

Children as Authors

To Enhance Writing Skills or to Build Authorial Practice?

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The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and the National Focus Group (NFG) on the teaching of English and Indian Languages have made a decided shift in the approach to language teaching in our country. However, even after this significant step much remains to be done. The new NCERT textbooks launched in 2006 did not completely reflect the thinking articulated in the NCF and the NFG position papers. These changes are also not adequately represented in the approach of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) which also publishes language textbooks, and more importantly conducts the all important class XII examination and structures the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation for schools affiliated to it.

It is worthwhile to study the annual CBSE Secondary School Curriculum to understand the guidance being given to more than twelve thousand schools that are affiliated to it. The 2011 edition, while dealing with the 'Matribhasha Hindi' (mother tongue Hindi) urges the teachers to value 'independent and original thinking'. However, only one of the sixteen objectives points to the importance of students writing from their own experiences and expressing independent opinions. Though the objectives do not seem to be listed in order of importance, it is worth noting that the second objective refers to developing the ability to use the 'viraam-chinh' (comma and full stop) correctly.

Under the section of Communicative English, teachers are urged to develop the 'competencies' of creativity and self-

monitoring. Creativity, according to the curriculum, is explained as: 'Students should be encouraged to think on their own and express their ideas using their experience, knowledge and imagination, rather than being text or teacher dependent'. This is followed by a list of twelve abilities that the students need to develop, starting with the ability to 'express ideas in clear and grammatically correct English, using appropriate punctuation and cohesion devices'. Needless to say, the focus throughout is on writing skills and abilities.

The CBSE textbook on *Creative Writing and Translation Studies* acknowledges that creative writing involves the cognitive process of transfer from experience to words. Yet the overriding goal of the course is to sharpen the practical ability of the learner. The course introduces students to different kinds of writing, and contains practical exercises that help students self-check their understanding and how much of that understanding has been translated into ability.

This survey attempts to show that much is left to be desired regarding the changes mentioned in NCF 2005 and NFG in the context of language, especially in the domain of writing. It thus comes as no surprise that writing continues to be seen as a problematic area in the classroom.

It was observed during the survey that often a collective sigh goes up in the class the moment the teacher announces a writing assignment. This reveals the attitude of the students towards writing; it is a chore,

something they hold in dread, and would rather postpone or find an excuse not to do it.

In junior classes, the first response of many students is to immediately head to a corner to start sharpening their pencils. In more senior classes a hunt begins for a functioning pen to do their writing with. Sometimes it takes a good ten minutes for the students to be ready to begin writing. In a thirty-five to forty minute period, that is a quarter of a class, already gone.

On the one hand, students often complain that they do not know what to write, and wonder how they should begin, or how many words they need to write. Teachers on the other hand, lament the students' inability to write, citing poor handwriting, lack of grammatical accuracy, lack of knowledge of punctuation, poor spelling, lack of fluency, and lack of coherence and organization. It is almost as though these are the only aspects of writing that matter.

So why does writing elicit this near universal distaste from students? And why do teachers lament the poor writing of students?

Let us have a quick look at what students are expected to do when they are asked to write. They are generally expected to:

- copy answers and other extended texts from the blackboard, text book, help book, etc., usually to be learnt by heart, and reproduced as written texts later.
- write/reproduce paragraphs, letters, etc., on tired and clichéd topics such as A Rainy Day, Value of Trees, A Morning Walk, My Favourite TV Programme, and Application to the Principal for Sick Leave.
- Write a report, article, letter, factual description in a given format in a maximum of 200 words.

Teachers either don't believe the students can write on their own, or feel that they cannot

be trusted to write on their own. It is assumed that students, if left to write on their own, would make too many errors and the teacher would have to spend too much time correcting those errors. Hence, it is felt that the best solution under the circumstances is to simply not allow students to write on their own. The other strategy is to curtail their writing by rigidly prescribing form and word limits.

Fear and anxiety are a few other major factors that influence the attitude of the students towards writing. Almost anything a student writes has to be graded or evaluated; it has to be given either a right or a wrong and assigned a grade or a mark. Rarely is any writing done for the sheer joy or pleasure of writing. Is it any wonder then that students want to disown any writing exercise as soon as they finish it? Moreover, they are deeply reluctant to revisit their writing. Errors are sought to be hidden under heavy scratches or liberal application of correction fluid.

The experience of Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education (henceforth Ankur) on the question of getting children and young people to write is markedly different.

Ankur is a non-governmental organization that operates in six working class settlements in Delhi. It runs 'Learning Collectives' for the age group 6-11 years, Clubs and Libraries for the age group 10-15 years, and CyberMohallas and 'Young Women Collectives' for the age group 15 years and above. In addition to this, Ankur also works with the entire community of these settlements on issues of housing and demolition, through concrete programmes to enhance the intellectual life of the locality such as the Community Archive, and by holding regular events in the locality. Recently it has entered into a collaborative project with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to

enhance the teaching of Hindi in primary classes in six schools of the settlements where it operates.

The collectives run by Ankur engage in sustained practices. The groups meet every week-day for one and a half to two hours, with an Ankur employee facilitating the interactions. Writing remains a major output of the creative practices of all these collectives. The Learning Collectives generate group creations that get circulated in the form of a poster or a poem. For instance, all the responses to a query such as 'What do you want in Sawda-Ghevra?' (Sawda-Ghevra is a resettlement colony that was set up in 2006 on the North-West outskirts of Delhi) were collated in the form of a poem weaving in the actual text contributed by children into a rhythmic chant, "*park mein ghaas aur pedh chahiye/ shopping mall, chidiya ghar aur dukaan chahiye/ papa ke liye pass mein kaam chahiye/ naaliyon mein paani ka bahav chahiye*" (we want grass and trees in the park/ we want shopping malls, a zoo and shops/ we want work nearby for our fathers/ we want flowing water in drains). Being able to recognize their individual contribution in print form, albeit an A-4 sized laser printout, gives children tremendous levels of confidence, and an eagerness to see more of their works in print.

The rest of the collectives do more of individual writings but they draw sustenance from group practices. The library and the club are an attempt to experiment with different resources that help enrich writing. The club has a non-exclusive focus on the locality, and the library on books. The learning from this experiment is that both resources prove equally rewarding. For now, Ankur plans to merge these programmes and not privilege any one resource over the other. The practitioners have

conducted many story-telling sessions in their locality and elsewhere. The writings of the children are now being uploaded onto blogs (<http://khichripurtalkies.blogspot.com/> and <http://dakshinpuridiaries.blogspot.com/>).

CyberMohalla came up with an anthology of writings, which was published in Hindi by Rajkamal Prakashan, as a book entitled *Behroopiya Sheher* (A City with Multiple Forms) and then as an English translation *Trickster City* by Penguin India. An earlier publication *Galiyon Se/From the Bylanes* was self-published by Cyber Mohalla.

The only gender-exclusive group is the Young Women's Collective which has a lot of skill enhancement programmes. They have also recently self-published a booklet entitled *Uddhedbun* (Tangled Weave) based on their writings.

This experiment demonstrates that there is immense creative potential inherent in children and young people, and that this potential only requires an opportunity to flower.

So what are the lessons from Ankur that can be carried into other teaching-learning situations, including formal schools? Let us start by trying to recognize where the urge to write comes from. Nowhere in the pedagogy of writing have we ever felt the need to evoke the desire to write. This desire can only be evoked when we are welcome as writers or listeners to an intellectual context, where we are struck with an idea that we spontaneously want to write about. To quote a writing practitioner in an Ankur facilitated Club:

'Na aaj mein yeh soch ke thami ki mere paas shabd nahin hain. Naahi iss sawaal ne behkaya ki meri saadi-sapat bhasha kisse ko pasand aayegi ki nahin? Bas man me jin khayolon aur ahsaaso ki tsunami aayi

thi; unhe ghar jate hee, palang par baith apnee copy ke hawale kar diya’.

(Today I did not stop on the grounds that I did not have the words. Nor was I swayed by the thought of whether or not my simple and sparse style would please anybody. A tsunami of thoughts and emotions stormed my mind and as soon as I got back home, I sat on my bed and just surrendered them to my notebook.)

To our understanding, the closest a pedagogical expert has come to theorizing the anecdote recounted above is Louise Rosenblatt, when she wrote:

Writing is always an event in time, occurring at a particular moment in the writer’s biography, in particular circumstances, under external as well as internal pressures . . . Thus, the writing process must be seen as always embodying both personal and social, or individual and environmental, factors. (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 17)

So while we wait for the personal and individual rhythms to come into sync, what can teachers do to help, as said by Rosenblatt, ‘writers facing a blank page’ ((Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 16).

Ankur seeks to connect new writers to resources that are close to them. For example: What do we like to eat? What makes us feel happy, sad, curious, and angry? There is also a reconnection with our sense of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. This is done by the practice of writing logs, hence capturing all the inputs we get from our senses in a specific place, in the written form. The impact of this practice can be enhanced or given a special direction by instructing the students to focus writing about the inputs from only one sense. Picture this as akin to students of music practising scales, or martial arts students practising basic punches and defensive moves.

Ankur moves into more advanced writing practices by getting students to engage in conversations with a wide variety of people, and by reading books. They believe that there is a fundamental similarity in the act of listening and reading and encourage practitioners to be active in both processes. Conversations with people, and ‘reading transactions’ with books continue to energize writing.

But what happens after the first flush of enthusiasm fades, and the writer is left with a small paragraph, or half a page and the spring of thoughts and ideas dries up. Here is where the community of listeners comes in as support. It is the enthusiastic listening, the curiosity and the questions of early listeners that energize the writer. For early stage writers, a close knit and nurturing circle of confidantes are more suitable, but for the more seasoned writer any circle of listeners will do.

Another practitioner of the club writes:

Hamare samne wale Rajesh bhaiya ke sagaai wale din, unke hone wale sasural ke log unke ghar aye hue the. Par ghar mein utni jagah nahin thi ki sab mehmaan uss mein samaa jaye. Iss liye kuch log hamare ghar ke samne, park mein charpai peh baith, batiya rahe the. Wahin kone mein charpai pe baith ke main bhi likh rahee thee. Mujhe dekh, Rakesh bhaiya ke sasur ne puchcha, “Yeh kya likh rahee ho.”

Maine apne ghar ki aur ishaara karte hue kaha, “Main apne ghar ke baare mein likh rahi hoon.”

Aur phir main apne likhne kee dhun mein kho gayee. Phir doobara unki awaaz aayee, “Kya sunnana chahogee?”

“Kyon nahin.”

Mai sunane lagee. Jaise lekh khatam hua sab ki baat cheet dobara shuru ho gayee.

Par ab unkee jubaan par mera lekh tha.

“Arre wah kya likhtee hai.”

“Ek din yeh lekhika banegi.”

“Arre bada dimaag hai.”

Dheere dheere yeh baatein mere papa ke kaanon mein bhi apnee goonj chodhne lagi. Woh bhi meri taraf nai nazaron se dekhne lage.

(On Rajesh *bhaiya*'s engagement his in-laws 'to-be' had come to visit him. Everybody could not be accommodated in their home. Some of the guests sat chatting on *charpais* in the park close to our house. I was also sitting on the *charpai* absorbed in my writing. After watching me for a while, Rakesh *bhaiya*'s father-in-law asked me, "What are you writing?")

I pointed towards my house and said, "I am writing about my home."

I turned my attention back to my notebook and got lost in my writing. His voice came through my thoughts once again, "Would you like to read it to us?"

"Why not?" I said and started to read out loud. After I finished, their chatter started all over again. But this time the subject of their conversation was my text.

"Wow, how well she writes."

"One day she will become a well known writer."

"She really has a remarkable mind"

The praise reached my father's ears. He too looked at me with new eyes.)

This cycle of writing, sharing written work and returning to the writing process with renewed vigour, has been termed by Ankur as the Generative Communication Spiral. It starts within the collectives of writers and goes beyond to the community; hopefully, it will eventually impact the wider world in some form or the other.

The most important thing is to move beyond the learning activity based approach to writing where each writing event is a discrete unit. There is need to allow writing practitioners to return to their works and treat each episode as a draft that will require some writing, reading and rewriting iterations before it can be treated as a final product. A school student's writing work could actually be the beginning of their portfolio.

A lot of Ankur's practice can be seen in the activities of writing groups or circles that some authors create amongst their peers. The ultimate point of this article is that the teachers need to recreate the conditions of a writers' circle in their classroom. They also need on a one-to-one basis to take on the role of an editor by being respectful to the person of the writer while remaining exacting with their text.

References

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