An idea for Indian education

Recently, I described some of the long-lasting mistakes that the US government has made in the administration of funds for scientific research, so that India might avoid making the same mistakes and avoid suffering the same negative consequences. Those mistakes are corrupting American science and making it second-rate. They have also adversely impacted American education, which has declined in parallel with American science, as described below. In addition, I present an idea that may be considered in planning the renovation of India’s education infrastructure.

There is a widespread perception in America — real or imagined — that if one contradicts work supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF), or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), for example, one risks loss of direct funding from such agencies. From extensive Science Citation Index Extended searches, I have noted that important contradictions, published in some of the world’s most prestigious peer-reviewed journals, have been systematically ignored by those with support from NSF and NASA, thus slowing down the progress of US science and wasting millions of taxpayer-funded research dollars. But how does this relate to education?

Many of the organizations that serve to directly influence teachers obtain support for education projects from agencies such as NSF or NASA. Can one really expect those organizations to encourage science teachers to teach students to challenge scientific ideas, when many of these scientific ideas are supported by these same funding agencies? There is clearly a conflict of interest. Young people are often being taught ‘science facts’, which may not be facts at all, instead of being taught to question popular perceptions about their world. The lesson: Science funding agencies should fund science, and not fund education projects. Similarly, science funding agencies should not fund science television or news programmes, as these may invariably lead to a skewed presentation.

Teaching is not only hard work, but it is also an activity that demands imagination, creativity and flexibility. As America’s education has declined, her teachers have progressively lost autonomy. Yet the core wealth of any education system lies within those who teach. In a sense, there is a parallel to what has been happening with scientific communication, and in that parallel lies the root of a suggestion that may be of some benefit for India’s education renaissance.

Anonymous system of reviewing, used by the scientific press, has slowed and impeded transfer of scientific communication. Anonymous, unaccountable peer-reviews, a methodology once thought to select the best, has all too often become a system used by some to delay and sometimes to suppress competitors’ reports. But now, recent experience has shown a better way, a system that obviates the bottleneck. This system is the Internet-based author self-archive, arXiv, supported by NSF and by the US Department of Energy, making it possible for physicists to communicate their reports worldwide in usually less than 48 h (http://www.arXiv.org). In a slightly modified form, this scheme may be adopted for current plans in Indian education.

My suggestion is that one should consider setting up an arXiv-like self-authoring archive for teachers. There, teachers would be able to post their best lesson plans, ideas for classroom demonstrations, descriptions of laboratory experiments, and other teacher-to-teacher communications. And teachers everywhere would be able access that information. It would become a valuable teacher resource. To encourage the use of this system, and to reward teachers, postings in various areas could be judged with the best entries receiving monetary awards, as well as national recognition.


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