**Rajaram Sharma**

rajaramsharma@gmail.com

# Trying to be Someone Else

A modern day teacher is under enormous pressure to perform. But more importantly to convince all and sundry that she is indeed performing. Almost everyone outside the classroom appears to be an expert, itching to tell the teacher how to do her job.

To be fair to all those unsolicited advisors, they are legitimate stakeholders in the education of children. They could either be parents of our students or citizens of the larger community in which all of us reside. Education is a process of socialisation and as teachers we are performing our jobs on behalf of this community.

At the same time, not all of these advisors are informed about the process of education. As trained professionals it becomes our responsibility to demonstrate that we are equipped to perform our duties well and we are indeed doing so. A positive way of warding off the interference is to demonstrate our efficiency at our job and establish that we are in control and things are happening the way it ought to.

It is in this act of demonstration and asserting their professional position that teachers are finding the situation a little confusing. Modern day technology developments have further aggravated the problem. On the one hand, the rapid access to information of all kinds provides a false sense of confidence in the knowledge gained. It is so easy to believe one understands the problems of teaching learning. On the other, news channels eagerly peddle every tid bit of negative news about our classrooms, painting us all with the blackest of paints. For every step we take, there are dozens of opinions about how we could have done it differently.

How do we react? Do we react at all? We will try and explore this issue and see how we can harness the same technological marvels to redeem the situation.

## Changing Course in our Technology Explorations

This argument is not about the wonders of modern information and communication technologies. There is so much said about it everywhere. Many of us teachers, who have had the chance to possess a personal device -- a laptop or a smartphone have fallen in love with it. There are at least a few times every day that the inevitability of this invasion into our lives hits us. How did we ever manage without this piece of glass and metal and the connection it establishes with the world outside? Again there are a number of us who have not yet been bitten by this bug and will spend hours arguing against the use of such technology. Let us for the time being concentrate on the few of us who have crossed the road, possess a device, do not require too much convincing about its utility and have the desire to explore its use in our classrooms.

Over the last few decades a number of demonstrations of what role technology can play in classrooms have been made. Teachers have been called upon to adopt these. Some of us have done so too. From early experiments with power point slides, to flash based interactive packages, to present day attempts at

using interactive smart boards, sales persons have promoted a variety of multimedia content, which can be displayed in the classroom. Content developers have also systematically mapped all chapters of all textbooks, creating digital content resources. A large number of schools, particularly private schools have established computer facilities to use these digital content.

## The issue with these attempts is the following:

It disengages the teacher, taking away from her, the primary role of nurturing student abilities;

It reduces students to passive consumers of packaged information;

It distorts the purpose of teaching learning, dumbing it down to mere content delivery;

It dismantles the very educational process in the classroom.

How can the use of educational resources developed with so much effort and investment of creative energy be so harmful. As we indicated earlier, digital content development has been primarily by persons outside the classroom process. Their angst has been against boring classrooms. They further have a mistaken notion that passing on information in textbooks to children in interesting ways is what classrooms are about. Together their model of supporting teaching learning, therefore, is to provide colourful, informative projected aids for the teacher to use.

To say the least, a teacher's role is far more. A textbook is merely a teaching aid. The job of an English teacher, for instance is to make children proficient in the English language and not to transact the English textbook. The process of learning the English language requires that the student is engaged with a variety of forms of text, listens to a variety of communication, acquires a variety of language skills, practices these skills through the original production of language, and in many creative and imaginative ways immerse oneself in the use of language. The teacher on her part has to create an environment where students can engage with the language, obtain critical corrective feedback, hone their skills and become efficient and creative users of the English language. The poems, the stories, the essays and the exercises in the textbook become convenient opportunities for engaging with the English language. By extension, it is also obvious that the mere transaction of the textbook would constitute a very limited exposure.

When a packaged content is offered to a teacher, it essentially reduces the teachers role to show and tell. Her own engagement with what is to be taught, how it should be adapted to her students' needs, how it is to be creatively packaged, made relevant and interesting -- her role as a curriculum arbiter is completely taken away. Even when a teacher teaches the textbook alone, she loses a great chance at enhancing students learning. Digital resources which focus on show and tell tends to compound this issue.

For the same reasons, student engagement with learning is stunted by the use of such resources. In the language example we used, the students active engagement is restricted to mere listening. Opportunities at production of language become severely limited. Opportunities at creative expression -- theatre, song, speech, debate vanish. Students are reduced to passive consumers of information and do not develop the skills or the knowledge of the language.

Across different subjects we teach at school, various aspects of a students' knowledge, skills, personality

are nurtured. Teaching is a vehicle to provide students opportunities at learning. And learning itself is the process through which various faculties of students are developed. Active engagement with the process of education is therefore the key to both the teachers' teaching and students' learning.

## Right orienting and Right Sizing our Expectations

What then should be our arguments for using technology in the classrooms? What forms of technology are better suited to teaching learning? How do we conserve and in fact catalyse the active role of a student and the teacher in the educational process?

The distinguishing features of modern day information and communication technologies are the following:

Connecting with the world;

Connecting with each other;

Creating with technology.

The world wide web hosts millions of websites and has emerged as the largest possible library. Assisted by search engines, retrieving information of our choice is just a click away. Schools do not usually possess large libraries, which are constantly updated. Keeping ourselves at the cutting edge of our subjects, well informed about the developments in our areas of interest. Not only does it satisfy our information needs, but also provides the technology tools, which could change the way we present our subjects in the class. Being Connected to the web therefore is an essential requirement. Coupled with a strong search and retrieval skill, the world of knowledge would well be at our fingertips.

The best of teachers live professionally isolated lives. In smaller schools, we are likely to be the only teacher in our subject. Even in larger schools, we may not always have the benefit of the knowledge and experience of a fellow senior. The communication possibilities of the internet opens out possibilities, which were hitherto impossible. Professional groups have begun to emerge, sharing and supporting fellow colleagues. An email is so convenient, that a request for support is very likely to be responded to. Forming a network of fellow teachers and together exploring our interests is a sure way of breaking professional isolation.

Unlike radio, television and cinema, which are essentially push technologies, meaning thereby that we can at best consume it. Interaction with the media, asking questions of it, modifying it to see what happens has never been possible. The advent of computers and software applications has opened up all these possibilites. We can also create our own content, be it plain text, a set of pictures, a drawing or diagram, even a song or video. Modern day devices have made it extremely easy to create very sophisticated content presentations or resources. Together with our students, fellow teachers and the community, the creation of relevant and appropriate educational resources is well within our reach. Not only will this satisfy our needs better, but also give wings to our imagination and creativity. The satisfaction of creating our own resources, sharing it with our colleagues and being appreciated is perhaps the most important gain we could aspire for.

## Being Ourselves

Overall, modern day information and communication technologies can be a much needed asset to our professional growth. Active and critical engagement with it, developing our skills of working with it, making the right demands can be an exciting adventure in itself. It can

also enliven our classrooms. But far more importantly, it helps us recover our professional identities as the real experts of teaching learning, who can make the difference to our students and through them to the world of the future.