

“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

-Albert Einstein

### An Experience

A lesson in social studies begins with little 10 year - old children walking down the hill in rural Maharashtra, on which the school is situated. They are on their way to the village below, to study the river that is a part of their lives in more ways than one. The task had begun in the classroom itself, when they were asked to trace the exact course of the river from books in the library. They now try to have a more intimate relation with it: to find out about the creatures (various kinds of fish, birds, amphibians and reptiles) in the river and around it, and about the fishermen whose lives revolve around it. They stumble upon the interesting fact that apart from the local fishermen who live permanently in the village, there are those who regularly come once a year from Andhra Pradesh, to release lobsters and prawns in the water. They allow them to grow for a couple of months and then come back to catch them when they are fully grown to further transport them to other states and make huge profits in the process. The logistics of such a flourishing enterprise in the seemingly sleepy wilderness is a surprising revelation to all. The temporary blue tents put up by the families of these migrant fishermen, speak little about this interesting tale of entrepreneurship, hitherto unknown to the people living on the hill top. The children visit the homes of the fishermen; find out about their lives in transition, struggles and joys in a way no textbook could have explained. They also try to find out whether the seasonal migration of fishermen from another state affects the social and economic lives of the local folk. Some children raise questions about fishing as an activity from an ethical point of view, while realizing that the livelihood of many depends on it.

Next, they take a close look at the dam, built on the river, to see how it works. An interview with the local engineer informs them about the need of the dam in the region, the electricity generated by it, the history of a struggle with the villagers and a ten year long agitation against the building of it. One is convinced by the end of the day that the story of the dam is not so simple. People had been displaced by the dam after all, and a whole village had been submerged because of it. Though the engineer tries to tell them that the

displaced people had been adequately compensated and that the benefits of the dam far outweighed the loss caused to local people, even little children can sense, there is more

to the story. They decide to meet the local villagers, some of whom are workers in the school they study in. The interactions give a completely different side of the story, one of anger and frustration, about the loss of homes and land, of not getting compensation as promised by the government or being offered land of a far inferior quality than the ones they originally owned. Excited about the newly learnt lessons from the river flowing by, the students decide to share their discovery through reports, photographs, inspired sketches and interviews, which they share with the rest of the school.



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Hopefully having captured the essence of a field trip, and simultaneously reflecting on the question given to me as the topic to write on, I realize that I have to contextualize my writing as I live in a world driven by measurement. What's the value of doing any activity that cannot be precisely and sufficiently measured? In a country where the history of assessment has largely been the traditional paper-pencil test, it is natural to ask, is there scope for assessing projects, field work and such other experiences? Can the assessment happen through formal tests or do we need more authentic, integrative, holistic assessment techniques to evaluate the students' learning?

## The Value

With reference to the experience quoted above, how did it enrich the learning experience of the children? The field trip gave them an authentic experience that interested them, engaged them and raised their curiosity. Such exposures give students an opportunity to engage with the world outside their classroom, discovering things for themselves, analyzing facts (very often confused with interpretation), reflecting upon a situation, answering questions, and often coming up with original solutions. It also exposes them to multiple perspectives of people.

In a typical project, groups of students work together toward the common goal of exploring and understanding something. Student performance can be based on the quality of the outcome produced, the depth of content understanding demonstrated, and the contributions made to the ongoing process of learning. Students may or may not be assessed individually. Most importantly, they create a scope for students to reflect upon their own ideas and opinions, think critically, make their choices, voice their opinion and therefore make intelligent decisions. Such experiences also help in developing a deeper understanding of the content since it is learnt from an immediate context. They also motivate students who otherwise find the classrooms boring or meaningless.

## The Demonstration of Learning

The learning from the experience can be captured to the extent possible, in a variety of non-traditional ways: reports, power-point presentations, charts, sketches, collages, essays, poems, skits, models, scrap-books, to name a few.

## The Skills Developed

Several skills can be developed in the students through such experiences: research and inquiry skills, communication and presentation skills, organization and time management skills, self-assessment and reflection skills, group participation and leadership skills.

## The Assessment Strategy

As a teacher who had been a part of the experience mentioned above, I ask myself whether I had been able to assess the learning of the students authentically. The answer is yes, but only to the extent possible.

Like any other activity, the scope for effective assessment of projects and field trips depends on some amount of thought

and planning. One needs to be clear about the goals and objectives of the activity, the method to be adopted to realize them and the tools that one will use to gauge whether those objectives have been fulfilled. Before beginning a project, it is always necessary to ask: "Why am I doing this or what I am aiming to do? How will I know if the project is successful and how will I ensure that students learn? It is important to mention here, however, that my experience tells me the goals and objectives might also change during the course of the experience and that one needs some amount of flexibility to be open to this.

The assessment plan itself can include both formative assessment that will allow you to give feedback as the project progresses and summative assessment that provides students with a culminating appraisal of their performance. Since intelligence is diverse, evaluation should respect the diversity.



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The assessment can be recorded through a variety of rubrics, based on the correctness, depth and understanding of the content presented, the organization of the matter, thinking skills and communication, oral and written presentation, analysis and application and last but not the least, the skills required to work in a group.

Using similar rubrics and parameters for other aspects of learning, one can assess any activity quite effectively. The need therefore is to enable teachers to modify standardized rubrics or create their own, while assessing the exploration of contexts that are local and therefore, specific. It would be impossible and unfair otherwise, to assess a student authentically by broadly capturing the multifaceted experience through marks or grades.

This brings me, however, to some larger questions about the measurement, almost invariably related to assessment,

which may be worth raising:

### Questions to Ask

- Is measurement always so tangible? How does one measure attitudes, perspectives, qualities like sensitivity, objectivity, empathy? Do such intangible things manifest so immediately after an experience or is there scope for the manifestation to happen sometime later in life? Character development, after all, does not happen in a day.
- Is a thoroughly predictable outcome always possible or desirable? It goes with the assumption that a thoroughly organized plan is bound to yield predictable results. It neither takes into account various factors that go into learning, nor leaves scope for the goals and objectives to sometime go beyond what was initially planned for.
- Predictability and accurate organization leaves little space for creativity or spontaneity in the teaching or learning process. Looking at the most perfect rubric, one wonders finally, whether the teaching - learning process is so linear?
- One also wonders whether one has taken accountability so seriously that little is left to the ability of either the teacher or the learner to give enquiry the direction and the depth one chooses.
- Can the best of rubrics capture the complexity of the way information is processed in the minds of children? Who knows what goes on in the child's mind during the process of learning?
- Creativity is related to "out of the box" thinking and the rubric is yet another box created to capture predictable and desired results.
- Can the best form of assessment ever justify an activity? Does one see projects as a way of learning, valuable because

of its own intrinsic value or only because it can be sufficiently assessed, in order to capture the proof of learning? Alas! The more one tries to capture the learning in exact words the more the mystery and magic of the process seems to be lost!

- At a more philosophical level, can one finally ask about the sudden national obsession with accountability: do we see a direct link between the desire to create more and more structures, checks, measures and precise tools to capture the output of work, as fundamentally a sign of lack of faith in people? While some amount of accountability is necessary, one cannot overlook the harm done by the undue importance given to the micro-planning of assessment techniques.
- Last but not the least, one is bound to ask, what is the purpose of education today? Is the objective of education merely to produce "skilled" and "productive" workers or is the essence of education something infinitely larger? Can we leave the magic and wonder of the process of learning untouched by seeking the proof of learning, eternally?

To quote Gibran, "You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams."

While trying to assess accurately, the experiences given to children from life around, there is a dire need to keep our minds open to the unpredictable, immeasurable, unimaginable potential in each child, to develop her own understanding of things at her own pace, to create her own world-view, with or without the influence of adults who seem to plan outcomes to perfection. The celebration of learning happens along the way, not merely through a visible, predictable proof as the end result!

### Readings

1. <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/whatisit.htm> - Authentic assessment toolbox
2. [www.bie.org](http://www.bie.org) - Project based learning for the 21st century
3. <http://pbl-online.org> - Project based Learning
4. <http://www.journal.kfionline.org/article.asp?issue=9&article=7> - Curriculum for an enquiring mind
5. <http://www.journal.kfionline.org/article.asp?issue=11&article=7> - Perspectives on testing

**Sriparna** has been teaching social studies and English at J.Krishnamurti Foundation schools for 15 years. She has also been engaged in curriculum development and training teachers. She is currently a part of the Academics and Pedagogy team at Azim Premji Foundation. With her recently developed interest in the digital medium, she feels that a pedagogic shift may be brought about through creative learning resources. She may be contacted at [sriparna@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:sriparna@azimpremjifoundation.org)

