

On the role of education (?) in creating an innovative culture

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Education (which will be termed as literacy here – since as aptly put – education is something that remains after we remove all that we learnt in our schools and colleges!) determines one’s ability, and gives one the courage, to question. The current literacy systems in India – including graduate and post-graduate systems – are more or less linear. The teeming numbers of graduates getting out of these systems are not consciously aware of the conditioning that they have been subjected to – a conditioning that stunts the growth of their innovative or “risk” neurons. It is not required to be innovative in these current education/literacy systems – there are just three skills required to pass through these systems – the ability to memorize, the ability to logically analyze (to some extent) and the ability to understand the examiners psyche (which I admit is an art). The systems are so linear that the end-product (the graduating student) is not even geared to address the problems he/she would subsequently face in his/her respective industry – where he/she would be spending the rest of his/her productive life.

Primary education (the formative years of a child’s thinking machine) is when children mould their understanding to make themselves fit vis-à-vis the principles of fairly basic survival. The principles of survival are ingrained in children by the surroundings (society – parents, friends, teachers etc). The society is “linear” (I am using this term in a strictly mathematical sense – this will be evident later in the article) – in that the only thing the child understands is that he/she should excel academically (high-marks, professionally-relevant awards) to get ahead through his/her “education”. Those not able to mould their understanding – “fail” and end up being branded as “drop-outs”. While the ones who excel in the “marks”-ocratic system – are revered until such point that they suddenly disappear – that point of disappearance I would say is the day when they graduate. The entire hoopla about the marks he/she used to score vanishes – and they are left at the mercy of the working world – where they have to again start molding these new experiences and make them fit it in to the new world around them – primarily a capitalist economic system. The skills required to survive in this new system are fundamentally different, none of the skills learnt in the earlier system are applicable here. The demands are different – and the output is measurable only in terms of the salary that one is capable of earning – the society suddenly changes the metric from marks to money – note that this again a very linear world (linearity is a numeric/quantitative concept). The individual is made to grapple with this new world order – somehow all the marks he/she had made look redundant – they may at best make the individual get a job – where the marks are used more as a gate-keeping element –for filtering the “resume”.

I would boldly state, that surprisingly, to succeed in the linear capitalist economic system – one has to be non-linear! The ones who succeed (who get rich and sometimes famous – the two most critical elements of measurement in the capitalist system) are the ones who are most innovative (and of course lucky) of the lot. The rest lead a linear life – a life that takes them to retirement (with some provident fund savings for the post retirement period). Further, I would also say that if one has to succeed in the non-capitalist (socialistic) system – one has to be even more creative and even more non-linear – as the metric for success in this system is definitely not driven by numbers. The notion of quality of life, the successful marriage, is definitely non-linear. The capitalistic system rewards the most innovative – as it is driven by the basics of the supply and demand – the only way to create disruptive systems (high demand low supply) is through innovation of new products and services. The ability to gain economic freedom and increase the standard of living for millions (in a capitalistic system) is through innovation – this I believe does not need any justification.

If that is the case, then why are the current literacy systems (I would prefer calling it so) so linear in their structure for delivering the skills, when it is a known fact that one has to be non-linear (innovative) to succeed in the world outside of these systems.

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One could of course choose to lead a linear life – a very unnatural choice. Individuals lead a linear life not by choice but because of the lack of choice imposed by the stunting conditioning from the current literacy systems.

Humans by nature are creative – the evolutionary processes have substantiated this fact – the biological systems constantly innovate to adapt to the changing natural ecosystems around. Why then are our literacy systems so artificially skewed to the extent that they defy most of the natural laws of growth? Every child does have these innate creative skills – for example learning natural languages is one of the most creative processes – why then an artificial layer of linear growth wrapped around the same child – who then forgets and later stops using his/her creative skills. Why can't the literacy ecosystem evolve around our natural learning abilities? Why can't the society respect and force one to harness the creative skills?

- Fundamental questions that probably need to be asked by each one of us – and make some effort to change the prevalent systems to the extent possible