

EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Ensuring a Smooth Transition from the Classroom to the Workplace

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Introduction

Today India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. By the year 2020 it is expected to be the third largest economy after the United States and China. From the GDP growth of 4.9 percent in the year 1990, the Indian economy achieved the growth rate of 8.7 percent in the year 2008. The process of liberalisation that began almost two decades ago has brought about a phenomenal change in the economy. As an important global player, India is now aligning itself with the norms and practices of a global work order.

It is estimated that a major section of the Indian population would be in the working-age group by the year 2020. This would create one of the largest highly qualified workforces. However, with the opening up of the Indian economy and the speedy proliferation of capital intensive, atomised and centralised industries, there has been an overall reduction in employment opportunities for the youth. A major portion of this young population, estimated at over 30 percent of the total population, comprises student/college going population. It is obvious that dynamic changes in the existing economic order, and its resulting stress and anxiety of survival as well as the pressure to succeed in today's highly competitive markets can have far reaching repercussions on this young generation. This would affect the future of Indian society.

In the Indian scenario, a job is associated with the social status of a person. The students are dependent on their parents till the completion of their studies, be it their graduation or post graduation, and may further extend till the time they get the suitable job. Fewer job opportunities and tremendous competition lead to anxiety. Young

students undergo a lot of stress, mainly towards their final years of study. Largely theoretical learning, both at school and college, has left the students confused about their strengths. Increasing demands of study leave the students very little time for play and explorations. Coupled with these, the addiction to television and the increasing use of computers become a major hindrance in enabling these young minds to explore and sensitize themselves to their surroundings. All these factors reduce their level of experience, exposure to reality of life outside, their ability to interact and work in team and their professional and socialisation skills. Of late, the gap between the capabilities developed through the current system of education, and the industry expectations have increasingly widened, leaving these students further distressed.

Indian Society

Indian society is multifaceted to an extent perhaps unimaginable in any other part of the world. It comprises more than 6400 castes and sub-castes, over 22 official languages and a vast plethora of dialects that are spoken all over the country. Indian society is also a multilayered society, each layer /segment is large enough to form its own group/community. Indian society is not simply divided into groups like rich and poor, as there are layers of different income groups between these two broad groups. Each such income group is dependent and closely linked with the other layers/strata of society. Socialisation is thus part of Indian nature, and it happens at various levels. Cooperation, community life and peaceful co-existence are the distinguishing characteristics of the Indian society. Family is central to Indian culture and society.

A vast majority of the Indian population comprises people from the rural and middle-income group segments. Though mature and positive in temperament, they tend to become conservative and conscious when it comes to embracing new changes. Limited resources, skills and fewer job opportunities make it difficult for majority of the people to get a secure job and a regular income. Jobs that are of a secure kind can make a major difference to an individual's future and add to his/her prestige in society. For the large middle-income group segment of the country, education offers an important window and opportunity to move higher on the ladder of progress. It aspires to have an improved quality of life and also some relief from its daily struggle for existence.

Education and India

Education, as Mahatma Gandhi believed, not only moulds the new generation, but reflects a society's fundamental assumptions about itself and the individuals which compose it. According to him, education must aim at educating the whole person, instead of concentrating on one aspect only. A strong supporter of equality, ethics and nonviolence, Gandhi believed that sustainable economic growth can only be achieved through development of the entire human personality and by maintaining the relationship between man and nature. Gandhi thus outlined a comprehensive but decentralised model, keeping in mind its applicability for the large numbers of Indian villages that focused on development of productive and social skills among the masses. According to him, true education is all-round development of the faculties, best attained through action. It bases itself on the fact that knowledge and understanding develop in relation to problems set right by action. Information thrust on the mind only burdens the memory and causes intellectual indigestion, casting learning into oblivion.

Over the years, various models of education based around the Gandhian philosophy of education have been successfully implemented at various levels, and some of them applied at the school level were particularly successful. *Nai Talim*, the education curriculum promoted by Gandhi, was one of the successful models practiced largely at the rural level, and it was based on the principal idea of imparting education of the body, mind and soul through an appropriate combination of practical knowledge with classroom learning. Various vocational programmes offered at the post-school/college level helps student attain different skills and capabilities that in turn boost their opportunities for self-employment. Also, there have been several initiatives that encourage the young generation to make voluntary contributions to society and thereby develop their social skills. SPIC MACAY, the Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth was established in 1977, and today it has its chapters in over 300 towns and cities. This is one such creative attempt to involve the young generation in conservation and promotion of the country's rich traditional values and heterogeneous cultural tapestry. Focusing on the classical arts, its chapters organise lectures, demonstrations, informal discussions and seminars. The *Lead India* initiative was launched by one of the country's largest media houses— The Times of India Group. The initiative was first launched through the group's newspaper in 2007 and then

carried further from next year through television. This is another unique initiative that encourages the deserving young leaders with vision and ability to enter into public governance. Its *Teach India* initiative on the other hand connects with the young generation and encourages it to contribute towards teaching underprivileged children. Both these initiatives, through their effective campaigns, have succeeded in connecting today's young generation to the basic demands and needs of society. These and various other initiatives inspire the young generation to take up voluntary work, and in the process inculcate in them a spirit of service that ultimately results in the development of their social skills.

However, there are still major gaps in the student's successful transition from education to a career. This is a major cause of anxiety and stress for both, the students as well as their parents. With fast paced technological and economical changes, it has become increasingly difficult for the academia to maintain the relevance and contemporariness of its curriculum that falls in line with the present demands and expectations of the industries, society, and the nation as a whole and at the same time the aspirations of students. Today's highly stretched industries are not in a position to invest their time and resources on grooming and moulding the young graduates to their methods and requirements. This further necessitates closer and more professional/formal linkages between the industry and academia. A smooth, gradual and systematic transition from students' education to their careers can reduce their anxiety and stress. This will also benefit the industry as it would get industry-ready professionals and thereby save on their further training/internship costs. The practical experience and exposure, coupled with theoretical grounding during their study will help these young graduates gain that much needed maturity and confidence to face future challenges, and thereby develop a positive outlook towards life. Combination of professional capabilities and social skills, and the confidence thus developed among these young citizens of the country would in turn help develop a progressive, democratic and healthy society. This large student segment of the country, comprising roughly over 35 million, could be effectively utilised towards positive and constructive outcomes for the society and also for the nation as a whole, through internships/training and field study programmes if creatively integrated within the curriculum.

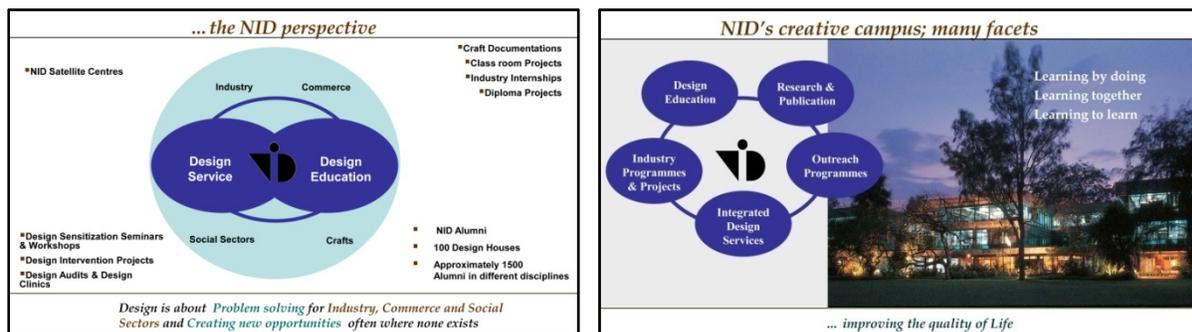
In today's era of globalisation, the economic condition of any industry, business organisation and of the society as a whole depends on their capability to produce products and services that are better, cheaper and faster than the ones produced by their competitors. As these industries are competing for survival in the fiercely competitive markets, they need skilled hands and quality workforce that can be directly absorbed. Aligning the skills and professional capabilities of the young graduates to the contemporary needs and demands of the industry would help nourish industries and augment the growth of the economy. This will also help increase the employment opportunities.

India is the second most populated country in the world. With over 50 percent of its population in the working age group, education in India has to play a crucial role towards creating sustainable growth of its economy and its society. Social innovation is typically defined as the innovation that is beneficial to society as a whole, and a suitable model of education that increases the employment opportunities would be central to the future progress of Indian society, and thereby form an integral part of social innovation. The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) is the largest consortium of industries in India. Acknowledging this urgent need to bring together the industry and educational institutes on a common platform to reduce the existing gap, the CII recently organised a workshop on the theme—*Sustainable Growth through Education*. One of the main issues discussed in this workshop was the importance of developing social skills and etiquette among future professionals. This is an important factor, because in the global economies of the future, the young graduates will be working in teams, and the success of such teamwork depends on how well they can interact with individuals belonging to various nationalities.

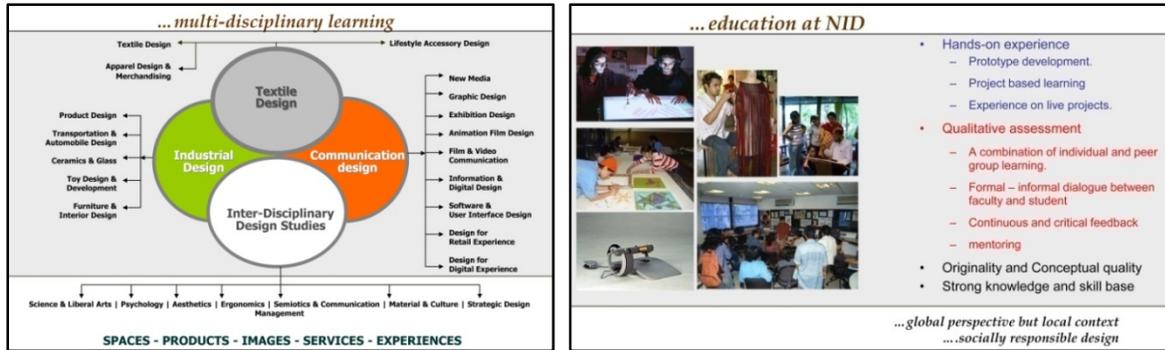
NID's Education Model

Set up in 1961, the unique system of education practiced at the first design institute of India, National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, has helped the Institute maintain constant touch with the industry and the society, and also provide that much needed exposure and experience to its students and prepare them according to industry expectations. Established as an autonomous multidisciplinary institute, it

offers education programmes, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level and across 17 different disciplines. Besides education, the Institute is actively involved in design research, training and design awareness through its consultancy wing. Over the last five decades the Institute and its alumni have worked extensively with the country's variegated industrial and social sectors including the SMEs, craft sectors and also at the grassroots level, and with government and non-government organisations. NID's consultancy wing helps the Institute and its faculty members maintain closer and regular contacts with various industries and social sectors. The real life experience gained by the Institute's faculty is shared with the students. Wherever possible the students are also involved in such projects under the faculty member's guidance.



With the academic environment deeply rooted in a value-based approach to problem solving, the system of education here lays more emphasis on *learning by doing*, *learning to learn* and *learning together*, than on mere instruction. With a view to provide adequate scope and opportunity for experimentation and exploration, the curriculum is structured on studio based and project based learning. The overall objective is to educate students about fundamental design skills, give them a thorough understanding of design issues, the ability to think laterally, and above all, the maturity and the confidence to take up independent design assignments as professionals. For this purpose, live industry projects are undertaken as classroom projects in order to provide real life challenges and feedback to the students. Suitable industry exposure in terms of internships, training, and industry visits are also integrated into the curriculum. Ample opportunities are provided to the student designers, in order that they face and experience reality. Several projects and course modules help bring the Institute closer to industry and society, thus developing a mutually beneficial relationship.

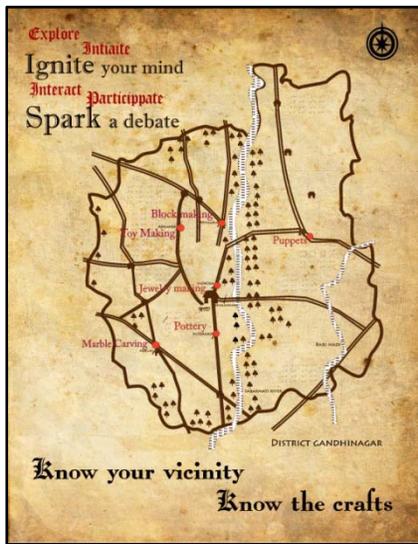


Learning from the field, is thus made an integral part of the curriculum in the design programme. Students are provided with a number of opportunities during their study and are encouraged to go out to the field and learn through interaction with various stake holders. ‘Environmental Perception’ and ‘Craft Documentation’ are such unique courses offered at NID that are tailor-made to suit the Indian context. These courses have been further refined and perfected over the years. These courses require students to stay with the artisans/villagers for a few weeks and document their macro and micro lives exploring and learning about their culture, tradition, profession, and artefacts. Through craft documentation, the course offered across various disciplines, the Institute has today developed a large repository of information and knowledgebase. It is an extremely valuable resource that provides critical understanding of a subject, and it has been generated through the last five decades. The crafts sector is the second largest employment generating sector, providing employment to over 30 million people. The Institute has recently published a handbook on handicrafts, *Handmade in India* which is a compilation of over 600 different crafts of the country, a mammoth task, undertaken and completed with the financial support from the Government of India. ‘Exploring Indigenous Innovations’ is another such course module offered to the students. The tasks assigned under this course have to be completed by the students during their summer vacation. This encourages students to explore the indigenous resources that are available outside and through this process, curiosity and thirst for new knowledge is created in them. These course modules, through their process of learning, help students develop sensitivity and respect for their surroundings and the society and the much needed empathy and concern for all the stake holders involved. Various design projects that the students undertake as part of their study provide ample opportunities and challenges to face real life situations.

The thesis project, known at NID as the Diploma Project, lasts for six months. It has to be undertaken by the students in their final semester, and it provides ample opportunity to test their professional capabilities in real life situations. Before embarking on this project in his/her final semester, the student would have already acquired the necessary skills and capabilities as a designer, and thus this - mostly sponsored project, provides a good opportunity for the industry/organization to test the student's abilities and benefit from design at the fairly subsidized cost and with limited responsibilities. These projects provide good platform for the young design graduates to launch their professional careers by demonstrating their capabilities. These projects also form good case studies for the Institute to demonstrate and showcase design capabilities and thereby create design awareness within the industry. Every year, during the convocation, the Institute brings out a publication titled, *Young Designers that* showcases the variety of diploma projects undertaken by the graduating students of that year.

Increased pressures of studies, tension of completing their assignments, constant competition, and the resultant confusion, frustration and boredom, all extend to the leisure time of these young students. Therefore, recreational activities should be creatively developed so that the students integrate fun with learning into their own areas and thereby increase their professional competence, their level of confidence, and personal satisfaction. Based on these insights derived through in-depth user study within the campus, as part of their 'Service Design' course module, the senior batch of one of NID's postgraduate programmes called Strategic Design Management, developed a range of services addressing these issues. A group of students designed a service titled—*Chingari (Spark)... ignite your imagination* that helps participants explore crafts from the vicinity of the campus (Poster-01). Through a short tour of these places it provides opportunities to interact with the local artisans, get hands on experience of the crafts by actually creating them with the guidance of the artisans, and in the process the students get to experience the socio-cultural environment. With an objective of removing boredom and the lack of field study, the second group of students designed a service titled—*Creativeland Tour Packages*. It offers, as mentioned in their report "...tailored tour packages for design students to mix learning with fun. The tour package gives an opportunity to the student to learn about research techniques (people study and ethnographic research), and also get out of the campus and use them in real

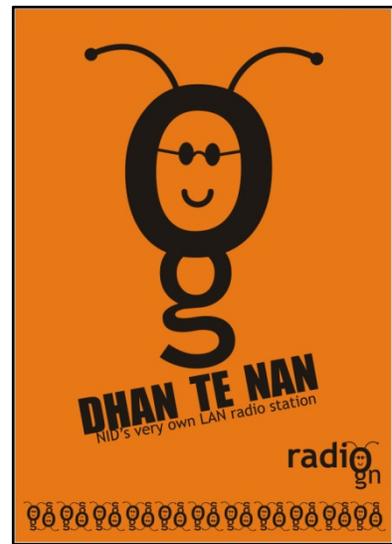
life.” (Poster-02). While yet another group designed a LAN based internet radio station, ‘Dhan Te Nan’, a service specific to the NID’s postgraduate campus (Poster-03). To be operated by the dedicated group of students of the campus, the service will offer podcasts on design, famous lectures or talks, informal discussion sessions and information and updates on events, news, user generated programs, TED talks, design discussions and explorations of music genres. With a view to generate a source of serious learning and platform of gaining design specific knowledge, the radio aims at generating a vibrant campus culture. These students also prototyped their service ideas and tested them in order to check their responses.¹



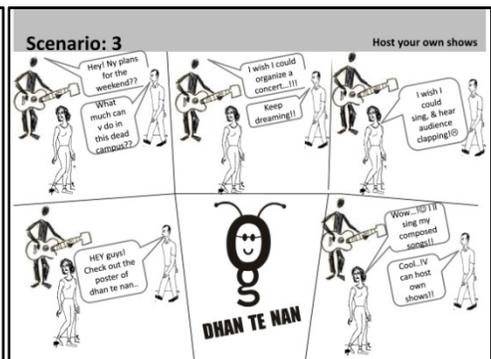
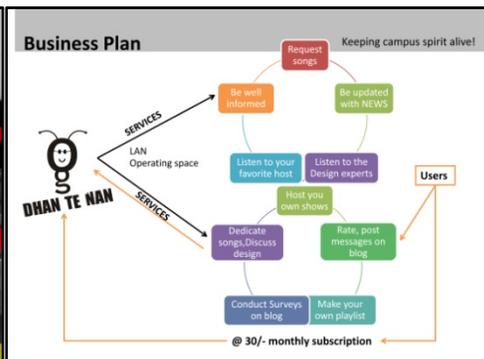
Poster-01



Poster-02



Poster-03



User Research, Business Plan and Scenario development before its prototype and user tests of one of the services designed.

¹ These activities were the fruitful outcomes of the Service Design course that was offered by the students of Strategic Design Management (SDM) discipline at NID. The objective of this course was to introduce the concept of service design along with exploring the scope of design intervention in the field of Service Design.

The learnings from this exercise were then carried further into their next assignment where each group of students redesigned one of the existing services through extensive research and design applications. Today, technological parameters such as reliability, performance and quality have reached a level of saturation. The economy is rapidly changing from a product-based economy to a service-based economy. Also, homogenisation and customisation have become the focus of most businesses. Also in the context of India, service offers the much needed employment opportunities at the doorsteps of the people, utilising their existing skills and resources and at their convenience. It thereby helps reduce the mass migration of the country's large rural population. India is therefore largely a service economy. The learning and experience from this course module, besides offering new direction to the students and the campus community to effectively utilise their leisure time, also enhances important capabilities in these young graduates and enable them to build a sound career.

The work portfolio of a variety of projects and vital contacts developed through classroom projects, internships and/or a diploma project helps the young graduates to straight away embark on their journey as professional designers. They can work either as freelance designers or take up a job or retainership with the industry. Samarth Mungali and Bhavna Bahri, two final year students of NID's postgraduate programme in Strategic Design Management (SDM), aspired to set up their own design consultancy office. Towards this end, they worked on their thesis project—*The First Steps: Exploring Entrepreneurship*. This helped them systematically explore and understand users, market potentials and the future market trends, along with understanding their own strengths as Strategic Design Management graduates. With their core domain expertise identified as branding and service design, *No Formulae*, the design consultancy office was set up as a result of this systematic study. It would focus on small and medium scale enterprises of the country. The self-sponsored project also provided them the opportunity to test out their hypothesis. This new start-up has already received its seed funding from the National Design Business Incubator (NDBI), Ahmedabad.

The objective of the design education programme at NID is to help students develop a positive personality and a unique identity as designers. Appropriate integration of practical experience and exposure, along with theoretical and classroom learning help students understand and imbibe the fundamentals and concepts. This helps them get

better clarity, scope to reflect on their own work and finally arrive at their own definition and inferences before moving further. Regular qualitative assessments and feedbacks are provided along with a variety of experiences that help student/s develop maturity and confidence to face the challenges of life ahead.

Conclusion

With its rapid economic developments, India is poised to become a major global player in the near future. Its main strength is its large and young workforce. It is expected that over 50 percent of its population will be in the working age group. And a majority of this population, over 35 million, will comprise students. Ensuring a smooth transition from educational training to a fruitful career for these young graduates is one of the important tasks ahead for the country's academia. Education should focus on all-round development of the entire human personality. Practical experience and exposure, coupled with theoretical grounding, during their study will help these young graduates gain that much needed maturity and confidence to face their future challenges, and enable them to have a positive outlook towards life. Systematic and controlled exposure to the realities of life outside would help students make a smooth transition from theoretical learning into a career wherein practical experience is given due importance. Appropriate integration of internships and training modules within the education programmes would also help positively channelise their energies towards various nation building initiatives and activities. These will also help reduce the gap between the industry and academia, and while utilising their core strengths, help them maintain their relevance in today's' fast changing global markets.

A combination of professional capabilities and social skills, and the confidence thus developed amongst these future young citizens of the country would in turn help develop a progressive, democratic and healthy society. This would help to achieve the sustainable economic development of the country. The system of education practiced at NID, takes within its ambit all such criteria. This time tested model, if appropriately replicated, will certainly create huge impact in terms of developing the much needed confidence and maturity in the large population of country's young graduates, aligning their skills and capabilities with industry and society demands. This will increase employment opportunities and help to bring about sustainable economic and societal growth of the country.

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Author's Profile



Shashank Mehta is a senior faculty of Industrial design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. Shashank holds rich professional experience of working with the small and large scale industries as well as the craft sector. Over the years he has taught various course modules and guided students on their design projects, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and across various design disciplines. Shashank has extensively worked in the area of *Technology & Design Fusion, Sustainability and Indigenous Innovations*. He has successfully anchored series of international workshops with the specific focus on 'design for crafts' and 'design for development' for the participants from various developing countries. In the year 2005, Shashank organized and co-anchored the first of its kind International conference on Design education in Asia – *Design Education; Tradition and Modernity, DETM05*. He later jointly edited the publication, comprising over eighty scholastic papers from this international conference, which was released in 2007.