

PLS – CEP WEBINAR

REPORT

THE IRRELEVANCE OF FORMAL EDUCATION: DO DEGREES MATTER?

Monday, 28 March 2022

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INTRODUCTION

On Monday, 28 March 2022, Pallavan Learning Systems, in collaboration with the Centre for Escalation of Peace, held its 8th webinar titled '*The Irrelevance of Formal Education: Do Degrees Matter?*' with Dr. Dinesh Singh. The webinar attracted more than 370 participants including students, teachers, school heads, education officers, parents, educationists, lawyers, civil servants, researchers, and people from various walks of life.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Dinesh Singh is a Padmashri Awardee and the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Delhi. He was also a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee (2011-18) Union Cabinet, Government of India. He has pioneered several new ideas in the realm of education and on the role of technology in education. He has delivered numerous prestigious public and keynote lectures around the world, on subjects like education, mathematics, economic policy, and the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi. He has also authored and edited several books.

THE WEBINAR SESSION

This talk examined if our educational institutions that offer formal and very structured education are relevant anymore or whether we need a new paradigm. Young aspiring minds need to boldly ask if today's formal degrees serve much purpose for true fulfillment. Are their time and money well spent in the pursuit of formal education? If not, what are the alternatives?

Dr. Singh commenced by pointing out that, as history demonstrates, many of those who have changed the course of history, of society, and even of mankind, have been people who often had very little formal education. To achieve a balance between knowledge which comes from a formal system, and knowledge that may be acquired through other means, is what we must strive for.

Dr. Singh narrated some personal experiences that he has acquired over time. Several years ago, he came across a 1st year undergraduate at the University of Delhi. He had got admission into a

degree that was not highly sought after. Dr. Singh met him because he was working on a project that involved a certain level of undergraduate level research, but also some innovative thinking and some entrepreneurial activity. He was looking for smart, motivated undergraduate students. He placed an ad and this student responded. The student had just entered college and had not done much in terms of formal acquisition of grades. He had only average grades from school, but there was something special about him. If he was given a problem to look at which involved some mathematical modelling with very clever coding with problems connected to the real world, he was extraordinarily gifted. He was very good at handling data in innovative ways to get mathematical insights. Very soon he got a job with a trans-national corporation in the United States. He achieved extraordinary success and he had no formal qualification.

Their degrees were not relevant simply because these students had put their faith in a group of colleagues, great teachers, mentors, and thinkers. And today these students are working in many parts of the world with great organisations.

Dr. Singh explained that this was not an isolated instance. He cited another example of a boy who even before he could complete one year of formal college education, to which he seemed to attach no value, he had already been recognised by many agencies and individuals in different parts of the world.

At one point, Dr. Singh set up an experiment for a five-year-period where he would look for extraordinarily motivated, original thinkers who were not happy in their undergraduate environment. He was looking for motivated youngsters who were interested in Mathematics, in data and coding. He managed to spot sixty such undergraduates, who went abroad to extraordinary institutions in the United States every year. They had very ordinary first degrees of no relevance and these institutions accepted them straight into a Ph.D. program even though their grades in college were very average. Their degrees were not relevant simply because these students had put their faith in a group of colleagues, great teachers, mentors, and thinkers. And today these students are working in many parts of the world with great organisations.

The world abounds with such stories. A thirty year old Harvard MBA student went for an interview smartly dressed in a suit. Across the interview table was a twenty year old kid with a scruffy appearance, and torn jeans who was the interviewer. During the interview he was asked to solve a real-world problem. He needed to optimise the output of an operation using some data. The

interviewee responded with some technical jargon and was rejected. The interviewer recorded later that he wasn't interested in jargon. He wanted to know, in practical clear terms, exactly what had to be done - but the applicant had no clue. Here is this man in his early twenties setting up a start-up, with enormous funding in Silicon Valley, and here is this MBA with some experience with other firms clueless about how to really get that operation going even though he has a Masters degree from Harvard.

The principal spoke of his two sons who had done brilliantly academically and then got average jobs with reasonable incomes, while his youngest son who was an average student went on to do brilliantly in his career, made the most money and was happy in his job! That got him thinking that formal education may not really have much bearing with how a person does in real life.

Dr. Singh shared that early on in his career he too believed that formal education of a high order was a must to succeed in life. But he was surrounded by wise people who changed his way of thinking. He related an incident about a principal of one of India's most prestigious high schools. When Dr Singh was about twenty-six years old he went to visit him and they talked about the need to get good grades to be successful in life. The principal spoke of his two sons who had done brilliantly academically and then got average jobs with reasonable incomes, while his youngest son who was an average student went on to do brilliantly in his career, made the most money and was happy in his job! That got him thinking that formal education may not really have much bearing with how a person does in real life.

Perhaps the highlight of this talk was the assertion by Dr. Singh that the most important part of being 'educated' is for an individual to find, and ultimately be able to march, to their own 'drum beat'. The main purpose of the schooling process should be to expose young people to as many different experiences and opportunities as possible so that they possess knowledge they need to recognize their passion and calling in life; such a passion would last a lifetime and lead to true fulfilment. This message resonated with the audience very well, as a large number of them are involved with The Druk Gyalpo's Institute (DGI) in Bhutan, which is based on a very similar philosophy and approach.

Dr. Singh quoted Mark Twain, who said that he never let his schooling interfere with his education. This idea that a very standardised curriculum, taught mostly by rote memorisation, provides any

kind of real learning is disappearing very fast, especially as it becomes increasingly obvious that urgent, real world problems will only be solved by contextual thinking, creativity and innovative thinking. The audience members mentioned Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg as notable examples.

But can creativity and innovative thinking be taught? Can we really provide opportunities for young people to actualise their innate potential? Given the incredibly fast pace of technological evolution, that makes the rote memorisation of information irrelevant, can we help students learn 'how to learn'? This is the hope and endeavour at DGI, and we are grateful for talks such as these that add to our wisdom and help us move forward.

The clincher was when Mr Singh was Vice Chancellor at Delhi University, he worked with a finance firm which was looking to hire under-graduate degree holders for jobs that required basic communication and data skills.

They were in the process of expanding in India and were offering hundreds of jobs at very good salaries. They came to the university and interviewed 1200 students and ended up hiring only three. They didn't find anyone suitable and said they wouldn't be returning. This was a real wakeup call.

The American economist at Princeton University, Alan Krueger, adviser to Obama, conducted a study and he came to the conclusion that there is a large body of students capable of getting into institutions like Harvard but choose to reject that and study at far more modest institutions. He did a comparative study of this group of students with students of Ivy League colleges. He came to the conclusion that this group of students ended up earning more than Harvard graduates.

He pointed out that the issue with formal degrees across the globe is that students often go into huge debt. Also, the 2008 financial crisis was largely instigated by Ivy League degree holders which begs the question - what kind of education are we providing? What kind of education are we providing for students who break the moral law?

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He gave examples of some of the great names in the history of mankind - did Jesus, the son of God, have a qualification of formal schooling? Did the Buddha, or Kabir, or Mahatma Gandhi for that matter?

True education is when you are given the opportunity to go through a series of experiences that provide original, creative thinking and connections to the real world. The most valuable thing a student needs to do to be happy and successful in life is to discover himself. Education is all about finding that drum beat. Our job in life is to discover that drum beat. That's when you will begin getting educated. It is a lifelong process which never ends. In order to do that, you need to be exposed to the right conducive environment and the right way of thinking.

True education is when you are given the opportunity to go through a series of experiences that provide original, creative thinking and connections to the real world. The most valuable thing a student needs to do to be happy and successful in life is to discover himself. Education is all about finding that drum beat.

The objective when Mr. Singh was Vice Chancellor of Delhi University was to try to help students march in harmony to their drum beats and not worry about being in step with others, which is the true purpose of education. He noted that students were naturally motivated - after all, which young mind doesn't like to tackle problems of the real world? He embarked on several projects which helped the students discover themselves. There are several institutions all over the world that are doing great work - Druk Gyalpo's Institute in Bhutan, the London Inter-disciplinary School, and the Dyson Institute at Warwick. There are a lot of positive changes taking place in the realm of education. However the old order needs to change and this new order needs to be ushered in with a sense of respect, with more gusto and enthusiasm. That is why the formal degree system may not matter as much in the near future as it does now.

Q&A SESSION

1. *Education institutes are part of social fabric and part of our political fabric. So how do we move away from degrees to drum beats without destroying this fabric of society?*

The NEP 2020 for higher education is almost entirely based on the experiments we conducted at the University of Delhi. The challenge is to understand pedagogy the way we want to go about it. If we can grasp that idea well, there may be some good changes occurring in India in the realm of education. As I mentioned there are institutions internationally which are doing great work - Elon Musk's school, Dyson Institute in the UK, Druk Gyalpo' Institute and Finland. There is change in the air and we will through these examples learn to understand, imbibe and bring about change in other parts of the world. It takes time. Education is a slow process. And it should be that way. There is always a danger of causing harm to young minds so change needs to happen in a graded gradual manner.

2. *Do you think that NEP will really change education as we know it in India?*

By itself, a policy can go either way. If you become mechanical about it, it's not going to work. The most critical part of the NEP is to be able to understand the curriculum which requires very good pedagogy. If you don't have that pedagogy, nothing will work. So there is a big challenge before us.

3. *One of the issues Bhutan is facing, especially when it comes to degrees, is that really highly qualified and experienced Bhutanese are leaving to go abroad. How do we incorporate your idea of actual education and what it entails into this system, where it helps to address the issue of brain drain. How can we reverse it using your concept?*

There are a lot of people from India as well who are migrating to various countries, so this phenomenon is taking place all over the world. But we need to consider those who stay behind, and ask ourselves why they do that. It is usually because they are able to do things that resonate with their surroundings. And one of the activities that I find when you want to gauge whether what they are learning is resonating with their drum beat and strengthening their core beliefs is to make it practice-oriented and have a semblance of

innovation and entrepreneurship. If you do that, economic well being begins to emerge. So, in Bhutan we need to bring in this kind of constructive entrepreneurship which should not be separate from their education which is part of the credit. That's when they start becoming creative and they start taking risks. And they must understand that failure is as much a learning process as anything else.

4. *In Bhutan people's mindsets have to change but then the institutes need to catch up as well and provide opportunities and platforms. Society as a whole needs to catch up as well. So if you had to align those three things, how would you ensure that they develop concurrently?*

My advice is to build a good curriculum around the needs and challenges of society - be it climate change, slum development, environmental pollution, cleaning up of rivers, or energy generation. This will require a trans-disciplinary approach. As long as they work in a collaborative way you will find that they automatically learn from one another. Peer learning is a very important part of the education policy. Once we begin to do this other aspects will start falling into place. In a few years' span they will begin to diverge and begin to develop liking and involvement in different directions. Your system must be flexible enough to allow them to do that.

5. *Looking at it in reverse, how do you think the contemporary global environment - be it the current war, climate change, the financial crisis, the pandemic, the fuel hike - is changing education as we know it?*

We must look at the world as a university. As Tagore observed more than a 100 years ago, and others have noted after him, we should not allow our schooling to interfere with our education. The world educates you. There are uncountless types of knowledge - be it mathematics, collaboration, strategies and poetry - but we fail to recognize that fact. Take for example, the dabbawalas of Mumbai. The kind of coding system that they have for delivery is better than what Fedex does. I am willing to wager on that. They have an almost zero rate of error. There is immense knowledge there. Hundreds of thousands of tiffins are delivered daily. But we don't think about their system in a conscious and deliberate way. It hasn't entered our learning systems because we think in silos. We need to break those barriers; and the apt way to do that is to view the world as our university.

6. *The teachers want to know of a process to identify whether the students have found their drum beats. But, even before that, they want to know how they will be able to tell whether they have found their own drum beats.*

I find it very rewarding when I get students to ask me questions. The more I work with younger people, the more rewarding I find it. The first thing I tell them when they ask me something is “I don’t know. Let’s try and find out. Let’s try and find out collectively together and in humility.” The students feel very reassured. This process of discovery engenders creativity, curiosity, and a sense of well being. So, build your curriculum around hands-on project work to a large extent. Spot the special characteristics of children and build a flexible curriculum around that. Don’t look for closed answers, and don’t look for closed solutions. Make lessons relevant and interesting for students. For example, a child will respond much better to learning how to land an aeroplane on an airstrip than learning about abstract calculus. Teachers should not be set in their methods and find ways to continuously evolve. As Tagore said, “if you are not a lighted torch, how will you light other torches?” Teachers need to be like that.

7. *Research has moved from finding answers to getting publicly published somewhere. So the idea of formal education has also become all about certificates and making profit. So how do we bring research back to our lives and how will credibility be incorporated in that?*

At the University of Delhi, we got children to work on projects in a collaborative way, and the topics were connected to the real world. There were under-graduates who developed a marvellous way of cyber security and created a great method of encryption. They wrote a research paper that was aligned to their drum beats. They were immediately absorbed by the defence research organisation of the government of India. So always keep avenues open for drum beats to be explored. Our teachers need to be patient and not expect to solve everyone’s problems but start by solving some people’s problems. This is the approach research needs to take as well.

SUMMARY OF THE WEBINAR

The Irrelevance of Formal Education: Do Degrees Matter?

Dr Dinesh Singh is a Padmashri Awardee and the former Vice Chancellor of University of Delhi. He was also a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee (2011-18) Union Cabinet, Government of India. He has pioneered several new ideas in the realm of education and on the role of technology in education. He has delivered, the world over, numerous prestigious public and keynote lectures on education, on policy towards economic growth, on Mathematics, and on Gandhi. He has also authored and edited several books.

The webinar comprised over 370 participants including students, teachers, parents, school heads and learners from all walks of life, from a number of different countries.

Dr. Dinesh Singh began his talk by asking the audience to examine the importance of degrees in creating persons of great character and influence. He noted that the world today is rapidly changing with emerging political, social, environmental and ethical situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the looming climate crisis and the Ukraine war. In such a scenario, does a formal education help in coping with such situations? Do institutions and corporations hire individuals with formal degrees since there are no true alternatives? These were some of the questions that he addressed.

This talk examined if our educational institutions that offer formal and very structured education are relevant anymore or whether we need a new paradigm. Young aspiring minds need to boldly ask if today's formal degrees serve much purpose for true fulfillment. Are their time and money well spent in the pursuit of formal education? If not, what are the alternatives?

Packed with insights from personal experience in his many years in the field of education, Dr Singh shared real-world examples to illustrate his thinking. He made an impassioned point that education should be concerned with helping everyone find their individual, unique drumbeat. Towards that end, education institutions should be more about providing opportunities and platforms for everyone to be exposed to many drum beats, rather than mere literacy, certificates and degrees.

The audience was thoroughly engaged with this thought-provoking topic and asked many questions in the chat section, leading to a lively Q&A session.

You can find out more about this webinar as well as other talks and webinars on our website and our social media handles. We look forward to seeing you next time.



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Pallavan Learning Systems
contact@plspt.com
www.pallavanlearningsystems.com

Centre for Escalation of Peace
contact@cepeace.org
www.cepeace.org

