

Towards an Educated India: Using Technology to Bridge Skills-Education Gap

Technology can help impart skills to a large part of the country to make them productive citizens

UGC estimates that in order to move from the current 12.4% GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) and achieve the XI Plan target of 15% GER by 2012, with a 9 per cent economic growth rate, we need a 7 million increase in enrolment between 2006 and 2012. Also required would be about 500 new Universities and 2000 new colleges. Keep aside for a minute the staggering investment required for just the physical infrastructure to meet this demand. We are a nation that is already struggling with one of the lowest teacher ratios in the world (456 teachers per million people, as opposed to the US where it is 3,200 teachers per million people). A more pressing need is to find trainers to impart quality skill training. When even premier institutes like the IITs and IIMs reportedly have nearly one-third of faculty posts lying vacant, this absence of qualified faculty is felt much more in the remote, tribal terrain of our country. The other pressing need of higher education today is to develop market-relevant curriculum leading to employment. Our higher education system unfortunately does not provide our graduates with the skills required for them to be immediately productive at the workplace. In-house training remains vital to convert fresh recruits to productive employees. Regrettably, today India, skills and education are far removed from each

other. Skill-oriented colleges like ITIs and Polytechnics are perceived to be an option only for those unable to pursue a regular Bachelor's degree. This perception of poor quality has been fueled by the lack of industry relevance in the curriculum of many of these institutions. In contrast, in Switzerland for instance, post school students have the choice of opting for either vocational training, which leads to employment, or for a university education. Neither alternative is considered superior to the other, the decision being purely based on personal interest. This has been achieved largely because industry plays a crucial role in not just deciding the curriculum, but also providing apprenticeship options for on-the-job training. This goes a long way in bridging the employability gap and bringing credibility to the tertiary education system. We in India need to embrace technology in our classrooms to address the need for quality and scale in higher education. There is a dire need for our classrooms to be more innovative in the use of technology for internet-enabled learning and teaching. In a country that boasts of a flourishing \$65 billion IT/ITES industry, this should have perhaps happened earlier. But it's never too late.

EXPERT SPEAK: HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

Reports suggest that 84 per cent of rural India is still unaware of the internet and that the number of active Internet users in rural India will swell to 5.4 million in 2010, from 3.3 million in 2008 - a growth of 30 per cent. (Ref: IMAI and the IMRB). Even though, in terms of absolute numbers this may be a drop in the ocean for a country like India, however it is still a significant and growing number. More importantly a majority of these users are under the age of 35, and perhaps in need of skill development. Further, it can be expected that the increased use of internet-enabled education will act as a catalyst to accelerate the internet penetration in rural India. For this, both the government and the private sector need to provide a platform by way of investing in setting up Common Service Centers (CSCs) meant for education. These are technology kiosks, much like a cyber cafe, where students can come in for their technology enabled synchronous class-



es that would be delivered remotely by qualified faculty. Cisco's webex technology is another cost-effective alternative to deliver in this learning model, in a traditional classroom setting. At a more basic level, technology can enable a rural youth to take an e-learning course that allows her to choose her time, her place and her pace of study. Education technology has today matured to a degree that the learning experience of even traditionally hands-on courses like plumbing and housekeeping can now be enhanced and taught effectively, just by using technology to crystallize experiential learning. This sort of technology support could

prove invaluable to the 5114 ITIs in India that need industry support urgently. There are reportedly 12.5 million people being added annually to India's 545 million workforce. Certainly while there are limitations to how far technology can help Indiaskill these people, it still remains undeniably the largest part of the solution to a more productive India. If we do not act quickly to equip these people with the skills required by them, to become economically productive citizens, the existing demographic dividend can well become a drag. Hopefully we do not want to see an India like that!!

(This article has been authored by Ms Pallavi Jankiraman, Projects Director, Nataraj Education Foundation. She may be contacted at pallavi@necconnect.org.)

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The art and craft of essay-writing

Mastering the art of writing good essays can help in getting the much-needed edge for many competitive exams



BY KAVERI ROY

ESSAYS are expressions which are as much a craft as an art. They require a systematic preparation, practice and hard work. The essays one wrote back in school days were simple in format. They all started with the topic sentence, followed by the paragraph introducing the topic, the supporting paragraphs and the conclusion with a balanced opinion. However, the essays for competitive exams and university entrance tests require much more facets packed into the piece. It is therefore, essential to give adequate attention to preparing for such essays while opting for competitive exams so as to score well.

Though most exams give the specific topics that candidates need to have basic know-how of, what really helps one score high is the fashion in which the essay is crafted. Prof Sneha Subedar, BMM Coordinator of Ruia College, says, "Essays are the best way through which we judge the abilities of a student. They help in evaluating abilities like:

- Ideation
- Logical articulation
- Clarity of thought
- Originality of expression
- Integrated thinking and Language

While applying for the entrance tests for most courses or university, essays are looked upon with more attention than any other section of the admission form. They work as the evaluators which provide insights and give one's application an individual identity. Many a times, if one manages to pull through an impressive essay, it could

work as a deciding factor on the application. The essays one writes is an individual expression and hence, mastering the art of essay writing helps provide an edge over competition. The topics usually allotted in most competitive exams can be broadly divided into two basic kinds:

Current-issue related:

These are the topics discussed commonly. These topics are the hot debated ones, the one's which an individual has heard over coffee tables, in canteens, seen on television and read in newspapers. These are topics like: Threats to Indian democracy, Restructuring of Indian democracy, Honour killings in India etc. As per Patricia Chandrashekar, CEO, The Writestuff Writers' Club, "For such situations it is essential to read essays from newspapers, magazines and other publications on various topics and write essays on the similar topics, much before the exams."

BASIC TIPS

- Start with a draft
- Understand the purpose
- Restrict to simple yet precise use of words
- Track down quotes most likely to help you
- Express clear thoughts in lesser words
- Form a pithy format
- Plan your time
- Research regularly on possible topics
- Learn from what you read
- Think different! Cliché is never going to help

Thought related:

Succinct statements, phrases or slogans, often more philosophical than factual, fall in this second category of topics allotted. "One should know his/her subject well before opting for such a topic and should be prepared with a lot of research on the subject," says Chandrashekar. The topics need a mature level of understanding, analysis and also knowledge to back the facts.

Expert Advice

On mastering the art of writing a good essay, Patricia Chandrashekar, an expert on writing skills and a visiting faculty at many institutions, shares, "Mind-Mapping" is a very useful technique in writing essays. This is a method that was popularized by Tony Buzan, who has written many books on the subject. A mind map is often created around a single word or text, placed in the center, to which associated ideas, words and concepts are added. For this you write the title of the subject in the centre of a blank page and draw a circle around it. Important facts linked to the subject, or subheadings are placed on lines drawn from the circle. These lines can be further subdivided according to the various points. You can use different symbols, images and colours for different ideas. This will also make it easier to remember the different subtopics.

Next you'll have to work on your outline. Decide what statement of the thesis will be. Jot down the main points of your essay and your arguments for each point. When you write the introduction make sure it creates an impact and grabs the reader's attention. Keep your language simple. There is no need to use big words which might just confuse the reader. Each new idea or subtopic should be written in a separate paragraph. Suppose you have five different ideas, you should present them in five different paragraphs. In your conclusion you will have to summarize the main points. This is where you emphasise the main statement you used in your introduction. Lastly, read your essay again for grammar and spelling mistakes."

KALA VIDYA MANDIR INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (POLYTECHNIC)

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