

# Role of Teacher as a Therapist: Issues, Challenges and Reflective Practices

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## ABSTRACT

*The competitive era of today lays stress on students. This is caused by unhappy situations created by teachers due to emotional imbalance. Teachers attend only the cognitive components and they do forget the emotive behaviour of students. It is the understanding of the teachers on Neurocognition that brings beneficial changes in the learning environment of the students so as to help them learn. In applied psychological terms we can call it neurocognitive therapy. As a therapist, the teacher takes an active role in guiding his students as he works to develop friendly environment during and after Instructional programme. Hence, the teacher needs to be familiar with the diagnosis and treatment for handling situations and conditions such as anxiety, disorders, depression, learning disabilities and bi-polar disorder. Along with this knowledge base, the teacher should know the strategies for neurocognitive therapy. One of such strategies is reflective practices. The author attempts to illuminate portfolio writing and reflective learning journals, the two essential reflective practices every teacher has to follow for healthy bringing up of future citizens.*

**Key terms:** Neurocognition, reflective practices, portfolio-writing, reflective learning journals

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The societal change due to globalisation awakens the educational authorities and the Central Government's educational policy has brought higher education centre stage. The eleventh Five Year plan was described by the Prime Minister of India as an 'Educational Plan'.

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The economic inability of the aspirants and poor quality of education are identified as the two inadequacies that exist in higher education. Despite other factors, the role of teachers plays a vital role in the quality of education.

The function of a teacher falls within the broad framework of the school education system — its goals, curricula, materials, and methods. The curriculum framework of teacher education needs to be in consonance with the curriculum framework for school education. A teacher needs to be prepared in relation to the needs and demands arising in the school context, to engage with questions of school knowledge, the learner and the learning process. The expectations of the school system from a teacher change from time to time, responding to the broader social, economic and political changes taking place in the society. Other than the changes, there are certain issues to be solved in this communicative era.

### **Issues**

In today's world everything is open to students. They can access information. At the same time, the manner in which schools run suggests that education is perceived as preparation for work. The school and the parents emphasise marks, often at the cost of the child's well-being. This results in commitment of suicides. Moreover, in the name of correction of 'misbehaviour', still teachers and school authorities use corporal punishments. If quality education refers to holistic perspectives of education, it definitely means the emotional component of students along with their cognitive development. The psychologist Steve Killick (2007) writes, "Schools do not 'teach' emotional literacy, they need to practice it." This indicates the importance of teachers to possess the knowledge and the skill of understanding the emotion of students. Maybe because of this emergency, National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009–10) is subtitled as 'Towards Preparing Professional and Humane Teacher.' An important contribution of teacher education is its development of teachers' abilities to examine teaching from the perspectives of learners who bring diverse experiences and frames of references to the classroom.

The frequent 'mishaps' in schools, make educationists ponder over the cause for it. They state the existence of total negligence of emotional component among teachers. Krathwohl (1964) and his associates analysed the feeling components and listed them under affective domain in Instructional design. Of late, scientists and educationists brought Neuroscience to the attention of the public for

everyone to understand the inside of man. No more teachers can have the say, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. The Supreme Court Order of 2000 banned corporal punishment. Emphasis has been given to child-friendly curriculum and learner friendly methodology. Yet teachers need time to comprehend and tune themselves for the above. There is greater urgency on the need to possess knowledge, not only on psychology but also on the biology of the brain and its operation. It is neurocognition that talks about the process behind one's behaviour. It is high time for teachers and teacher educators to be aware of neuro cognitive science before the NCFTE (2009–10) comes into practice.

### **Neurocognition**

In psychology, it refers to an information processing view of an individual's psychological function. In other words, it is information processing approach that views the mind as an information processing system that selects, transforms, encodes, stores, retrieves and generates information and behaviour (Lachman & Butterfield, 1979). It includes every mental process that maybe described as an experience of knowing, perceiving, recognising, conceiving and reasoning as distinguished from an experience of feeling or of willing. It describes the cognitive functions closely linked to the function of particular areas, neural pathways, or critical networks in the brain. Therefore, their understanding is closely linked to the practice of neuropsychological and cognitive neuroscience, two disciplines that broadly seek to understand how the structure and function of the brain relates to thought and behaviour.

Neural science explains human behaviour in terms of the activities of the brain. The ultimate challenge is to understand the biological basis of consciousness and mental processes by which we perceive, act, learn and remember. The brain is the leader for coordinating our physical activities. Exercise strengthens the brain's interconnections and rejuvenates the mind. The chemical link between the mind and body is best exemplified by the brain derived neurotrophic in our factor (BDNF), a protein found in our brain which helps brain cells to stay healthy, sprout new connections and develop plasticity. The short-term and long-term exercises both lead to a release of BDNF from various parts of our brain the cortex, basal forebrain and hippocampus which are the areas considered — vital for learning, higher thinking and memory. Neurocognitive functioning is strongly affected by stress levels, hormonal functions, sleep, exercise, health habits and many other environmental factors.

### **Challenges**

The essence of understanding Neurocognition is to bring beneficial changes in the learning environment of the students so as to help them learn. In applied psychological terms we can call it neuro-cognitive therapy. As a therapist, the teacher takes an active role in guiding his students as he works to develop friendly environment during and after Instructional programme. Hence, the teacher needs to be familiar with the diagnosis and treatment for handling situations and conditions such as anxiety, disorders, depression, learning disabilities and bipolar disorder. Along with this knowledge base, the teacher should know the strategies for neurocognitive therapy.

It focuses on changing attitudes and thought patterns as well as behaviours. It is as if a client moves from asking 'what's wrong with me' to asking 'what are my strengths and weaknesses.' The therapist can begin to guide him to find good matches between his interests, abilities and traits that can help him reach his potentials at school or at work.

Educational researches on cognitive functions reveal the fact that the frontal lobes are part of the brain where concentration and learning take place. This area is also associated with working memory as well as all our executive functions including prioritising, organising, planning and behaviour control. Researches emphasise cognitive exercises for cognitive processing.

Students' academic performance will be improved by enhancing their focus on attention, concentration and memory. On account of this behaviour, a teacher should incorporate appropriate strategies to enhance cognitive functions. The essential strategies are given below. A teacher would be a therapist in developing the following cognitive functions.

- Attention duration
- Divided attention
- Selective attention
- Working memory
- Sequential processing
- Simultaneous processing or multitasking
- Processing speed
- Sensory motor co-ordination
- Visual processing
- Auditory processing
- Audio-visual coordination

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- Peripheral vision
- Concept comprehension
- Visual blending

Students will benefit from

- enhancing all aspects of attention and concentration;
- improving short-term and long-term memory;
- increasing self-control;
- enhancing speed of processing;
- improving self-discipline and self-confidence;
- improving the ability to concentrate in the presence of distractions;
- reducing hyperactivity;
- reducing impulsivity;
- improving the ability to relax;
- improving patience;
- enhancing the ability to multitask;
- improving learning ability;
- improving the ability to quickly shift focus;
- improving the ability to sustain focus for prolonged periods of time; and
- improving planning and organisations.

Performing the role of a therapist is a real challenge to a teacher. Other than the academic calendar, he has to attend to every individual in terms of realising the strengths and weaknesses, design strategies to overcome difficulties, provide adequate input for strengths and operate relevant strategies for cognitive functions. This wide spectrum of activities could possibly be done only through adequate planning and systematic execution with periodical monitoring. In order to perform these activities, first of all he has to practise cognitive functions to happen in him. This could be achieved through portfolio writing and journal writing. These practices regulate the individual in terms of self-awareness, self-monitoring and self-regulating. This expectation is sensitised by educational experts and so NCFTE (2009–10) insists on process based learning and reflective practices.

### **Reflective Practices**

Reflection involves thinking. In the process of thinking, self-reflection on thinking enables one to proceed and reflect on one's own thinking process. This reflectivity is centred on a function. Reflection on thinking process enables one to complete a function by the application and reorganisation of knowledge and skills to perform a function.

These reflectivity and functionality would be possible only in the context of application of learning strategies and self-regulation skills. While applying in the context, the individual should be able to progress, if not, he has to self-regulate for progress by revising his own learning process. On the basis of self-regulation he would be able to strike a balance between the quality and quantity of the activity. This entire process would enable one to cultivate deeper cognitive process. The two reflective practices, i.e. portfolio writing and journal writing refine individuals towards successful personalities.

### **Portfolio Writing**

The word 'portfolio' in the seventeenth century was recognised by almost all disciplines and of late, is being processed by each and every competent individual towards quality product. In education, portfolio refers to a personal collection of information describing and documenting a person's achievements and learning. There is a variety of portfolios ranging from learning logs to extended collections of achievement evidence. Portfolios are used for many different purposes such as accreditation of prior experience, job search, continuing professional development and certification of competencies. Portfolios are valid measures of literacy. There is evidence that portfolios inform students as well as teachers and parents, and that the results can be used to improve instruction, another major dimension of good assessment (Gomez, Grace & Block, 1991).

The review of researches shows that studies were both on process portfolio and product portfolio. In the process students reflected on the difficulties they encounter. The student teachers become effective teachers through the use of actual products they developed in classroom situations; portfolio provides a forum for extended and complex learning activities and observation. It becomes a powerful assessment tool in teacher preparation programmes. It promoted collaborative learning, increased students' reflection and aided psychologically secure environment in the classroom.

A well-planned documentation in terms of portfolio speaks about the efficiency of a successful teacher. Similarly, the learner's individual developmental portfolios and individual learning portfolios reflect the candidate's attitude, interest and level of development and growth in a given period of time. Thus, portfolio becomes an essential component in the field of education.

The main focus of portfolio is writing. This writing is in three different dimensions, viz. describing, analysing and reflecting. In other

words, we describe what; analyse-so what and reflect-then what. These indicate the ongoing cyclic process of writing for one's development in teaching and learning. These entries will be read both by the individual and by others in the course of assessing. Hence the entries should be organised and structured.

According to Paulson, Paulson and Mayor (1991), "Portfolio offers a way of assessing student learning that is different than traditional methods. Portfolio assessment provides the teachers and students an opportunity to observe students in a broader context of taking risks, developing creative solutions, and learning to make judgments about their own performance". Portfolio assessment provides thoughtful evaluation to take place. A combined effort of teacher and students is essential in framing criteria for assessment, both formative and summative. Throughout the academic year, students and teachers have to work together to identify significant artifacts and processes to be captured in the portfolio. This reflective thinking refines their decision-making and evaluation capacity. It is a thoughtful practice for development.

### **Reflective Learning Journals**

The act of writing down things always helps us to clarify our thoughts and emotions, to work out strategies, and to focus on our development and progress. It helps us to focus on our own development. Reflection is often defined as 'meditation, thoughtfulness or careful consideration of some subject matter, idea or purpose'. Life is full of experiences. The art of taking the experiences critically into our understanding leads us towards development. The ongoing interactions between thought and action deepen our understanding. And this in turn, changes our educational practices.

### **How could the interactions be?**

Hardly it is possible to keep all the messages we received from our experiences. If we record it in our journal regularly, it will be quite possible to reflect on our experiences, thoughts, struggles and insights as we move along our learning path.

### **What do we write?**

Anything which helps us to reflect on:

- our feelings about the course, the topic, the lecture, the lecturers, peer group responses and our progress;
- the challenges we face;

- the changes we find in our attitude;
- the strategies we apply to tackle problems;
- the unsolved areas;
- the resources we search in; and
- things that we find about ourselves.

#### **What is the use of these entries?**

This journal entry helps us to

- explore questions on the concept that is important to us;
- analyse patterns and relationships;
- examine assumptions, beliefs and values;
- respond to new ideas;
- appreciate learning;
- celebrate success;
- attend alternative mode;
- develop personal theories;
- take thoughtful action; and
- identify the skills to be honed.

#### **How can we maintain a journal?**

A reflective journal is not a diary or a log of daily activities. It is a log or a register being maintained for personal use. The thoughts, feelings, enquiries can be recorded in a narrative form or in bullets. Sometimes, we can even include visual representations like drawings, maps, lists or charts. If we practise reflecting in the journal regularly, we make sense of our learning journey. In due course, it will help us in preparing portfolio.

#### **How shall we activate?**

To begin with, let us think of the tools we require. Maybe it is our favourite notebook or a sketchbook; or probably our computer. Then we must find a quiet place or a personal area where we sit and write our experiences without any disturbance. This is an ongoing process, leaving a link for further developments.

#### **Journaling Strategies**

As we discussed earlier, we probe into thoughts in different dimensions. Those dimensions can be expressed in different formats.

#### **Narration**

Feelings could be expressed in short imperatives. Sometimes, we can express our feelings and emotions with words, using different colour sketches or through symbols and images.



### **Enquiries**

In the process of learning, we tend to get unsolved questions. They activate our attention and curiosity. In certain occasions we may get answers while in other, we may get amazing questions. It is worth keeping a separate area in our journal book for exploring questions. It will be a record of what we do not know and what we come to know.

### **Analysis**

Generally, in meaning making process, we go for patterns and associations. As a result, we get 'why' questions. By analysing critical incidents, we may arrive at new theories and sometimes we tune ourselves to take new actions.

### **Examine assumptions, beliefs and values**

The experiences in classrooms let us frame beliefs on teaching, learning, and education. Those beliefs could be modified with other resources.

### **Respond to new ideas**

Everyday we come across new information, new ideas, and new experiences through many resources. Some maybe surprising. And some maybe amazing. All enquiries and doubts maybe clarified by working out logic through puzzle solving diagrams like Venn diagram, flow charts or concept mapping. By drawing connections between facts we come to believe one truth. Through collaborative journaling (with friends and peers) we construct new ideas and understandings.

### **Taking thoughtful action**

We know that change is permanent. We tend to have our thoughts and ideas change, so do our attitude and behaviour. Education brings behavioural change. Through reflective journal writing modification of thoughts and attitudes is towards well-being. The written journal is not an end product. It is for reading. Everytime we read, we find new meanings and we start perceiving things in a new dimension. The impact of those experiences makes learning very significant.

The ongoing journal writing and reflection becomes a therapy. It helps in self examination development of self image. It improves one's memory and allows for a sense of direction and purpose. Journal writing could also be in the form of a diary entry. The basic daily entry maybe an internal dialogue which could be a record of daily happenings or important thoughts. It is like a photo album painted

with words. It sharpens one's memory, allows for details and enriches one's learning.

These strategies in journal writing help the individual to be aware of his strengths and weaknesses. It sharpens his perception and improves his understanding. This self-perception could be further taken to analyse his products (the assignments, test papers, i.e. the artifacts of the individual) and express in writing the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of the product. In other words, allowing the individual to assess his product and state the reason (what and why) for the product status. Further, he should draw steps for (how) corrective measures. If an individual practice to analyse and reflect on his performances, there is room for further improvement. It becomes a healthy practice to compare himself from what he was yesterday and what he is today. He becomes his own competitor and there is no competition between individuals. Here in this environment, the teacher facilitator becomes a therapist developing all the cognitive functions discussed earlier.

For a teacher to whom journal writing becomes a habit, personal and professional development is assured. A teacher who trains her students in journal writing actually fosters deeper and harmonious form of human development. Education is a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. It is an expression of affection for children and young people welcoming them into society and offering them the place where they have all the rights. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to understand neurocognitive perspective of learning, maintenance of portfolio writing and practise journal writing.

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