis, finding proof, recording it and finally proving an argument were scientific skills which the children developed unobtrusively and spontaneously while practicing their language skills.

I often wondered whether we were teaching English as a subject or teaching children to think by themselves. Was it important to teach a text book in a language class? What was I teaching? A text book or language skills, Lessons or thinking skills? I felt suffocated by the boundaries of a text book. I wanted my children to fly, and to learn to fly on their own! Did the lessons in the text have anything to do with the world of the child? Did they let her think of her life on the playground, did they help her to learn Science, Maths and Geography! Did they connect with her life, her likes, dislikes, hobbies and friends? How did learning a few spellings, answering a few questions, doing a few exercises on word building or grammar really help to develop thinking skills or even language skills? In fact what are language skills? Are they a bunch of rules or are they related to choosing the right word, the right phrase and saying and writing things clearly and precisely, knowing what to say on a particular occasion, to a particular

audience and how to say it? If these were the skills my children should acquire, wouldn't creative activities tied to their life inside and outside school achieve our aim in a better manner? The text book was, I felt a supplementary reader for the teacher to trigger thoughts and to provide guidelines for enhancing the vocabulary and reading writing skills of the students. It was the teacher's task to develop cognitive skills of thinking, communicating thought, collating thoughts, designing an argument, thinking of the framework of an article or report and then articulating thoughts

precisely and clearly as theme, purpose and audience demanded. Language teachers cannot work in isolation from other subjects, language is the mother of all the vehicle of all thought whether from the domain of Maths, Science or Geography. Was it not the duty of the language teacher to equip the student with thinking skills? If it was then language had to go 'live' and do things related to the child's world, her problems, her learning in other subjects. And this will not happen unless we learn to use the text as a springboard for diving deep into life itself!



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