



**HERITAGE
INTERNATIONAL
XPERIENTIAL SCHOOL**

THE PROJECT-BASED PATH TO LEARNING



Over the last 20 years, there has been increasing reform and activism against the current models of mainstream schooling around the world. Mainstream schools are criticised primarily for their dependence on rote learning, teacher-led authoritative pedagogy, confinement to classroom and preference of standardisation over personalisation of learning and assessment. Mainstream schooling is also seen as the primary culprit in making schooling experience irrelevant and distant to real life, alienating millions of children to a learning experience.

Many alternative education reform movements view such schooling models as didactic, ineffective in building deeper understanding and more importantly, building relevance to real life. Mainstream schooling was a product of the times which needed a large-scale education process to create a workforce for the industrial revolution. This resulted in preference of certain subjects over others (math and science over arts) and certain forms of intelligence (deductive, logical, reasoning over empathy, social, design, aesthetics etc.) resulting in alienation or exclusion of many students who lacked “academic skills” like memorisation, written reproduction, attention, etc.

Skilling for the 21st century

But the loudest criticism of mainstream schooling has been its inability to build pertinent skills and capacities in children from the 21st century. And the intensity of this criticism has recently been driven by the onset of some fundamental societal shifts like artificial intelligence, automation et al. Clubbed under the banner of “the fourth industrial revolution”, the impact of these on our lives is still to be understood fully.

The industrial form of schooling is based on the ethos of the industrialised age like standardisation, uniformity and linear thinking and does not reflect the ethos of the globalisation age

like collaboration, empathy and divergent thinking. It largely acts as a funnel for “university excellence” rather than “real life excellence”. As a response to these criticisms, several alternative schooling pedagogies based on Project Based Learning (PBL) or experiential learning have mushroomed around the world. These schools have been built on progressive human centric (as against content/curriculum centric) philosophies like Waldorf schools, Reggio Emilia schools, Montessori schools, Gandhi’s Nai Talim Schools, Aurobindo schools of human excellence etc.

Reforms in public education in many countries have also been advocating a full or a hybrid form of experiential learning (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, UK (1999); National Curriculum Framework, India (2005)). Many mainstream schools are now embracing some forms of PBL. The past few years have witnessed a rise of a number of social organisations, donors and funding agencies to expand the cause of PBL. Unfortunately in India, policy makers, parents and even many popular schools still don’t grasp the criticality and impact of PBL.

PBL is an approach where students learn critical competencies and skills through comprehensively crafted real life projects, which are linked laterally to various domains or subjects. Instead of books and blackboards, students learn from the design, research, implementation and production of these projects. The focus is on building relevant skills and capacities (like design thinking, collaboration, creativity etc) and not just remembering facts. Often these projects are implemented in groups with active mentoring and coaching by teachers, mentors and more importantly community members and subject matter experts. Projects are also crafted to accommodate multiple modes of learning and multiple ways of expressing understanding.

There is a sea of evidence across several disciplines that supports the effectiveness of project based learning, the latest being from the exciting world of brain research. New research in the emerging fields of cognitive neuroscience has thrown exciting insights into how our brain functions and how best it learns. We now know that our brain processes, stores and retrieves learning by connecting new information with existing neural “networks”. Thus for learning to stick, it has to be always contextual and interrelated. Projects, unlike traditional subjects, are integrated and interrelated helping our brains to naturally follow its pattern of learning. We also know that the brain processes and hard wires learning only when it is emotionally engaged. A well-designed project often builds agency and relevance for the learner thus creating a strong emotional connect to the learning process.

FMRI scans have also established that no two brains (not even in the case of identical twins) are wired the same and thus each brain has its unique learning fingerprint. Unlike one-size-fits-all traditional classrooms, a more individualised learning approach like PBL honours the learning styles of multiple learners in a classroom. Research from the fields of cognitive and educational psychology also supports that learning happens effectively when learners construct, cooperate and are engaged to learn. In many ways, this is an antithesis to the industrial model of education.

Building citizenship

But the biggest advantage of PBL is in its inherent capacity to build citizenship among students. In a country like India with poor civic engagement from the educated middle class, projects designed to solve real life community issues build tremendous capacity for civic leadership among the young generation.

While PBL has the potential to transform education in our country, the implementation limitations of PBL also need to be kept in mind. The biggest challenge of PBL is in its complexity to deliver. Only schools and teachers that have a certain sophistication and maturity in the understanding of the complexity and chaos of a PBL curriculum can do justice to the power of this pedagogy. It takes many years of professional development, collaborative planning and a culture of learning community to be a good PBL school. Parents may want to probe more on a school's practices around training, collaboration and culture when a school claims to be a PBL school on its website or brochure. The government must invest in institutional capacity to train and develop our teachers to sustain such a curriculum. Many countries have embarked on this journey and our children shouldn't be left behind.

By Vishnu Karthik,
CEO Xperiential Learning Systems and Director,
The Heritage Group of Schools

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Heritage Xperiential Learning School, Sector 62, Gurugram

info@hixs.org | Tel: 8882178996 | www.hixs.org