



Project based learning in social work: An epistemic approach in teaching learning process

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Abstract

The present project is about the relevance of project based/practice based learning method in social work education. This deals with the non-conventional teaching-learning methodology in social work education. Social work is practice based profession in which practice is considered as 'soul' of the profession. It believes on application approach, hence the pedagogy in social work education should not be only focusing on formal teaching in closed setting but it has to go beyond the it. It has to delimit the boundaries and learning of social work should be learner centric in informal setting by providing them practice based learning tasks.

The new approach of holistic development emphasises on building competency among the students which includes knowledge, skills and attitude. In order to build the competency among learners, teachers also need to be competent and dynamic in terms of delivering the ideas and concepts. Hence, conventional method of lecturing where students have least freedom will not serve the purpose. There has to be shift in approach which provides learner the liberty to reflect, introspect and reform their own understanding about the knowledge they are searching for. Education should lead to empowerment; it should be liberating mechanism and should be based on democratic ideals.

Thus, project based learning/ practice based learning pedagogy which unorthodox and non conventional method will bring certain tangible changes among the learners. This will give students 'worm eye view' by which students will able to see through and experience through the reality and develop their own understanding and competencies.

The present study is based on empirical experiences and available secondary data. In this an attempt has been made to explore the relevance of project and practice based learning method as innovative, dynamic and democratic teaching learning method in social work education.

"Our grand business is not to see what lies dimly in the distance, but to do, what lies clearly at hand"

Carlyle

Keywords: Project based learning, social work education, fieldwork, knowledge

Introduction

Education is an instrument of social change. Social transformation occurs in any society based on the quality of education exists in that particular society. Hence, it is considered as one of the important social institutions of society. It is the process of acquiring knowledge by learning and instruction. The purpose of education is to help students learn to solve complex problems and accomplish complex tasks in day to day life. Education is provided in several stages of through-out the life. These stages includes primary education in childhood which teaches basic things required to learn in childhood especially formal language, elementary and secondary education is provided in adolescent which focuses on preparing foundation for their career and finally in the young hood higher education plays an important role for getting ready for employment and settling down the life. The basic assumption during all these educational phases is to make futuristic responsible citizens for enhancing the quality of life in particular and strengthening the nation in general. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the education is strong nation building by educating young minds.

In a broader way education is one of the important factors in development when it is both conservative and progressive. It conserves the worthwhile culture of past, transmit it to the coming generation and also creates condition which ensure progress. It is reconstruction and reorganisation of past experiences (Taneja, 2003).

As we grow in education the responsibility of educational institutions is also increases. Moreover, teachers' role

becomes very essential. It starts with 'teacher as parent' to 'teacher as mentor and philosopher'. In each stage with the change in purpose and demand of education teachers' role also get changed. Historically teacher's plays the role of mentor who is responsible for moulding the behaviour of students in right and expected way. The methodology may change person to person but the approach remains same whereas students' role was to obey the teachers and follow the ideas of teacher and inculcate the same in their personal and social life. These roles of teacher and students have been changed with invention and introduction various aspects of education in society. As the modes and models of educations are changing with the rapid speed, the approach of education is also changing. Existing situation demands not only values but skills to sustain in the competitive world. Hence, the teaching and learning process is quite challenging as the total approach of the education is different from the history. There is shift in approach from "following and application" to "verifying and application". This shift in approach leads to shift in methodology also. Therefore, we must prepare the students especially in higher education to verify the knowledge and apply the same in their lives to achieve the broader aim of education i.e. enhancing quality of life.

Higher education in India particularly is institutionalized, characterized by higher concentration of importance and leadership for teachers and lesser degree of autonomy for the students who are recipients of the knowledge. This calls for a need to re-orient the pedagogy so as to shift the focus

to more student centric learning. Although it is true that diversity of learners in respect of their background, abilities and other personal attributes will influence the pace and extent of learning, learner-centred education calls for appropriate methodologies that can be used by teachers to provide a variety of learning experiences, including individual and collaborative learning.

Academic disciplines like social sciences in general and social work in particular is more of analysis and application oriented. Many times it is argued that it is matter of subjectivity as the theories and concepts introduced in social sciences and social work are ambiguous and methodology of the knowledge base is also challenged. Therefore, it is necessary for educators and students to build up their understanding of the concepts and theories by practically experiencing it. Unless it is not based on any learning experiences from field, it cannot be claimed to be a knowledge base. Hence, the theories and concepts in social sciences especially in social work has to be tasted, verified and analysed with empirical approach.

Unlike pure sciences, social sciences in general and social work in particular cannot bring out absolute answer to any of the social issue or phenomenon. But strong empirical base would bring out the strong analysis of the social context which will help out to develop the strategies to overcome from any social issues. This is possible because it is tested and verified by the learner in particular social context. Therefore, it becomes necessary for teachers and students to become more project and field oriented in their learning process.

The present study focuses on the importance of project based learning in social work education. Social work education is all about facilitating the change process in society and life of person. The change process of society and humans cannot be taught in classroom, it has to be verified practically into the field. Hence, it is very essential for social work educator to provide platform for students to develop their learning based on real life experiences. Project based learning will help to develop holistic understanding among the students about practical solutions to social problems and innovative strategies to facilitate social change for the betterment of the society.

The present paper focuses on theoretical foundations, importance, advantage, disadvantage of the project base learning method. Further it focuses on relevance of project based learning in social work education for strengthening the quality of teaching learning process.

Project Based Learning/Practice Based Learning

1. Conceptual Understanding

Most of the studies on project based learning methodology discusses the relevance of this teaching method in pure sciences and technology such as biology, chemistry, physics, information technology and computer sciences. Seldom efforts have been made to draw the relevance of project based method in social sciences especially in social work. In this section we will analyse the perspectives and understanding of various researchers on this method.

Constructivism (Perkins, 1991; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978) explains that individuals construct knowledge through interactions with their environment, and each individual's knowledge construction is different.

The most distinctive feature of project-based learning is problem orientation, that is, the idea that a problem or

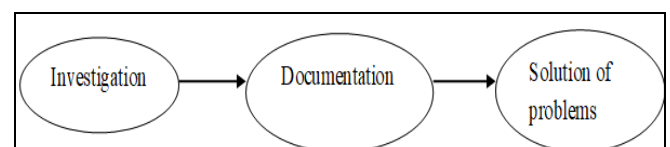
question serves to drive learning activities. This was according to Dewey (1933) at the core of "scientific" or "reflective" thinking, which in his view, should have constituted the goal of education. According to Dewey, adopting this goal would serve at least two functions: solve the problem of ever increasing subject matter abundance (in 1933!) and retain the ardent curiosity of childhood (cf. Boud and Feletti 1999; Brew and Boud 1995).

Scarborough, Swan and others in their article titled Project Based Learning and the role of learning boundaries have highlighted three dimensions *viz.* practice based nature of learning, project autonomy and knowledge integration. This analysis generates a number of propositions on the relationship between the learning generated within projects and its transfer to other parts of the organization.

Thomas John (1997) in his article "A review of Research on Project Based Learning" has provided holistic understanding of Project-based learning (PBL). This is projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; give students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations.

Project-based learning is unorthodox method of teaching. Unlike traditional teaching method, it empowers the learner and provides more autonomy to students. It is gives more emphasis on the learner and provide them opportunity for in-depth investigations of facts and concepts. The origin of the project based learning method can be traced out in the work, John Dewey of early 1900s as he supported "learning by doing" aspect in learning methods. Project Based Learning (PBL) has been described as "a way of learning" (Engle, 1997), a "general educational strategy" (Walton & Matthews, 1989), and a "way of conceiving the curriculum" (Boud & Feletti, 1997).

Project Based Learning (PBL) is dynamic and democratic approach to teaching in higher education. This method is introduced by American philosopher John Dewey. According to him project based learning is practical, experimental and utilitarian approach to teaching and learning process. This method is centre around the project which is practical unit of activity, having educational implications and aims at achieving not only knowledge but understanding and application of skills also. This method functions based on following framework:



(Source: Mohanty, 2003)

Fig 1: process of learning in project based learning method

Project based learning in another words is practical oriented teaching and learning process which gives hands-on learning experiences to learners. It helps to develop critical approach among students which leads to enhance their knowledge base with strong methodological base.

Project Based Learning reflects an explicit commitment to helping students learn not just content, but also the skills for their future knowledge and endeavour. These skills include communication and presentation skills, organisation and time management skills, research and inquiry skill, self

assessment and reflection skills and group participation and leadership skills, critical thinking and emotional intelligence skills, conflict resolution skills, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, etc.

It is very effective method as it is student centric and planning is done by student themselves. Planning and implementation of the project is based on the students' learning expectations and outcomes. The learning process and supervision is facilitated in natural and real life situations.

2. Definitions

According to Stevenson 'project based learning is a systematic act carried to completion in its natural settings'.

Kilpatrick defines it as a "whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment".

Good in 1973 defines "project based learning as a significant practical unit of activity having educational value and aimed at one or more definite foals of understanding, involves investigations and solutions of problem. It is carried to completion by pupils and teachers in a natural real-life manner".

Some important educational ideas emphasized in project based learning include the following:

- An explicit focus by teachers and students on the transfer of learning
- Discovery-based learning, learning by doing, active learning, being engaged
- Peer teaching and peer evaluation
- Authentic assessment
- Self-assessment
- Teachable moments
- Problem solving
- Intrinsic motivation
- A unifying goal is to help students gain increased expertise as independent, self-sufficient, lifelong learners.

Relevance of Project based learning in social work

Social Work is emerging academic discipline in social sciences which has just completed 8 decades. The profession aims at bringing about positive change in the society. It is made up of people dedicated to helping others change some aspect of their social functioning. Social workers help people to improve their interactions with various aspects of their environment- their children, parents, spouse, family, friends, co-workers, or even organisations and the whole communities. Social work is a profession committed to improving the quality of life for people through various activities directed toward social change.

Social work is a humanizing profession and social workers are action-oriented people. Social work is not merely a leisure time activity now. It has developed into a full-fledged profession with definite knowledge, techniques skills, specific attitude and a code of ethics, which are acquired by a social worker.

Thus Social work is a vocation, it has a highly developed and methodically teachable technique of serving people suffering from disharmony or maladjustments in social life or from some such ailments. Social work is based on scientific knowledge. It views human a biological, social and psychological entity and her/his behaviour can be adequately explained in terms of certain "needs", natural or

acquired, which originate in the somatic, social and psychic aspects of his personality.

Sometimes the social worker offers a direct service or helps individuals, families, or other groups on a face-to-face basis. In some situations they help people solve specific problems while other times social workers counsel people to solve problems or engage in activities that will enhance the quality of their lives -whether or not they experience an identifiable problem.

The services of the social worker might also be provided on behalf of individuals or groups of peoples. These indirect services help to make social institutions such as organizations, neighbourhoods, communities or even the policies of a government or laws of a country more responsive to the needs of people.

Thus, social work education is not an academic discipline to teach theories and concepts in classroom but learner need experience and exposure of social reality to be critical about the social issues. This can be only be done by project and practice base learning. Teaching them theories and concepts of society and development with lecture and conventional method will not help them to have sound knowledge and understanding of the social situation. They need to be given specific tasks to develop their knowledge base.

In order to make students aware about the social reality emphasis laid on fieldwork. Field work is an integral part of social work education which is based on projects and practice. It is "learning by doing" aspect of social work education. It is a "Praxis" process where student reflects their theoretical knowledge in the field and similarly brings practical experiences in classroom which helps them to build their understanding about the social work profession and provides experiential learning for the social work students. Fieldwork enables the student to integrate and reinforce the knowledge acquired in the classroom with actual practice under competent supervision provided by field instructors who may be members of the faculty of the Institute or staff of an agency.

Field work in social work education is guided and planned process under the trained professional social worker. Learner has to plan their field work according to the context where they are placed. The main purpose of field work is to develop an understanding about the social work and identify the role of professional social worker in various fields of social work practice. It includes clear understanding the issues and problems of partner groups, preparing action plan, exploring possible intervention areas, actual interventions, evaluation of the interventions and concluding the field work activities.

Fieldwork plays the pivotal role in social work education. Basic knowledge, skills and attitudes of professional education are achieved through fieldwork training. Fieldwork gives opportunities for the student social workers to learn field based expertise, practical skills, essential values and attitudes that are relevant for the practice of social work profession. It offers the students to see for themselves how far the theory and principles learnt in the classrooms are applicable or transferable to real situations and check for themselves how far they are capable of handling social work problems in the community. Through fieldwork as project based learning method following components are developed.

1. Knowledge

In fieldwork students verify and reflect the theories and concepts taught them in classroom and develop their understanding based on their own experiences with regard to particular concept or theory. They are expected to develop their knowledge about human behaviour, society, social institutions, social and individual issues, policies and programmes for social and community development, etc. They also develop their knowledge about the strategies and interventions for dealing with social issues.

2. Skills, Techniques and Tools

Skill is the worker's capacity to apply knowledge and understanding to a given situation. Skills in social worker students are developed through teaching and training. Students through this skill of programming arrive at satisfactory and fruitful relationships. They are skilful in analyzing the social situation, individual and groups

feelings, using agency and community resources, serving the client for self dependent and diagnosing and treatment, working in team, project planning and management, communication and interpersonal skills, listening and observation skills, decision making skills, stakeholder analysis, fund raising, etc.

3. Attitude

Attitude plays vital role in social work profession. Unless a student has a positive attitude towards profession s/he cannot be committed towards the profession. Hence, fieldwork and project based learning helps to develop right attitude among social work students. This also helps to overcome with pre-assumption notions and biases towards certain situations, people and community and social issues. Field exposures help students to see through the reality and be empathetic towards it. Comparatively attitude carries more importance than knowledge and skills

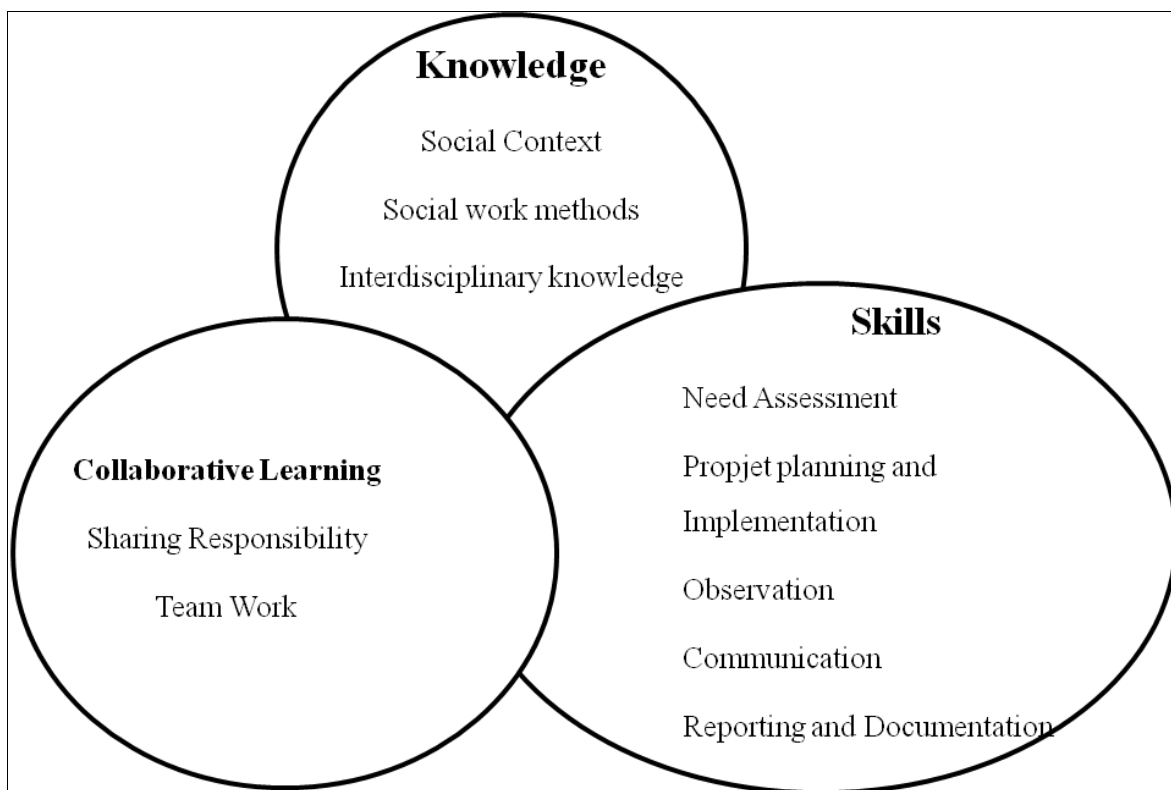


Fig 3: Learning in Project Based Learning Method

2. Framework for Project Based Learning

Project Based Learning process is where student groups begin by identifying the nature of the problem; they must develop knowledge of the problem and then move toward providing a workable solution to the problem. This requires a structured and thorough approach and students are therefore encouraged to address the problem in a fairly systematic way

Social work has a separate identity in the area of education. In most of the countries there are provisions for graduates and postgraduate level of education in the universities and other teaching institutions. Students are directed to implement their classroom knowledge into the field work agencies. They are placed in various types of social welfare agencies like hospitals, beggar homes, after care homes, labour welfare agencies, schools, slums, community centers etc. They are also placed in rural and slum communities to

understand the social context and issues and plan appropriate intervention to initiate the problem solving of these communities. Students are sent in the fields with proper orientation in small groups of not more than five students in each group. The allocation of students in groups and field settings has to be done systematically by understanding the students' background, potentials and learning outcomes.

Therefore in order to provide organised and professional learning experiences to pupils, we should have proper framework and models of project based learning. Lets us discuss the framework for project based learning in social work education. As project based method is systematic approach to learning process hence it has to be organised in gradual phases.

Project base learning is supervised learning process under the guidance of trained and competent faculty. In this

process supervision and monitoring plays vital role as they help and facilitate students' learning process. In each phase of learning, students should be guided properly hence supervisory meetings in groups and individually need to be scheduled frequently to monitor and evaluate the learning process and progress of the students. Supervisor also

seeks continuous feedback from the students about the challenges and learning opportunities of the students. The mistakes and challenges faced by students have to be rectified in the field only so it will rejuvenate the learning process without any hurdles.

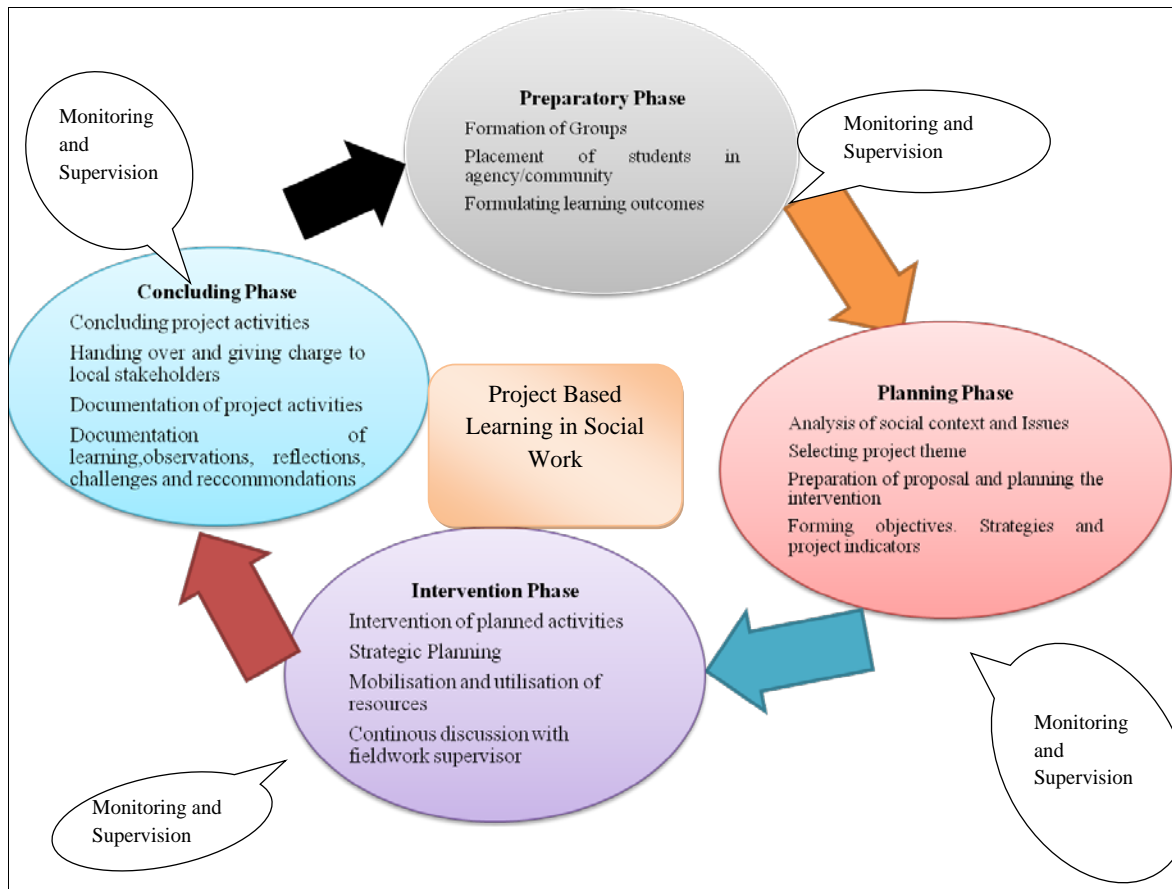


Fig 4: Project Based Learning Framework in Social Work

It starts with the induction phase in which students are oriented towards the learning goals and opportunities in project/field. In this phase the crucial part is group formation. Students are divided into small groups of four-five members each. Each group is given specific field and faculty supervisor. This phase is identified as rapport building and inductive phase.

In the second phase students are oriented about the field situation. The major tasks in this phase includes situational analysis, identification of issues and problems, finding gap between theoretical knowledge and reality they have experienced and accordingly preparing plan for intervention. The second phase is termed as understanding and getting equipped with the field context.

Based on the second phase, students' develop intervention plan in third phase. This phase is very crucial phase as they actually start working on the small project for dealing with the identified problems. In this phase students share various responsibilities accordingly individual qualities and competencies. Here, students have autonomy to use their own experiences and prior knowledge and develop and sharpen their skills at the higher level of professionalism. Most of the learning takes place in this phase only. Hence, strong supervision and close monitoring is required from the faculty. There may be chances where students create

conflict in group as they have to perform comparatively better than other students. However, this conflict is good and students may have ability to resolve this conflict by their own.

The final phase is equally important as all these three phases. After the completion of the project proper termination is very important. Students learn the process of winding up the project in a systematic and professional manner. Students' are also taught about the withdrawal process. In this phase students organised their learning as per the set goals in the induction phase and write a report of the whole process along with the learning, observations, reflections and the challenges they have faced during the process. The final step in this phase is presentation of the whole learning process in-front of other students. This gives students proper feedback from other students and also provide mutual and peer learning. The idea of having presentation at the end is to provide platform different groups to learn about other projects and field realities from different groups.

Discussions and Analysis

There is a larger debate in academics about the strong methodology of social work discipline. It is argued that social work education does not have proper methodology by

which knowledge is created and imparted. Hence project/practice based learning method would provide proper solution to this argument. A social work is application oriented; it should have proper methodology by which students are exposed to the field context. Through this non-conventional and unorthodox teaching learning method liberty is provided to students. Project based method will give *worm-eye view* to social work students which will enable them to get acquainted with field reality from the below.

According to theories of teaching methods; teaching should flow from known to unknown, simple to complex and concrete to abstract. Project based learning in social work will also help students to relate their known experience to the tasks they are undertaking and get to know the knowledge and skills which they are not aware about. It will also help their to start their projects from simple and small activities which they can take up easily in initial phase and gradually move towards the complex task in later phases of their learning. In this whole process students are able to develop their understanding about the abstract things which they are least aware.

Project/practice/field based learning is considered as soul of the learning process in social work education. Unless students are not exposed to the practice oriented activities the theoretical knowledge and concepts are worthless. Hence, project based learning make learning process more lively.

Nevertheless, students may start developing feeling of reluctant if they finding the task difficult of are not comfortable with the task given to them then it will lead to dissatisfaction among students. This dissatisfaction can harm the learning process of the individual students. Therefore, faculty need to be in close contact with each student in their group to ensure smooth learning process.

Conclusion

Knowledge is core theme in education. Knowledge leads to empowerment and competency development. Along with knowledge skills are required to be competent and capable to excel in this competitive world. Therefore knowledge and skills are two sides of the coin; they are valueless without each other. But the fact is maintaining the equal balance between these two important aspects. Hence, the source of these two dimensions of educational and learning process is project oriented teaching learning methodology. Through this we can easily balance between the knowledge and skills required for students' development. Project based teaching learning method will help students to enhance their quality of life by increasing knowledge which is justified by themselves and upgrading the skills which are gained during the process of justification of knowledge. Last but not the list, the right attitude of learning, which is another important component of teaching learning process. During the process of learning students get familiar with many activities, experiences and inferences which help them to perceive them with proper attitude based on moral values of social and individual life. So, attitude and right perspective is over arching structure in education in general and teaching-learning process in particular.

Thus, project based learning/practice based learning/field based learning is very much applicable to develop

knowledge, skills and attitude among students with their empirical experiences.

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