

## TEACHING SKILL ENHANCEMENT COURSE IN HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is a small part of various experiences that I have gathered on the journey as a teacher and educator. It is a dialogue addressed to all who believe learning in the first essential step to evolve into a better teacher. In 2015, the Skill Enhancement Course was first introduced in History syllabus in University of Delhi. As a history teacher I share my challenges, experiments, innovations, and experiences through this article.*

**Keywords-** Skill, Challenges, Innovation, Heritage, Fieldtrips, Course Structure

### PEDAGOGY-

Teaching-learning is a difficult path, it is neither linear nor eclectic. The path chalked out by the teacher is pedagogy. Collins Dictionary defines pedagogy as “1. the function or work of a teacher; teaching 2. the art or science of teaching; education; instructional methods”. (Harper Collins: 2009). Alexander Cuenca in his paper entitled “Self-Study Research: Surfacing the Art of Pedagogy in Teacher Education” says that “The term pedagogy has been appropriated in education discourse as simply strategies of Instruction.” and he intends to bring out the artistic and relational dimensions of pedagogy in teacher education (Cuenca: 2010). With time the scope of history has widened and in reciprocation impacted pedagogy as well. There is a vast variety of relevant literature that talks about it. In his honours thesis for graduation from Western Oregon University, Daniel J Tew mentions how “History teachers are plagued with the stereotype of being dry and boring.” (Tew, Daniel J.: 2014) On other hand, Philips Roberts in his article “From historical literacy to a pedagogy of history” talks about that “there is a limited body of research that explores the pedagogy of historical literacy and thinking and that provides clear practical classroom advice for pre-service teachers.” He focuses on “how history teacher educators can learn from museum educators and how this can be applied in pre-service education.” (Roberts, P.: 2010) In our time when artificial intelligence is making waves, Okan Yetisensoy and Anatoli Rapoport “explore the relationship between social studies and AI literacy and to discuss the potential role of social studies in teaching AI literacy.” (Yetisensoy, O. & Rapoport, A.: 2023) As teachers with changing scope of subjects we innovate ways to enhance our teaching all the time.

### MY JOURNEY

From 1989 to 2021 are over three decades and I have been lucky to have partaken this long discontinuous journey of knowledge, full of wide and varied experiences. I wish to share here how my experiences have shaped me as an educator, a teacher as well as a pupil.

Teaching and learning are two sides to a coin. The learning is not just for the students but also for the teachers or more so because a teacher not only has to prepare to teach but also keep on innovating new ways to make his or her lectures interesting and informative. College teaching has its own benefits and challenges, on one hand the students are mature but on the other hand they are extremely aware and equipped and can keep the teachers on their toes all the time with their questions and expectations.

The CBCS system introduced a Skill Enhancement Course in the syllabus of University of Delhi with very interesting papers like Understanding Heritage, Indian Art and Architecture and others for History Honours and History and Tourism, Introducing Indian Art and others for BA Programme. I will be discussing two papers - Understanding Heritage and Indian Art and Architecture.

Our students have been studying various aspects of heritage in different courses but it was the first time that a course was specifically designed with keeping various aspects of heritage in mind – Understanding Heritage.

#### **COURSE STRUCTURE AND FRAMEWORK:**

This course was divided into four units (Syllabus of CBCS 2016 (History) on University of Delhi), namely,

- Defining heritage;
- Evolution of heritage legislation and institutional framework;
- Challenges facing tangible and intangible heritage; and
- Heritage and Travel.

This course was planned as a 24 credits paper which meant there were supposed to be 4 lectures and fieldworks/field trips and projects. In the internal assessment the student was supposed to be assessed as per attendance (5 marks); test (10 marks) and project (10 marks). Visiting a heritage site was an essential part of the course. Among the suggested reading list given in the syllabus there were links like [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org) and [www.asi.nic.in](http://www.asi.nic.in).

#### **NATURE OF THE COURSE:**

As announced this course was supposed to be a Skill Enhancement Course for the students who had History Honours. It was supposed to give the students a broader and deeper understanding of the heritage aspect of their discipline of History. Though students had been studying about some aspects of Indian heritage as sources of history or probably as art and architecture of a certain period/dynasty which was generally a small part/detail of their paper. Now, they were studying the concept as a whole.

#### **IDEA BEHIND TEACHING HISTORY:**

It is important for a history teacher to know why he/she is teaching history. It is also important that the teacher should have a clear conception of what purpose history should serve in the culture and society in which they live. History should be looked at with a broader perspective as to promote better social understanding and civic efficacy on the part of the students who are the future citizens. Keith A Erikson had said,

*Over the past four decades, the reigning paradigm among history educators has tacitly ignored the concept of place in its emphasis on helping students “do history.” In practice, the slogan has included a range of activities, from skillful cognitive explorations of what it means to think and read and write “like a historian” to document-based questions on advanced placement history exams to simply giving students photocopies of “primary sources.” (Erikson, Keith A.: 2011)*

However, now more heed is being paid to the aspect of taking history lessons outside the classroom and focussing on the real-time learning also. The effort is being made to blend theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge so that a holistic development of the student is possible. I am sure, we would not want more James Mills, who could write volumes about India without ever visiting the country.

Since, the nature of the Skill Enhancement Course takes a different trajectory from the study of core discipline, such a course might help understand the core discipline better.

### **CHALLENGES OF TEACHING THIS COURSE**

Usually, when teams of scholars who frame the curriculum have to plan a course, they keep in mind that it should encompass the values related to well-being, emotional stability, critical thinking, social justice and also skill for employability. They try to suggest the readings for the course in such a manner that the aspiration of the team from such a course could be met. In order to do so best of the readings from renowned scholars and academicians is included. To update the teaching faculty, the university holds teachers' workshops from time to time. The challenges start after that.

When such courses are introduced in the syllabus, the suggested and the essential readings are not immediately made available. Another, and one of the most pertinent issues is that there is hardly any material made available for the Hindi medium students. In our university we have a huge strength of the students whose medium is Hindi. The college timetables are stretched in such a manner that it is very difficult to plan trips for the students without affecting their other classes. How to arrange for such large class groups to visit a heritage site is an important logistic issue.

Interestingly, even the approach of the students who had been used to only classroom lecturing was an obstacle. To get the students out of the classroom and prepare them for a different kind of study based on observations and discussions was quite a task.

### **REAL-TIME SOLUTIONS TO REAL-TIME TEACHING ISSUES**

Without going into paradigms of history teaching, I will talk about a paradigm shift, and also discuss how I learnt, innovated and incorporated some new ideas into my teaching.

The new paper of Understanding Heritage was SEC in the second year History Honours. Nature of the course is such that instead of just lecturing the students, a slight change in the procedure was required. It was an initial lecture to introduce the topic and then open the floor for interactive discussion. This actually got the students interested and also made me realise their ideas and perception of concepts like Heritage, antiquity, tangible and intangible heritage, archaeological sites and art treasure. The class discussions were generally very vibrant and they quickly attracted even the quietest of students to come out of their cocoons.

On topics like national and international heritage laws, conventions and acts after discussing all the past and present laws, the students to asked to look for suggested books in the college library, search for the recent acts or legislations in the websites that had been suggested by the course planners, i.e., asi.nic.in and unesco.org. Interestingly, the website of ASI proved a big help for the Hindi medium students as it could be accessed in Hindi as well.

It was during this period a visit to the library of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) proved extremely helpful for my Hindi medium students. This visit proved an extremely enriching experience for me but also opened the doors of knowledge for the students. INTACH, Delhi has a wonderful documentation centre, library, conservation centre, Heritage Education and Communication Service (HECS) etc. Interaction with the people of the document centre revealed how a heritage artifact or a visit to the archaeological site should be documented. The officials at HECS gave me three brochures which were to prove extremely beneficial for the students.

For their fieldwork, the students were sent to the National Museum in groups of 4 to 6 to get first-hand exposure to the wealth of the nation's material heritage housed there. They were asked to make a project

on the basis of their observations for which some mandatory questions had been raised which they needed to answer. As another mandatory requirement the students had to affix their group selfie and tickets on the project file. This was to confirm that they actually visited the place.

The classes during Unit 3, which dealt with challenges to tangible and intangible heritage would start with a usual lecture where a case study would be investigated, followed by very vibrant discussions. Student's interest and their observations indicated that we were moving in the right direction. Loss of cultural heritage in war, terror activities, in natural disasters or by sheer negligence was discussed at length.

Finally, in Unit 4 we discussed Heritage and Tourism. It raised issues like sustainable tourism and challenges to our natural and cultural heritage because of the huge load of tourists parcelled off to places not equipped for it. The discussion also made students aware of the environmental degradation due to all these activities and how they were becoming a huge challenge.

The feedback of this course was positive and as a teacher it was an enriching experience.

The second SEC History Honours paper that I will discuss here is Indian Art and Architecture. Visiting monuments and heritage sites is one thing but teaching a paper on art and architecture is a different issue altogether. It requires not only an understanding of the architectural styles, material used, the geography of the region and equally important, why it was built. Luckily, for this paper, sufficient text material is available (though in Hindi the smooth flow of textual content usually dries up quickly). There are lovely very short video clips by ASI and UNESCO at least on the world heritage sites that are very helpful. Most importantly, Delhi is blessed with monuments of all historic periods.

Its syllabus was divided into five units –

1. Historiography of Indian Art
2. Indian Art (c. 300 BCE-600 CE): art, craft and paintings; stupa, cave and temple art and architecture.
3. Indian Art (c. 600 CE -1200 CE): North and South temple architecture, Chola bronzes.
4. Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Architecture (c. 1200-1800 CE); Mughal and other styles of paintings.
5. Introduction to the rise of modern art; art schools with special reference to the Bengal School. (Syllabus of CBCS 2016 (History) on University of Delhi)

It has usually been perceived that at the undergraduate level, while art and literature formed part of the usual rubrics, however, very few teachers take pains in explaining them. This resulted in distancing the students from these topics. On the other hand, now there was this whole paper about the topics they would usually avoid. Luckily, a workshop was organised for the faculty for better understanding of the topic, its nuances and what it should be conveying to the student. It was helpful, but the final test was classroom teaching. Soon it became apparent that the only verbatim approach was utterly useless. But with help of pictures and video clips it was easier to make the students understand the architectural features of monuments and finer points of the paintings.

### **RENDEZVOUS WITH ART AND ARCHITECTURE-**

Unit 1 dealt with historiography and is not so much a problem as good textual reading was suggested for it. Unit 2 became a little easy for students to understand as they had been to the National Museum in the previous semester and that helped in understanding art, craft and paintings. This unit also had the

rubric of Gandhara and Mathura sculptures which students had seen. The videos and pictures were of stupas, Ajanta caves and early temples were like a lifeline for a good lecture.

Unit 3 brought the extravaganza of Nagara, Dravida and Versara temples. Here my being an avid tourist proved extremely helpful. One would realise that a seen temple or a monument becomes even easier to teach when students enjoy the nuances and description which can be given only if one has visited them. This got the students very interested in visiting the monuments. Glimpse of Chola Bronzes in the National Museum made their understanding clear and many of them wanted to see the lost wax method of making bronze sculptures.

As Unit 4 approached, the students were again assigned a project where they had to visit any one of the monuments in Delhi and write an architectural description of it. They can be taken for heritage-walks. Project files came with a breeze of fresh and enriching observations. The National Museum has a good collection of Mughal Art and other types of arts. This helps build their understanding better.

The last unit was about the modern art of India and what could be a better place for the students to see this art than a visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art. This visit was a part of the second project where they had to discuss art-style and three paintings of around ten artists that were part of their syllabus.

Visits to monuments, museums and art galleries give students a better understanding and more concept clarity. It is an experience which stays with them and is any day better than reading a text. It makes them aware of their rich heritage and compliments their classroom learning.

Students who take admission in University of Delhi come from different states, regions, religions, castes, and diverse income groups. It is here where they rub corners and smoothen out as individuals. Their scope of understanding is widened and enriched. Some issues or structures have over the years earned a dubious reputation thanks to some insensitive political handling. Therefore, it is very important to handle such topics with the support of well researched and seminal articles and reading material. It requires a teacher who can explain sensitively and sensibly that certain decisions of some despots to raze down or build new structures were their personal decisions as it is been world over and now in modern times of popular sovereignty, we must learn to understand that whatever was the past is still our own and we need to accept and protect it.

Thus, teaching of History in University of Delhi is not just making a student understand what has happened in the past but it is endeavoured that students learn to reflect and draw inferences from the past and address the issues of present. Through papers like Heritage and Indian Art and Architecture students are exposed to our pluralistic cultural heritage and makes them realise the importance of unity in diversity.

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*Note:* The National Museum of India is in close vicinity of my college, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. The college itself is located near the gurudwara, where Mata Sundri ji, wife of tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Govind Singh had lived for more than four decades.