

## **Reflective Learning Bridges the Theory- Practice Gap in Social Work Education: Roots from Gandhiji's Nai Talim**

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### ***Abstract***

Social work education in India is currently at a stage of significant introspection and potential change. There are calls for a move away from traditional 'didactic' and transmissive approaches to learning and towards more critical and reflective paradigms for education. The way education is imparted has a paramount role in developing individuals so they can acquire need based knowledge that can enhance self-directed and comprehensive development. Gandhiji's new education vision of socially useful productive work as pedagogy and reflective learning that triggers from diverse educational experiences have similarities in many ways, and is the timely need of this century to incorporate it into the part of existing educational system. When learning helps to shape life, it not only makes it easier for the learner to comprehend and apply the practical knowledge and skills to work in a way useful for society, but also exercises the Nai Talim philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. Social work learning becomes meaningful when it is executed through experiential centred knowledge derivation and knowledge driven experiments. Experiential educational experiences through a reflective mode of learning is the best method in the teaching-learning process. Social work education inevitably has a responsibility to prepare its trainees to assimilate the knowledge through a reflective process. In the first part of this article the attempt is to bring together Nai Talim and reflective learning as a better pedagogical praxis, and in the second part the role of reflective learning in social work education to complete the journey of the learning experience has been explored.

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**Introduction**

In Nai Talim, Nai is a Hindi word which means new and Talim is an Urdu word which means education. It is Gandhiji's new education vision that every individual becomes responsible for the management of themselves through the useful way education is imparted and thereby each village is able to stand on its own feet in attaining all the basic needs and sustainable development. Gandhiji proposed this new education system, Nai Talim, in 1936 (Sykes, 1987), during the prevalence of illiteracy, casteism and exploitations in India. Gandhiji believed that the solution for all the social issues is to provide education for all. His main focus was the way in which knowledge was disseminated to the people. Learn becomes earn not only by omitting the letter L from Learn but also in the actual way of obtaining the knowledge from work and work from knowledge. One learns to work and become self-reliant which helps to develop one's family and thereby the whole village. When work, life and learning become immersed in each other, the passion and natural enthusiasm rise to utilise their fullest potential.

**Nai Talim and Reflective Learning**

Nai Talim is associated with reflective learning in two main ways. Firstly, the Nai Talim philosophy has its basis in the reflective thoughts and actions of Gandhiji on how to understand the social issues that existed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in India. Secondly, both the experiential focused new education system of Nai Talim and reflective learning need concrete experiences or actions to begin the actual learning process.

Gandhiji's reflections on the growth of Indian citizens during the existence of social problems helped to reap the new fruits of work driven education, where work, life and education are not separate. People who were poor and victims of different kinds of exploitation continue to remain at the same status until these painful events and experiences are processed and reflected upon through practical actions. Gandhiji dreamt of a new India, with socially and economically developed justice-friendly and autonomous communities through the new education method. Gandhiji

found that the experiential driven pedagogical principles are the key to educate the poor and illiterate. The critical reflections on inequality, illiteracy and exploitation experienced by the rural poor before the independence of India resulted in Nai Talim. Gandhiji thought that through Nai Talim, the young generation could bring about revolutionary changes in the poor villages of India (Sykes, 1987).

Nai Talim and reflective learning begin from concrete experiences (Mezirow, 2012). From this experience, one draws conclusions on what went wrong, which style was used to do the action, what knowledge was derived from it, and what is the better process for more profound actions. These conclusions help to proceed with pragmatic planning which leads to elevated actions. All the social hardship experiences are reflected by Gandhiji, drawing conclusions and his plans to spread education paved the way for Nai Talim. The reflection has to do with the soul, not just the mind and body. Gandhiji was of the view that education should integrate one's mind, soul and body and help to liberate the people in order to realise one's personality development. In social work education, reflective learning which begins from experiences such as classroom teaching-learning experiences, field work experiences, books, assignments, seminars and examination preparation experiences, must aid the learner to visualise and figure out conclusions and thereby systematically plan for more reflective actions to help people to help themselves in a progressive way. In order to facilitate this, colleges need to welcome the introduction of the Nai Talim concept on the campus. Through reflective learning, the employability knowledge and skills learned as part of the curriculum, in turn help to meet the vocational needs of learners. Gandhiji said that the role of the teacher is very important in experiential learning. A teacher helps the learner to reflect on action or experience, during and after the course of action. Reflective thinking is not just dreaming or thinking about what spontaneously comes to mind, but reflecting about what and how of any concrete experience that one would like to do better (Rodgers, 2002). In 1988, the American sociologist and psychologist Graham Gibbs published the Reflective Cycle model in his book 'Learning by Doing'. Gibbs Reflective Cycle is simple and almost in line with Nai Talim. It helps any learner to think and act systematically during the educational experiences (Willis, 2010).

### **Milestones: Nai Talim, Social Work Education and Reflective Learning**

Professional social work education began in India in 1936. In the same year Nai Talim was introduced by Gandhiji, and a number of western books and articles were published on experiential learning and reflective learning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work or practice driven education system of Nai Talim and practice based professional social work education system resemble each other at the operational level from its inception onwards. The social work curriculum is designed and structured for classroom learning to practice and learn new theories or conclusions like Gandhiji enunciated in Nai Talim. When Gandhiji introduced new work based education in 1936, the concept of experimental learning was propounded by John Dewey, who wrote *Experience and Education* in 1938 (Boydston, 1980). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed many western theories that were established by various researchers on reflective learning, reflective practice, reflective pedagogy, reflective writing and experiential learning. Legends like Donald Schon, Michael Polanyi, David Kolb, Carl Rogers and Jurgen Habermas, explored the work or experience as the first means of learning that helps the learner to develop connections between reflection and action for effective learning and practice.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the work of Freire, Habermas and other critical thinkers highlighted the limitations of traditional, transmissive models of education and learning. In such models, learners were characterised as ‘empty vessels,’ simply needing to be filled with the knowledge and information transmitted to them by their teachers (Freire, 1996). These approaches to education were criticised on a number of grounds, including the fact that they gave little weight to the lived experiences of learners, and that they tended to reinforce the socio-political status quo, often to the direct detriment of learners themselves, especially when they were drawn from already disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Critics of these transmissive or ‘banking’ approaches to education argued that education was always a political activity, operating either to reinforce or challenge the existing power structures. It could therefore also be radically redesigned to become an emancipatory or liberating practice, leading to individual and social transformation.

In India, a similar tradition has been in use, based on the centuries old model of a guru and disciples, where students sat at the feet of an expert

and received wisdom and knowledge through direct transmission. This traditional model has significant cultural importance in India and remains a prominent and respected cultural feature. Many aspects of the current higher education practice reflect dimensions of this traditional system, with expectations placed on students that they will passively and unquestioningly accept the knowledge handed out to them by their expert teachers. “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” (Boydston, 1980: 239). The learner’s minds must be prepared in such a way that they understand the knowledge through the experiences, are able to make the connections with the theoretical base with teachers’ help on the practicality of the information, and finally become proficient in actualising the professional actions.

### **The Incomplete Journey of Social Work Education: Ways Forward**

Gandhiji’s pedagogy of experiential education has always been part of social work education since its commencement. Field work internships in social work education are one of the best practices of this kind to identify similarities between practice and theory and vice versa. Though this unique way of practice-based educational experiences is in place unlike the other disciplines, young professional social workers currently have to deal with actual situations in their respective work places. Any journey is successful only when it reaches the destination. Today’s social work educational journey needs to step back and reflect upon each of the components of the curriculum with more focus on encouraging students’ reflections. Self-reflection is significant to students’ training as it enhances their personal and professional development in practice (Chaddock et al., 2014), which in turn increases the quality of social work education. Reflecting about reflective learning is a gruelling task, but it is a call for changing the social work pedagogical methods, learning styles and the curriculum structure in this fast changing world.

Following are a few reflections on how to have a complete journey in social work education.

**Classroom Learning:** Social work is an action oriented profession with a good number of skills, principles, strategies and techniques to employ along with its methods. Students have learned these theoretical frameworks in a way that could be professionally and practically applied in a practice

setting. It is of grave concern that students' learning has become merely a memorisation of the skills, techniques and principles of social work. This style of learning by repetition of theoretical sentences that too on the previous days of the examinations, would not help the learner to professionally implement the interventions. Due to many factors, the education scenario has become highly competitive. In a competition based educational system, the basic purpose of education is diluted. When education does not pave the way for shaping the work, career, and how to communicate and express emotions with others appropriately, it diminishes the value of quality education. Gandhiji's vision on the integration of education and vocational work would not fit in the present competition based educational system. The competition between institutions and institutions, students and students and teachers and teachers, creates chaos regarding the vision of education in building and shaping the people of tomorrow. The way out is to teach students the process of learning. The reflective kind of learning of classroom lessons helps the learner to not only comprehend the knowledge imparted but also to apply it timeously when the need arises. The contemplation of lessons needs visualisation regarding the practicality of knowledge and eventually results in gaining confidence in order to apply theory to practice. Therefore learners' social work aptitude and passion for devoting time to reflect on learnings from the classroom, books and other sources are significant. A mark based and competition driven learning system are hindrances to reflective experiential learning.

**Classroom Teaching:** Social work pedagogy in training social work students in the techniques and strategies to deal with people plays a large role in social work education. Gandhiji said that a teacher is a mentor who ensures whether students cope with the learning demands in a very practically oriented way. The way knowledge is disseminated in the classroom must encourage students to be creative and innovative while carrying out the interventions. A paradigm shift is necessary in the classroom teaching methods by preferring a reflective mode of teaching where each student has to think about the topic of discussion in depth. The teacher has to precisely plan the sessions in advance on different methods of instruction according to the topic and also prepare specific questions and case studies to help students to reflect upon the discussion concepts. Any

innovative method of teaching without space for students' reflections will not be effective in the long run. Unfortunately, due to various factors, the classroom hours for teaching and covering the syllabus are a bare minimum per course. Due to a lack of time and help, teachers use methods of teaching which can cover more sections in less time. The focus of classroom education is an examination oriented teaching and completion of portions on time with little emphasis on the learning and understanding of theoretical frameworks. The audio visual learning tools introduced into the classroom give students and instructors an enriched teaching and learning experience. At the time of delivery of knowledge, it helps the learner to visually view the information and have an increased comprehension of the subjects. PowerPoint presentations are occasionally used to merely recite the contents without much deliberation and reflection due to shortage of time. If this practice is continued, it is not so far away that technology will one day replace the teacher in the classroom. Transformative pedagogy and reflective learning hold the key to reap outstanding flowers from the buds planted in the classroom. The right level of watering to nurture motivation and passion for the subjects and an adequate level of fertilisers to grow on a par with the learning outcomes are the need of the hour in order to flourish and grow high like trees. A new road is essential in the way knowledge becomes beneficial to students by enhancing their professional career life.

**Field Work and Supervision:** The falling of an apple on the head of a person resulted in developing the theory of gravity. These kinds of reflections to propose a theory from a small action must be the same in field work and its supervision. The field work supervisor has a major role in helping the trainee to integrate the entire set of practice based knowledge in line with activities to deal with individuals. According to Boyd and Fales (1983), reflection is a process of thinking about and exploring an issue which is triggered by an experience, and in social work education the field internships are experiences. Therefore field work experience is just a starting point which should trigger further guided reflections of the same for better understanding and application. Focusing on students' learning from 'the inside' encourages students to speak from their own individual and collective positions (Giroux, 1990). Unfortunately, the field work supervisor is a person who handles multiple job responsibilities such as being a

member of the teaching faculty, examiner, invigilator, member of some committees, member of associations, member of other students' club and college union. Field work supervision is only a small part of the total responsibilities. Though universities have explicitly mentioned the total hours of field work, the way in which quality field work supervision should be carried out by igniting the minds of student social work trainees towards professional action to do productive work has not been mentioned. The analysis and process of learning by students in field work education has been neglected, although many research findings have been in place on the need for congruence between theory and practice, issues of field work supervision, the need for indigenous practice and literature.

**Seminar Presentations and Assignments:** Digital knowledge has become an inevitable part of education today. The internet has a significant role in providing a detailed understanding of any concept. The quality of assignments of social work trainees prepared and submitted as part of each course depend on the content and authenticity of the internet sites. The very purpose of the assignment is to develop and elaborate one's own ideas about the given topic with the help of existing knowledge created by experts. The knowledge base developed must enable social work trainees to find the relationships and differences between the variables of the given assignment topic. An assignment without readers reflection upon it becomes a meaningless activity that does not help any learner to comprehend and inculcate the expected learning outcome. Today, due to easy internet access, a few submit highly plagiarised assignment works. Any learning activity which does not stimulate students' thinking, and thereby a transformation in actions, is a waste of time. Similarly, the students' seminar presentation as part of the curriculum is one of the components which can create deep reflections. The students' classroom presentation not only provides an opportunity to gain confidence in public speaking, but also disseminates knowledge from a higher level of understanding of the topic. When the knowledge acquired promotes a skill gaining activity to do the professional interventions, the words of Gandhiji on learning become relevant.

**Social Work Examinations:** The educational evaluation is monitored and based on the internal and external examinations. Students who attain good grades in the exams are expected to exhibit a high level of professional intervention based on the knowledge instilled. In reality, scoring high marks



in the exam and their performance in practice do not correlate with each other. A student who is able to memorise contents pertaining to the subject on the previous days of the examinations may secure high grades. The memorisation may not always mean a clear understanding of the concepts. The students who have no competent memory to store knowledge in the brain, but who are able to do well in the practice settings with the knowledge base gained, have no place in the examination system today. The memorisation of theories is an inevitable part, but the practicality of it has also equal or more importance in social work practice. Students with high grades are bestowed with awards and appreciations from the colleges and universities. If the comprehension of students on the knowledge presented in the examination answer sheet is not tested, the evaluation process becomes meaningless in a practice oriented profession like social work. Gandhiji's educational philosophy is oriented towards knowing what to do and how to do it with the knowledge imbibed from education. The conventional examination pattern is questioned by social work educators in the name of just memorising information to score marks without bothering to reflect on the theories. The open book examination system offered by a few universities provides an opportunity for students' reflection.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the assessment of the potential for the reflective learning approach to contribute to the empowerment and liberation (Anonymous, 2014) of oneself and others is the need of the hour in the contemporary social work era for a successful progressive journey of social work education. The next step of growth in social work education needs practical suggestions and ways to implement the reflective learning approach. The Nai Talim model of experiential learning together with a reflective way of wisdom bring together a new world of teaching and learning experiences in social work education. Thus the future discussions must open the door on: 1) how transformative pedagogy and student self-reflection can help learners to imbibe and instil social work theoretical frameworks in professional actions, 2) how reflexive field work education and practicums help to provide meanings and interpretations to the classroom learning, and 3) how the conventional competition based examination be better approached. Social work students need to be assisted in order to foster a self-reflective process

along with its logistics. A teacher in this technologically equipped world is an irreplaceable person who can help students to reflect on the helping tools of social work. In particular, the curriculum should be designed in order to highlight the students' growing experience in the 'professional world' (Fook et al., 2000; Phillipson et al., 1988). Additionally, the social work curriculum needs to be reviewed in order to promote self-reflective practice.

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