

Classroom as a Site of Learning: A Sociological Study of a University in India

Sahana Sen¹ and Nagaraju Gundemeda²

¹*Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad,
Central University, 500046, Hyderabad, India*
Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
Telephone: +91- 040-23133250 E-mail: sahana.sen1@gmail.com

²*Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad,
Central University, 500046, Hyderabad, India*
Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
Telephone: +91-040-23133263 E-mail: ngss@uohyd.ernet.in

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ABSTRACT Higher education gained critical importance in the developing countries in the post-colonial era. The young adults of India attach utmost value to higher education in order to attain social mobility. However, a critical appraisal of the reports on the current status of education in India reveals wide disparity in learning abilities and achievement. The current paper based on an empirical study, conducted at a central university in India, seeks to examine the patterns of learning in the university and secondly to map out the meanings, challenges faced by the students from diverse social, economic and linguistic backgrounds in the learning context. The study found that, in this university the professors use multiple means of teaching and learning mechanisms such as classroom lectures, assignments, presentations, e-resources etc. to encourage the students to acquire knowledge from multiple sources. It is observed that students are faced with multiple trials and tribulations owing to the dichotomy existing between course demands and their achievements, the curricula and the social, cultural, economic or symbolic capital associated with their backgrounds. The study argues that the methods of learning worked as a means of exclusion. The students from first generation suffer from multiple forms of learning violence which works in favour of students who hail from elite and middle classes and exclude the students from the lower classes. The study proposes that higher education institutions must play a proactive role towards inclusive learning.

INTRODUCTION

A university is a place where new ideas germinate, strike roots and grow tall and sturdy. It is a place where creative minds converge, interact with each other and construct visions of new realities. Established notions of truth are challenged in the pursuit of knowledge.¹

Learning is an activity which involves gaining knowledge. Academic learning involves, ideally, a goal oriented process of attaining practical skills or knowledge irrespective of institutional set up, with the help of several agents and can continue throughout life. 'Culture' of learning in the this paper refers to the sets of formal or informal behaviour which characterize the particular university being studied and the variances which emerge with respect to the several variables taken into consideration. In today's world of opportunities and competition, the young adults of India are extremely cautious about what they learn and how they learn es-

pecially when they are a part of tertiary education. Their everyday experiences largely influence what meanings they attach to the knowledge they gather in class, through lectures, informal and formal exchanges with peers, or professors, with or without the help of textbooks and other learning aids. But amidst contemporary studies in higher education or universities in specific, certain questions need to be addressed like; what information should be transmitted as relevant knowledge in a university classroom? What is the right institutional framework that develops skills remaining sensitive to the needs of the heterogeneous student population in a Central University?

Whereas the above questions open up the main arguments to be addressed in this paper, it is essential to locate the present problem amidst a relevant body of literature. The trajectory of the changing debates related to university education from access to quality to micro-aspects such as students, teachers, classroom processes as units of analysis are discussed briefly.

Indian higher education seems like an enigma enveloped in contradiction (Altbach 1993). India has one of the oldest higher education systems in the Third World. Eric Ashby has pointed out, India's higher education institutions are patterned on Western models and are not truly indigenous institutions; they have nonetheless become integral to contemporary India (Ashby 1966: 54-166) (Altbach 1993). Founded in 1857, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras ushered modernity in India (Guha 2007: 564) and opened new horizons both intellectually and institutionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative and *hierarchical mould* for centuries (Beteille 2005: 3378). But the present universities had very little historical connection with India's 'ancient and medieval centres of learning' (Education Commission 1971: 8). Indians who entered the colleges and universities in the 19th century encountered a whole new world of ideas to which access was mainly through a new language.

Colonial rule served to ease some of the social prejudices, but did not address existing inequalities in the distribution of material resources. These disparities have not disappeared. The Indian leadership viewed the coming of independence as an opportunity for a new beginning in the field of education. Many of the leaders were critical of the colonial system for what it did to the educational scenario of the country. Gandhi wanted the system to be replaced by one that would be in tune with the Indian tradition, whereas modernists like Nehru and Ambedkar, wanted the educational system to produce scholars who could take their place among the best in the world. Since independence, India has been trying to gear her system of education to serve the challenges of development (Chitnis 1993). Questions have been raised based on the persistent challenges like, *what is a university really? What category of students does it seek to serve?* (Singh 1975: 867). Then, as a part of bold initiatives, university system was vastly expanded and diversified. Research centres and special institutions 'deemed to be Universities' have been set up to provide advanced education in science, engineering, technology, management and a number of other fields (Chitnis 1993). The responsibility of the British rulers in neglecting education is manifested in their refusal to spend revenues for the cause of the Indian education system and this neglect was

compounded by the restrictions imposed by a caste and community-ridden and class-divided society (Bagchi 2010).

With time, changes in the major debates in university education emerged. Modern societies have been described as knowledge societies. However, the major institutional frameworks continue to function following dominant ideologies of a segmented society. Earlier universities acted more as sources of traditional knowledge than as workshops for the creation of new knowledge. Advances in knowledge, no doubt took place in the past, but the universities absorbed those advances at a leisurely pace (Bagchi 2010). So, when it came to assessing the performance of universities and introducing reforms in them, debates related to access seemed to dominate when it came to policy building. Now, policy building needs to be governed by the need to build up an inclusive quality of education in the Universities through comprehensive teacher student learning transaction encompassing students from all backgrounds.

The recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) on higher education focussed on expansion, excellence and inclusion². NKC has recommended a very massive expansion by suggesting the creation of 1500 universities nationwide with an objective to achieve gross enrolment ratio of 15% by the year 2015. But this target has to be evaluated in the light of the fact that the country at present has approximately 500 universities³. Even the Yashpal Report which followed fell short and failed to identify and classify 'nurturing of knowledge' with an inclusive perspective as a key for grading University education.

The modern corporate (educational) institutions can be a blend of the past and present by focussing on the dualisms of the society, such as excellence versus relevance, assimilation versus diversity, town versus country, etc. (Viswanathan 2000: 3597). Guha (2007) highlights the importance of these dualities in his study pointing out the importance of pluralism of caste, religion and region in the student population of a University. In addition, the acceptance of the World Bank prescription of categorising education as 'non-merit good' by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has opened up the private sector and exposed higher education to the risk of market economy and thus compromising with the principles of equity and jus-

tice (Das 2007: 55). Development in a student, the full flowering of talent, which comes to him or her naturally, is not present. Following the 'norm' of the society, in many families in India a student is forced to join a course in the science stream even though his/her inclination is toward some other stream of study.

There is a plethora of sociological studies on the factors affecting learning of students in the college and university classrooms. They are focused on the social status, role relationships, and structural inequalities affecting individuals in a social context of a classroom (Thoits 1995). Several studies in the Indian context have also been conducted. Beteille's critique of Indian Universities as popular public institutions through the analyses of issues of equity and meritocracy is a macro-level study. On the other hand, there are micro level studies as well. Glyn. L. Woods' study at the Mysore University points out the institutional changes due to political transitions viz. caste rivalries in the university environment. But a micro-level study taking into account the interplay of multiple social variables and their effect on student performances could reveal a new context of study, as has been attempted in the present one. Moreover, classroom being a setting for the interaction between the students and between students and teachers from diverse backgrounds at the University becomes a focal point of the study (Hirschy and Wilson 2002). Considering knowing and learning as a continuous communal act (Palmer 1998) where the students are involved together over months, they can be considered as *groups*. Unfortunately, due to the segmented nature of Indian society, subgroups are formed within the same class group in the University. This propagates communal (regional/caste) identities not really favouring a comfortable peer group environment. Therefore, even though the teacher provides the same materials, the reception and responses are different in different student groups.

From the 8th 5 Year Plan, equal access to higher education has been a focus of the Indian Government until the recent 12th 5 year plan, where inclusive growth was further added. There are several ways to assess the utility and success of such plans. In order to evaluate the success and failure of such plans factors affecting learning at the grass-root levels have to be identified. This will produce a practicable combination of

student-teacher exchange in the classroom. In the words of Freire (1996), the interrelationship between the teacher and the learner should be of mutual respect, particularly in higher education that helps to create a channel of dialogue, of exchange of information through critical thinking that influences analytical abilities of the students.

Purpose of the Study

Young (1971) has pointed out that what should be considered as educational knowledge is an idea which has not found an intellectual space in Sociology of Education. Further, what is considered as educationally relevant knowledge is determined by its validity for being socially or culturally reproduced. The reality of India's highly segmented society is that this validity is determined by the need of the hegemonic caste-class structure and the patriarchal needs of the society. This is at the cost of the disadvantaged sections of the society, particularly at the level of higher education where they reach with a lot of difficulty but are disillusioned due to the problems they face, owing to one's position in the society as determined by his/her ownership of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Moreover the economic capital produced by the conversion of the cultural capital of the social sciences is on an average less than that produced by the jobs from the technical courses. So the intricacies of inequity of distribution of educational resources at the level of higher education are a complex phenomenon. To tackle the varied problems, a point by point approach should be taken. In this paper the approach has been to deal with the existing culture of learning that emerges in the university campus from the interplay of the variables like age, caste, and gender. Each of these variables has their own way of independently influencing the students' responses towards the learning processes in the university particularly in the classroom. Bernstein (1971) had pointed out the differences in the pattern of socialisation among students belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds in terms of *elaborate* and *restricted codes*. This goes on to explain the expectation of the students from the dis-privileged backgrounds and the achievement levels of such students in class in comparison to their counterparts. This study aims to use Bernstein's ideas to assess the issues discussed

related to a heterogeneous university classroom. The schedule of questions was prepared to capture the diversity in responses with respect to their expectations and achievements in classroom processes.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To examine the culture of learning in the Hyderabad Central University particularly inside the classroom.
2. To map out and analyse the challenges faced by the students belonging to diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds with respect to learning.

Contextualising 'Classroom' in Higher Education

The formal education imparted in a university classroom based on the classification of knowledge needs to be analysed in order to answer the pertinent question in the present context, 'how are forms of experience, identity, relation evoked, maintained and changed by formal transmission of educational knowledge?' (Bernstein 1971: 203). As mentioned earlier, changes might have been introduced, but none of them were radical enough to alter the ways in which the established institutions maintain power and control. This is why inclusion should mean being able to maintain an autonomous identity in the university classroom. An analytical account of related studies in India and in the west can help with contextualising issues related to university classroom learning.

Participation of the student in the classroom affects his/her learning. Students in an Undergraduate College classroom in the USA who were actively involved in the classroom processes learnt more than those who did not (Tinto 1997). Active involvement in class facilitates critical thinking (Garside 1996). It emerged that some students become role-players of *active participants* in the classroom while the larger majority engaged in *civil attention* paying sufficient attention without being too involved (Fritschner et. al. 2000). Similarly, Blau and Schenherr point out that (1971: 57) in view of the authority of teachers a hierarchy of students was created with *good ones*, *quiet ones*, and *poor performers*. But the studies did not elaborate on the

reason behind the emergence of this hierarchy of students in class. The reasons might have been with respect to the relationship between the teacher and the taught denoted by Bernstein's notion of *Framing* (Bernstein 1996: 26-28) which refers to the differential level of control over the selections and transmission of knowledge by the students and the teachers. This is the reason why knowledge is transmitted and received in a variable and hierarchical manner.

Another related factor on the part of the students is 'fear' in participating in class. It suggests a withdrawal in contrast to having confidence which gives a 'social energy' required in the classroom. It happens in large classrooms with students belonging to different age groups and ethnic backgrounds. The lecture mode, closed-book exams, and segregation of faculty and students and of students themselves, create social isolation within the classroom, often accompanied by stress and fear (Collins 1984). As a result of the corresponding strong framing and classification of Bernstein's (1996) *collection type of curriculum*, with the inflexible syllabus and control of the teacher, other ideologies develop outside the public educational space. This is not recognised as a part of the public identity of the student which is problematic for the youth⁴. Their learning is mostly influenced by their ideological beliefs and in turn by their experiences in the everyday world. This is seen in the case of some of the educational experiences and demands of minority group students in the Hyderabad University campus.

A study in West Bengal's Jadavpur University, (Naik 1979) can be correlated. According to this study 75 % of the students found the use of English as a medium of instruction to be a barrier to their understanding of problems and development of deep interest in their subject. It further explores dynamics of class involvement among students. Continuous student unrest and involvement in politics made the otherwise mature students lose focus. This picture of the 70s is noticeable as well in today's context, when we saw student bodies protesting on streets as a part of the *Hokkolorob movement*⁵ in the September of 2014. Therefore, the persisting debate is while student *involvement* is central to the learning process yet participation in the college classroom is low.

In Freire's (1970) view, the "banking model" prevails in education wherein faculty uses lectures to communicate knowledge to passive students who, in turn, regurgitate on exams some portion of the information they absorb. Responding to such conditions on the other hand, there are some studies which have suggested remedial methods like memorising students' names, arranging desks in circles to nullify the effects of authority and create an atmosphere of equality (Lehman et. al. 1997). Encouraging students to visit teachers in their office, exchange of e-mails when students have questions, etc. fall under what is called 'professional socialisation' which makes the students view criticism in a constructive way (Astin et. al. 1993).

Methods such as these can be implemented in Central Universities given the infrastructure provided, but how far the students take advantage of this is questionable. Often the students who mostly need personal interaction and care belong to dis-privileged backgrounds, sometimes facing language barriers. Therefore, they are unlikely to gather the courage to come up to the teacher to share his/her difficulties. In spite of all this systematic empirical examination of the scope and variety of faculty-student interaction as related to class participation has been lacking. In the Central Universities of India professor's face a heterogeneous class. Therefore, the faculty is required to be very careful in addressing sensitive issues so that they do not offend any particular group. Today's classroom interactions are changing. The professors are now faced with the challenge to open up the forum for discussion in classes, with or without taking their own stand, while discussing issues related to, dowry, or reservation etc. so as to enthuse students to share their views in a controlled framework of the classroom.

There are some informal factors which need to be considered as well. Lacking close connections with instructors and with few resources and time available to them, students often rely upon each other to meet work demands and to give them more control over their education. For instance, in the semester systems of Central Universities, due to the sheer size of the classes instead of written exams, students are being given group assignments as a method of assessment. Although these methods may not always yield the best results, this makes it easier for the teacher to assess. Also, the students learn to develop

the ability to work in a group. This gives the opportunity to implement Bernstein's (1996) *integrated curriculum*.

Therefore it can be said that active involvement in class depends on the teacher, content of knowledge being transmitted and finally the assessment of the students which in turn affects participation in class. The assessment of the culture of learning involves this entire process. To do that, the present study has taken into consideration students' opinion regarding the role of teacher/professor, body of knowledge transmitted, and tools of assessment which affects their class participation.

METHODOLOGY

The University of Hyderabad (UoH), a premier institution of higher education in India is largely devoted to postgraduate studies and is widely known for its excellence in research and for its distinguished faculty⁶. The University has built up a reputation for providing high quality academic training, in the disciplines of the Basic Sciences, Applied Sciences, Medical Science, Engineering Science, the Social Sciences, the Humanities, Fine Arts, Media Studies and Communication, in addition to more recent efforts in areas such as Folklore Studies, Health Psychology, Dalit Studies, Women's Studies, Neural and Cognitive Sciences and has been recognised through a number of awards⁷.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), the chief regulatory body of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in India (MHRD) records the existence of 45 Central Universities in India as on date⁸, University of Hyderabad being established in 1974 and is one of the three Central Universities of the newly formed state of Telengana. In terms of infrastructure and other collateral support, the University has been proactive⁹. It has a fully computerised library with special software for visually-challenged students and operates throughout the week. The University of Hyderabad has seen considerable growth in the past few years, with the introduction of new courses of study and new initiatives. With the range of disciplines represented, the quality of the faculty and students at UoH, the University, which is among the finest in the country is well poised to make its mark internationally as well.¹⁰

For conducting this study, a questionnaire was prepared consisting of two parts. First part dealt with the socio-economic background of the respondents with close ended questions and the second part dealt with some open-ended questions for assessing the qualitative aspect of the idea of a culture of learning. 450 respondents were interviewed who had been chosen from the Department of Sociology or any other Department (Integrated Masters or IMA/IMSc, MA, Mphil, PhD students). The students were mainly chosen on a random basis of Probability Sampling. The quantitative data was turned into percentages for data analysis.

A significant point to remember is that unlike State Universities, Central Universities in India are in a better position when it comes to teacher-students ratio. In Central University of Hyderabad there are about 4000 students and 400 faculty members. It is also one of the first Universities to provide Integrated Masters courses. The data has been analysed taking into account three variables like age, gender and caste. For convenience 6 tables have been taken into account in the present paper, where the relation between the respective variable and the question asked has shown significant results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Selection of Courses

The identity of a student in higher education is built around the subject of his choice (Bernstein 1996). The general trend over the years for selection of a major subject in college has always been influenced by instrumental reasons, the obvious choices being the courses which fetch jobs. Engineering, Medicine, Business Management, Computer Applications are preferred by students. Whether extremely meritorious or mediocre, the effort has always been to absorb themselves into any of these courses, sometimes with huge capitation fees. Of late technical courses no longer provide 100% employment. Moreover, rising unemployment and lack of job opportunities added to the misery of the aspirants of Social Sciences. Many students divert and pursue Social Science courses, primarily with civil service goals; many join PhD courses where there is stiff competition for lectureship jobs. So the choices for the subjects have now closely become related to the emerging economic condition of the coun-

try due to the increasing competition in every sector of academics.

None of the under 18 respondents said that being with a friend was least important in choosing a course of study. Around 66% of the students in the 21- 23 age group in the masters' level were more interested in choosing a subject in terms of its employment benefits. There was an obvious influence of age on the opinions formed. Among the younger group of students there is a significant number who chose the subject because it was recommended by their parents. Majority of PhD students over age of 23 had chosen the subject on the basis of their own interest. Interest in the subject or the employability factor was the main reason for choosing a course. 71% women chose the course of study on the basis of their interest as compared to 63% men. STs had greater propensity to choose a course based on employment benefits, however the variation in the propensity for choosing the subject by employment benefits differed by 2% within the variable caste.

According to the Table 1, the highest percentage; 55% males and 59% females thought that the social sciences were not professional courses. The definition of what is a professional course seemed subjective. The general opinion among Social Science and Humanities students seemed that knowledge of these subjects is required nowadays in all walks of life. So there is no reason why they should not be considered as professional courses. But the students from technical branches of knowledge were not interested in this debate. In this case the table for gender has been shown for assessment because there has been a general trend of girls being pushed towards arguably softer subjects like Literature, History, Languages etc. rather than technical or professional courses. 68% of 23+ age group students felt that Humanities and Social Sciences could be considered as professional courses.

The following excerpt of an interview shows the political economy of course selection. Ac-

Table 1: Do you think Social Sciences and Humanities are professional courses?

<i>Gender</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	157	55	128	45	285	63
Female	97	59	68	41	165	37
Total	254	56	196	44	450	100

According to Mr Ramesh, belonging to lower caste/class family studying an MA Political Science, entry to the university campus was a major achievement for the first generation student. “We consider university as a source of economic and social mobility”, he said.

2. Culture of Learning

Krishna Kumar has pointed out the lines along which the indigenous education and the colonial system of education differed in India. The village teacher before colonial rule was guided by the conventional pedagogy in accordance with the village economy. The teacher could control the pace of his progress in terms of the pupil’s capacity. But under the colonial rule, the teacher was a *meek* subordinate of the administrative officers (Kumar 2005: 76)¹¹. Tradition lost its place to prescribed syllabus and the teacher could no longer decide on his own what to teach and how to teach. Pattern of teaching established under the colonial system soon became a part of the culture of learning in India. It is against this backdrop of the prescribed syllabus that the dictatorial power of the teachers is played. This culture of the monologue is seen in many Indian college classrooms. But in Central Universities, Professors have the autonomy of deciding how to go about the syllabus, what methods would be best to reach out to the students and depending on the heterogeneity of the class, what would be the best methods of assessment. Unfortunately, it propagates what Bernstein calls *collection* form of curriculum. Sometimes methods of teaching go beyond classrooms when special screenings of movies and sponsored lectures take place in the Central Universities unlike the state Universities where mostly a fixed syllabus is taught without any revision over the years. At the state level, the syllabus, course structures are fixed. But, in the Central University of Hyderabad, in the Social Science classes, professors are flexible. To motivate students to study a course, particularly in the case of the optional courses offered at the Masters’ level, the professors take into account the students’ feedback at the end of each semester. On the basis of that they can revise the syllabus to make it more interesting, inclusive and contemporary in nature.

The dynamics of classroom in Indian context gives out a different picture when referring to the higher education in general and university education in particular. At this level the stu-

dents voluntarily opt for the subject. So, there needs to be even lines of communication between the student and teacher so that there is the maximum utilisation of resources. To ensure that the students are fully involved in the classroom processes, factors like teacher’s grip over subject knowledge, communication skills, use innovative teaching methods etc. should be introduced to ensure that the students feel that they have made the right choice in choosing the particular course.

According to Table 2, the highest percentage is recorded by the 23+ age-group where 80% respondents perceived that students should actively participate in classrooms. The general trend among all age groups was that participation in the classroom is important. Students from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds tend to be unwilling to open up. Personal interviews with students of integrated studies, masters and M. Phil programme revealed that the language barrier is one of the major reasons for the lack of motivation to participate in the classroom debates. A student pursuing M.A. who hails from the rural background said that the teacher’s tendency to discourage the participation kills the spirit of dialogue in the classroom. 88% females felt a greater tendency to participate in classroom discussions as compared to males. 18% scheduled castes (SCs) and 19% scheduled tribes (STs) gave very little importance to classroom participation.

Table 2: Do you think it is important to actively participate in classroom discussions?

Age	No	%	Yes	%	Total	%
<18	4	25	12	75	16	4
18-20	19	30	45	70	64	14
21-23	63	24	203	76	266	59
23+	21	20	83	80	104	23
Total	107	24	343	76	450	100

According to Table 3, some considered reading materials recommended by professors as the most important source of getting good grades, while others did not depend on the professor much. 67% females favoured this to a very large extent. In this category again gender was a significant indicator because it is a prominent trend among girls to be more sincere in collecting all materials distributed by teachers compared to boys. Students did not have clarity on how they

would want to utilise the notes mentioning that they were “unstructured” or abstract. No significant trend emerged with respect to the variable age. 67% STs thought these reading materials were important.

Table 3: Do you think reading materials recommended by the professors add value to grades?

<i>Gender</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	104	36	181	64	285	63
Female	55	33	110	67	165	37
Total	159	35	291	65	450	100

The general trend among all students in this University seemed that memorisation (rote learning) is considered important by all for getting good grades. There were also students who thought that evaluation should not just mean measuring memorising capability through tests. Hence, alternative methods of assessments were preferred by quite a few of them. One reason for the institutionalisation of rote learning across the country is that teacher performance is linked to the student achievement. This has led to the accordance of highest emphasis on the reproduction of the answers without critical reflections. Though this practice is rooted in the school education, the method in higher learning has not changed.

Across age groups class-notes were not considered as a good source of learning. 46% students in the age group (18-20) gave least importance to class-notes provided by professors. All other groups recorded more than 50%. Unlike usual assumptions, only 37% females thought that class-notes were helpful in getting good grades to a large extent. There were students who thought that since teachers are professionals “notes given by them should be taken as tablets” and also that, teachers’ notes together with their own notes could be a good source of learning. Additionally, students who were not interested in taking any kind of notes developed other methods to gather information. The dominant trend was to take down notes from teachers indicating the lack of opportunity of developing ones’ own critical thoughts. This is a result of what Freire termed as the ‘banking model’. 34% OBCs (Other backward Castes) gave importance to class-notes as compared to the others castes.

Sixty-four percent of (21-23) year old students, 42% males and 43% general category candidates showed a negative opinion towards compulsory attendance. This opened up avenues to assess the reasons behind the general apathy of students to attend classes. It could be reasons related to the professor teaching, or the lack of interest of the students towards the particular subject taught, or the general tendency of students to remain absent from classes as they reach the University arena.

Just as seminars, symposiums etc. are innovative aids of learning; similarly, presentations and assignments are alternative methods of assessments. While the latter are sometimes misused and become faulty methods, the main goal of resorting to newer methods of assessment, apart from the question-answer pattern of written tests, generates a genuine interest among students towards learning.

According to Table 4, 75% general candidates, 76% females and 68% males felt that presentations and assignments were a very important mode of assessment for students. On the other hand, 17% ST candidates (lowest percentage) thought that this was not a mode of assessment. Overall there was a positive opinion towards presentations and assignments as a mode of assessment. 24% females preferred written test as the only mode of assessment as against 25% males. The primary mode of assessment in higher education in addition to primary and secondary education is the written test. A lowest of 3% is recorded among students less than 18 years of age who thought that written tests should be the only mode of assessment ‘to a small extent’. Of course, the modes of assessment which obviously most students wanted were presentations and assignments. It appeared that there was a lower affinity towards internal tests among younger students than the older. The students seem to realise the importance of internal tests as they become older. This

Table 4: Do you think presentations and assignments should be a mode of assessment?

<i>Caste</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
ST	17	29	42	71	59	13
SC	23	27	62	73	85	19
OBC	43	30	101	70	144	32
GEN	40	25	122	75	162	36
Total	123	27	327	73	450	100

response is valid in both the categories of males and females who are not in favour of internal tests as the only mode of assessment. 25% general candidates, 27% OBCs, 33% SCs and 32% STs preferred written test as the primary mode of assessment. This depicted the social reality of the relatively deprived students from socio-economically backward students preferring written tests compared to making formal presentations.

The apathy among students to write long answers is on the rise. To understand the students' opinion, even further regarding the assessment pattern, the survey aimed to address this issue of replacing the end semester exams with more internal tests. A highest of 78% was recorded among the 21-23 year old students who thought that internal tests should not be increased in lieu of end semester exams. On the other hand none of the less than 18 year olds thought that internal tests should be increased in lieu of end semester exams. 77% males and 66% females recorded a very low preference for more internal tests replacing end semester exams. 57% general category students thought that internal tests should be increased replacing end semester exams and the trend progressively decreased for OBC (54%), SC (52%), ST (47%). There was a disparity in the trends across the three variables.

Vernacular education from primary level through secondary education sometimes can act as a drawback for some students in higher education particularly when it comes to understanding the class lectures followed by classroom participation. Students from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds cannot voice their opinions. Sometimes meritorious students in spite of several difficulties, like language barrier, manage to get noticed. Possibilities of having bilingual teaching in classrooms were assessed. This issue emerged time and again in this survey.

In this University, in the Masters level, there are many students who come from varied backgrounds and many of them do not understand any other language apart from their mother tongue, in this case Telugu. 57% males thought bilingual teaching did not help as against 63% females. However, among caste categories, 47% STs and 45% SCs supported this view. So it appeared bilingual teaching involving Telugu would be helpful at this level. But outstation students facing similar language problem require a multilingual medium of instruction, the imple-

mentation of which would be both cumbersome and non-viable. Data somehow did not reflect the challenges posed by bi/multilingual medium of instruction when placed against students with varied linguistic backgrounds.

3. Means of learning Outside Classroom

Opportunities to learn from several other sources are made available for the students inside a Central University. Apart from the methods operational inside the classrooms, informal methods like discussions, attending special seminars also provide important insights which prove to be very enriching for young students and scholars.

Seminars, Lectures, Symposiums, Conferences etc. which are frequently organised at the university for the benefit of the student community was most popular among the above 23 age group, 86% of whom stressed its importance as per Table 5. The same was endorsed not only by all caste groups but also by both genders, provided the topic inspired student interest. But it is more important for the students in the Integrated or regular Masters Courses to attend these as they are new in the world of higher education. They are required to be well oriented with dominant researches in various fields through these workshops and conferences.

Table 5: Do you think one should attend seminars, lectures, symposiums and conferences?

Age	No	%	Yes	%	Total	%
<18	4	25	12	75	16	4
18-20	14	22	50	78	64	14
21-23	51	19	215	81	266	59
23+	18	17	86	83	104	23
Total	87	19	363	81	450	100

Students were also asked about their opinion regarding alternative medium of learning like classroom discussions, video, films and documentaries etc. According to Table 6, the highest percentage was recorded by the 73% SCs who thought that these alternate media of teaching helped to a very large extent. In comparison, 71% females preferred to attend these as against 68% males. Ironically, 19% STs thought that this medium was not helpful. In the words of Ivan Illich, students could develop their own 'learning web'¹² by forming their own study groups either for the formal purpose of group presenta-

tions in class for assessment or for informal purposes that could benefit each of them. But discussions and documentaries seemed largely unpopular among this group of students.

Table 6: Do you think use of classroom discussions, videos, films, and documentaries are an appropriate method of teaching?

<i>Caste</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
ST	19	32	40	68	59	13
SC	23	27	62	73	85	19
OBC	51	35	93	65	144	32
GEN	43	27	119	73	162	36
Total	136	30	314	70	450	100

Discussion with friends is another indicator of how the culture of learning exists in this university. Both 82% females and 80% males were inclined towards discussion with friends as an aid to learning. The students belonging to age group 23+ recorded a highest of 83% among those who thought that discussions with friends helped increase knowledge and the lowest percentage was recorded by the below 18 group who recorded 75%. For students of social sciences and humanities discussion with friends helped increase the base of knowledge and widened perspectives.

There has been an evolution of the site of learning as the need and access to education has increased and the importance of quality of education has taken the spotlight in the recent debates. Unlike earlier days, information is readily available to all students at the click of a mouse. As arguments surrounding Knowledge Economy and innovative pedagogical techniques arose, issues related to the classroom came to the forefront. Site of higher learning debates have revolved around having big buildings and well-furnished classrooms. But issues like student satisfaction and relevant assessment patterns emerge, if 'classroom' as a site of learning is considered. The processes that go inside a classroom cannot be quantified distinctly just as one cannot define a 'good classroom' in absolute terms. Moreover, several factors are in play varying across gender, religion, caste and class which can be analysed with any combination of the discussed components of classroom. A heterogeneous population, the chance of being taught by eminent and highly honoured faculty, various UGC conducted distinguished lectures, subsidised fee structure, UGC granted fellowships

etc. help students develop one's own identity especially for first generation learners.

The thematic distribution of the analyses brings into focus the main findings which reveal some new trends contradicting old assumptions characterising the culture of learning in this University. The first objective is addressed through the role played by variables like class discussions, reading materials distributed by teachers, class-notes, attending seminars, conferences, film screenings, discussion with friends together with opinion on written tests, assignments, presentations, etc. The second objective of the study is revealed through the interplay of age, gender and caste assessed across all the questions asked.

Employment benefits and interest for the subject generally dominate the reasons for choosing the subject of study. In order for Social Sciences and Humanities to have their own identity, the respondents needed clarity on what was being meant by 'professional course'. In terms of the culture of learning at the University, 'inside the classroom discussions' are considered very important by the eldest group of respondents and the female students. However, the SCs and STs showed lack of interest in this. Reading materials given by lecturers are not too useful across all ages, but the STs depend on these the most. Inside the classroom, the eldest group of students give most importance to the class-notes but the teacher is certainly not considered the sole authority and provides substantial autonomy to students in this University. Unlike usual assumptions, females are not very keen on taking class-notes. A general negative trend was recorded towards compulsory attendance in class across all 3 variables. The questions related to assessment pattern tries to evaluate the relationship between quality of students and achievement levels. The survey recorded a high preference for presentations and assignments among general candidates and female students but lowest among STs depicting the general shy nature of the latter to make formal presentations. The emerging trend is the tendency towards less writing in examinations even though the trend towards rote learning is quite prevalent. But, in contrast to earlier days, the intention is now to make students critically think what they are reading and apply them in their own ways. Innovative tools of assessments are opening up the scope of critical engagement,

where, in each semester students have the choices of selecting group projects as against only taking written tests. Vernacular education is not possible at this level due to heterogeneity of regional backgrounds of the students even though the English medium of teaching is a barrier for many. The results show a significant trend of acceptance of the lecture based learning in big classrooms where students have the rare opportunity of critical thinking. Outside the classroom, discussions on the subjects of Social Sciences provide opportunities to learn more on the basis of self-reflection of each individual. The highest age group of students, females and all caste groups indicate a positive trend towards participating in seminars, lectures, conferences and classroom discussion. Films and documentaries are also considered as most important aids of learning by the females and the SCs.

From the dominant trend of Freire's 'banking model', having their own *learning web* (Illich 2000) seems to be fast catching up among students in many Universities. It can prove to be a good learning aid in the Hyderabad Central University campus for hostel boarders especially. Also, an *integrated* curriculum (Bernstein 1996), where the content is open with weaker boundaries of control without unequal power relation between teacher and student, can be an option, fruitful for those who have failed to cope up with the *collection* type of curriculum. For having an inclusive curriculum it is required to understand the social character of knowledge rather than mindlessly reproducing knowledge (Young 2008).

CONCLUSION

Given a limited body of available Indian literature in terms of classroom participation and such variety of aspects still to be studied within a typical classroom of a University, there is ample opportunity to contribute in terms of descriptive, exploratory or explanatory research to be conducted for in-depth analysis of each and every aspect of a University classroom in India. A further in-depth research can be conducted by taking a larger sample size and to have a broader idea of the culture of learning in the Central University taking into consideration i) the cross cultural views of different communities ii) the learning experiences and dilemmas of the day-

scholars versus the hostel boarders and iii) evolution of the learning culture across years in the University campus. At this level what is necessary is to assess whether the students are inspired enough, or are merely passive followers, as pointed out by Paulo Freire, of the classroom proceedings; whether they are pursuing what they are studying out of interest or just to get a job. In the end the student, professor and the classroom are three ends of a triangle and each is dependent on the other for the successful completion of a development of an individual.

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NOTES

- 1 Report of Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi, p.9.
- 2 <http://www.napsipag.org/pdf/suman-sharma.pdf>
- 3 Eleventh Five Year Plan document, Planning Commission, India, Volume I p. 22.
- 4 <http://www.thresholdconsulting.co.uk/phdthesisPDF/chapter8.pdf>
- 5 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Famous-protest-slogans-from-across-the-years-and-around-the-world/articleshow/44812361.cms>
- 6 Founded in 1974 with Prof. Gurbaksh Singh as its first Vice Chancellor, UoH - also known as Hyderabad Central University or HCU- has emerged as a leading centre of teaching and research. With 46 different Departments and Centres organised in 12 Schools of study, the University has over 400 faculty and over 5000 students. It also has a thriving Five year Integrated Masters Programme. The University hosts an ever increasing number of foreign scholars in the highly popular Study in India Programme.
- 7 PURSE, given by the Prime Minister of India, a grading of A, which is the highest, by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)
- 8 www.ugc.ac.in
- 9 The entire campus is connected on 1 Gbps NKN connectivity, Wi-fi enabled and this facilitates networking, vital for sustaining academic activity. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Library at the University has a collection of more than 3.56-lakh books and other reference material and subscribes to about 600

- foreign journals and 18,000 online journals and 10 online databases.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.uohyd.ac.in/index.php/about-uoh>
- ¹¹ Kumar, Krishna. 2005. *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd
- ¹² Illich, Ivan and Marion Boyars, Avan Allich. 2000. *Deschooling Society*. Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.
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