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Arvind Sahay

**U**nderstanding how students absorb, process, and retain information has never been more critical in an era of rapidly evolving learning environments and diminishing attention spans. Traditional teaching methods, rooted in rote memorisation and standardised assessment, often fail to engage students effectively. However, insights from behavioural science provide a fresh perspective on how learning can be optimised to create more dynamic, student-centred classrooms.

By applying principles from cognitive psychology, motivation theory, and decision science, educators can promote deeper learning experiences and improve student outcomes.

**Processing information**  
Behavioural science highlights that learning is not merely a passive transfer of information but a complex interplay of cognitive processes, emotions, and environmental cues. One fundamental concept is cognitive load theory, which suggests that students have a limited capacity to process information at any given time. Overloading students with excessive content or poorly structured material leads to cognitive fatigue, reducing retention and comprehension. Rather, dividing lessons into smaller and more manageable chunks improves memory and comprehension.

Similarly, spaced repetition, where information is revisited over time, has

## Build better classrooms

How insights from behavioural science can be used to enhance learning outcomes and empower students with cognitive and emotional skills



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been shown to strengthen long-term retention, making it a far superior approach compared to last-minute cramming.

Another crucial factor in the learning process is motivation. Traditional education often relies on extrinsic motivators such as grades and rewards, but behavioural research suggests that intrinsic motivation – where students are driven by curiosity, autonomy, and mastery – yields more sustainable learning outcomes.

The concept of self-determination theory explains that when students feel a sense of autonomy and competence in their learning, they engage more deeply. Educators can cultivate this by designing activities that provide choice, encourage problem-solving, and relate lessons to real-world applications. Furthermore, tapping into stu-

dents' natural curiosity by framing lessons as challenges or puzzles enhances engagement, as it aligns with the brain's preference for resolving uncertainties.

Information presentation can also have a big impact on student engagement and retention in the classroom. The availability heuristic, a cognitive bias where people tend to rely on immediate examples that come to mind, suggests that relatable and vivid storytelling is far more effective than abstract theories.

When educators use narratives, case studies, and real-life applications, students are more likely to internalise concepts and recall them later. Additionally, incorporating active learning strategies, such as discussions, role-playing, and experiential learning leads to stronger cognitive connections than passive lecture-based approaches.

The classroom environment plays a subtle but powerful role in shaping student success. Behavioural science underscores the impact of nudges – small environmental or procedural changes that influence behaviour without restricting choices. For instance, structuring syllabi with clearly defined goals and providing regular formative feedback can guide students toward better academic habits.

**Assessments**  
The way assessments are framed also matters; instead of high-stakes exams that induce anxiety, incorporating low-stakes, frequent quizzes has been found to reinforce learning while reducing stress. Even the physical layout of a classroom – arranging seating to encourage collaboration rather than isolation – can significantly impact student participa-

tion and engagement.

Beyond academic learning, behavioural science offers valuable insights into bridging the employability gap. Employers today seek graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable, resilient, and capable of making sound decisions in uncertain environments. The field of decision science sheds light on how students can be trained to think critically and make better judgments.

Introducing scenario-based learning, where students are placed in complex real-world decision-making situations, prepares them for professional challenges. Encouraging reflection and metacognition – where students analyse their thinking patterns – can also foster better problem-solving skills and adaptability.

A well-designed curriculum infused with behavioural insights does more than impart knowledge; it transforms students into engaged learners and critical thinkers. The shift from conventional instruction to a more scientific, student-centric approach requires educators to rethink how they teach, assess, and support students.

By leveraging behavioural science principles, universities and institutions can build better classrooms that not only enhance learning outcomes but also empower students with the cognitive and emotional skills necessary for lifelong success.

The writer is the Director, Management Development Institute (MDI), Gurgaon.

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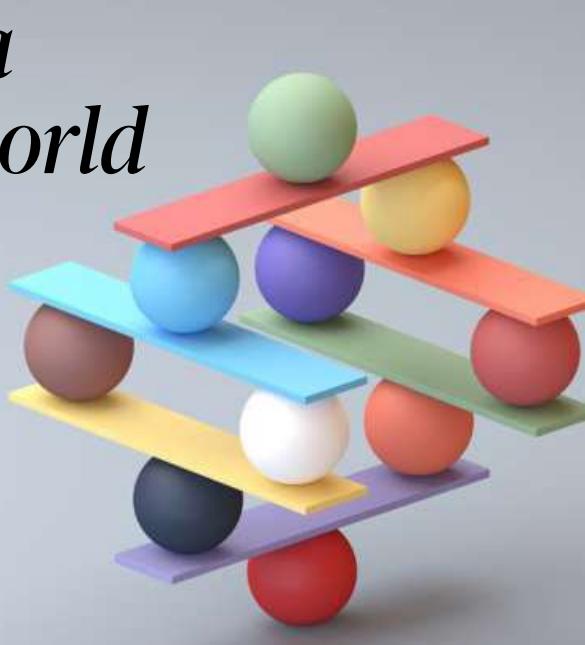
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# Design a better world

American researcher and author Prof. Don Norman on the importance of Design Thinking across educational frameworks



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**Soma Basu**  
soma.basu@thehindu.co.in

Design is changing the world, whether one notices it or not, says Don Norman, American researcher and author popularly known as the man who designs designers. "To address every challenge of modern living, from climate change to resource scarcity and social inequities, it has become necessary to rethink education with human-centred designs. Achieving this requires a new way of seeing the world."

Norman, whose approach expands the scope of Design from private profit to public good and who guides designers and innovators worldwide to create intuitive and functional products, was in India a few months ago to meet faculty and vice-chancellors of Indian universities. His aim: to convince people that empathy-driven education that encourages students to be critical and independent thinkers and prepares future leaders who can transform the world for the better.

"Hidden rules of design are changing the way we live, work and play," he said during a chat after his visits to institutions such as BML Munjal University

(BMU), Gurugram; BITS Design School, Mumbai; and The Design Village, Noida, among others. A staunch believer in "the change we create today shapes tomorrow", he emphasised the need for students to champion designs for peoples' good by following broad academic options.

In India, design was introduced as a modern profession in the 1950s when Prime Minister Nehru committed himself to the country's industrial development in a broad way of finding one's own solution. He did not want to lose on quality of life in the rush towards rapid industrialisation, wrote industrial designer S. Balaram in the journal *Design Issues* in 2008.

In the 1970s, Indian designers and educators pushed for Design to have a bigger role in national policymaking but the Ahmedabad Declaration of 1979 that wanted to bring designers into critical policy making remained a non-starter. With the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) focusing on liberal arts, universities are again recognising the vibrant spirit of the discipline and exploring collaborations between the department of Liberal Studies, and

Schools of Law, Management, Science, Engineering and technology.

Small interactions lead to greater organic growth, enhancing both engagement and reach, says Norman, adding, "We cannot go on building technology that does not understand people. We must expand the role of Design across nation-building ambitions. Design assumes that we can craft objects, services, experiences, and systems that are more humane and acknowledges the interplay between design thinking and making."

As universities re-imagine their curriculum by integrating local and global challenges, Norman offers some suggestions. "Students should be put together in a cohesive team to do a project that is interesting. They have to be provided with tools to understand societal issues and innovate solutions that usher change. The proper edu-

cation is to know finance, technology, art and history, and work with different people with different skills."

According to him, the interconnectedness in Liberal Arts is missing in India because of the dominating culture of 'specialisation'. "The education system is concentrated on making students specialists in one subject. Often, they do not quite know what they are learning and why are they learning so much. There is too much rote learning; instead of testing what students have learned, they seem to be learning what is being tested."

Indian universities have to move towards collaboration. For instance, History and Philosophy can be clubbed together instead of being two different subjects under different streams. Or to understand climate change, one needs to know Chemistry, History, Geography, Economics, and human behaviour. "Students should understand how subjects are related to each other and how things come together to fit in. Design is a way of thinking that can be applied to any problem; it is about building, constructing and collaborating," said Norman, emphasising that education has to move beyond conventional frameworks to cultivate intellectual agility, ethical reasoning, and adaptability.

"Higher education is not just a means to employment, financial and social success, but a space to develop critical thinkers, empathetic leaders, and socially responsible individuals."

The essence of liberal studies is to create informed, self-reflective individuals who question fearlessly and are change-makers with a deep human connect. "Education serves its purpose when it is a vehicle for meaningful engagement with society, socially responsible actions and impactful contributions."



OFF THE EDGE

Nandini Raman

I scored 84% overall in Class 12 (87% in Physics, Chemistry, and Maths) in 2024. I am currently contemplating my options for higher studies, as I do not intend to pursue engineering. What are the potential fields that may align with my interests and academic background?

Anshul

Dear Anshul,  
Hope your gap year has been useful and productive. In Pure Sciences, you can pursue a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in Physics, Chemistry, or Mathematics or specialise in programmes like Data Science and Analytics, Statistics, Forensic Science, Aviation or Aeronautical Science.

Other options depending on your interest include Architecture (B.Arch) or Nautical Science or the Merchant Navy, Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA) or Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Bachelor of Design (B.Des) or take the exams for the National Defence Academy.

Reflect on what truly excites you. Do you enjoy problem-solving, research, or creative pursuits? What are your long-term aspirations and goals? Identify your strengths and weaknesses and shortlist a field that aligns with your skills and allows you to develop new ones.

I am doing B. Tech Food Technology in a renowned institute. I am passionate about the field. I don't think I will make it to a big company during placements. What options

## Don't limit yourself

Uncertain about your career options?  
Low on self-confidence?  
This column may help

do I have? Mifra

Dear Mifra,

Don't limit yourself to the traditional placements. Focus on building a strong skillset and explore diverse opportunities. Leverage your degree across diverse industry roles like food processing and manufacturing (quality control and assurance, production, management, R&D, product development), food safety and regulatory affairs, food analysis and testing, food packaging, food marketing and sales or entrepreneurship.

What about further studies: M.Tech M.Tech in Food Technology or MBA in Food and Agribusiness Management or specialised certifications such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP), food safety, or quality management.

Build your network by attending conferences, and workshops and seek internships or part-time work to gain practical experience. Connect with other students and professionals on LinkedIn. Highlight your technical and soft skills, showcase your projects and relevant experience and be proactive in your job search. You can also consider government jobs in agencies such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) that hire food technologists.

I am in the second year of B.A. Humanities. My interest in Sociology has grown during my UG. I am torn between pursuing my M.A. immediately after

graduation and taking a gap year to prepare for the UPSC exams. What should I do? What are my potential career paths? Indhuja

Dear Indhuja,

Weigh the pros and cons and work on a cost-benefit analysis before deciding. Evaluate your strengths. Are you a self-directed learner who can thrive in a gap year or do you perform better in a structured environment? Managing both M.A. and UPSC requires strength, determination and exceptional time management skills.

If you lean towards the UPSC, then a time-bound gap year is better, as it allows you to cover the vast syllabus and practise for the exam. This may require financial resources for coaching, study materials and a plan that you can follow. You do not want to end up wasting time and resources. If you prefer a career in sociology, doing an M.A. will provide a strong academic foundation for research, teaching, or other careers. It will also be beneficial for the UPSC exam, especially if you choose Sociology as an optional subject.

Apart from the Civil Services, potential career paths include academia and research, social work and development, journalism and media, human resources, market research and analysis, urban planning and policy analysis.

I am a B.Sc. Agriculture graduate. I attempted the

UPSC once but didn't get through. I am preparing again but lack the previous consistency. What can I do to regain it? Keerthana

Dear Keerthana,

Reflect on what is going on and what you want in the long term. Revisit the initial reasons for taking the UPSC. Work on a vision board of your goals and the impact you want to make. Be aware of the challenges and set realistic expectations. Focus on improving your weaknesses. Set sustainable and consistent habits. Create a detailed study schedule by breaking down the syllabus into smaller, manageable tasks with specific time slots for each subject and activity. Ensure that your schedule includes breaks for exercise, and relaxation. Set daily and weekly goals to give you a sense of accomplishment and stay on track.

If you are struggling with gadget addiction, lock them away or hand them to someone during 'study time' and reward yourself with screen time you achieve the goal. Check out the Pomodoro Technique (study for spurts of 25 minutes and take a five-minute break). This can help maintain focus and prevent burnout. Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet, and exercise regularly. Allow time for hobbies and social activities.

Talk to friends, family, or mentors about your struggles and consider joining a study group or an online forum for support and motivation.

**Disclaimer:** This column is merely a guiding voice and provides advice and suggestions on education and careers.

The writer is a practising counsellor and a trainer. Send your questions to eduplus.thehindu@gmail.com with the subject line Off the Edge

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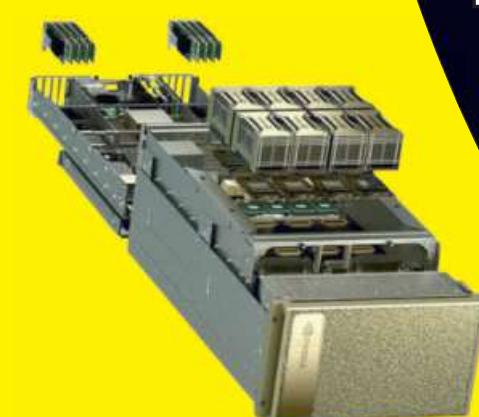
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