From Teaching to Enabling Assimilation

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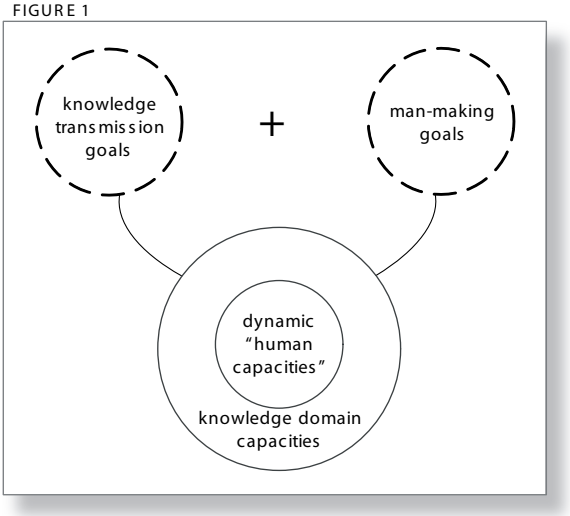
The ideal of education that dominates schooling in India is 'transmission of knowledge' from teacher to student. A teacher who lives by this ideal will measure his or her own success through parameters such as acquisition of relevant information by the student, comprehension of concepts and ideas, and application of concepts to various real-life situations. In contrast, a teacher who seeks to live by the 'man-making ideal' would use a completely different set of parameters. These parameters would include development of self-esteem, *atma-shraddha*, in the student; growth of the student's character as well as intellectual and physical capacities—*atma-bala*, *buddhi-bala*, and *bahu-bala*; and awakening of the infinite potential inherent in the student.

In this context let us now examine the challenge we seek to address: How to achieve the goals of the man-making ideal within the context of an existing schooling system that is clearly built on the transmission-of-knowledge ideal? It will be obvious to any teacher who has struggled to reconcile these ideals that the task is difficult for some very obvious reasons: i) the current model of school education, which involves large classrooms, information-centered curricula, and an excessive focus on examination performance; ii) the aspiration of students, and parents, which is built around 'degree acquisition' or 'admission to prestigious institutions' or 'job acquisition' rather than personality and character development; iii) the limitations of teachers themselves, who find the struggle and effort associated with man-making educational practices far too taxing in the context of pressures exerted by school and educational authorities.

How does one, in effect, accomplish the dual goal of developing dynamic human capacities needed for a mature human personality while, at the same time, master the 'knowledge-domain capacities' required by the educational and commercial systems? (See Figure 1).

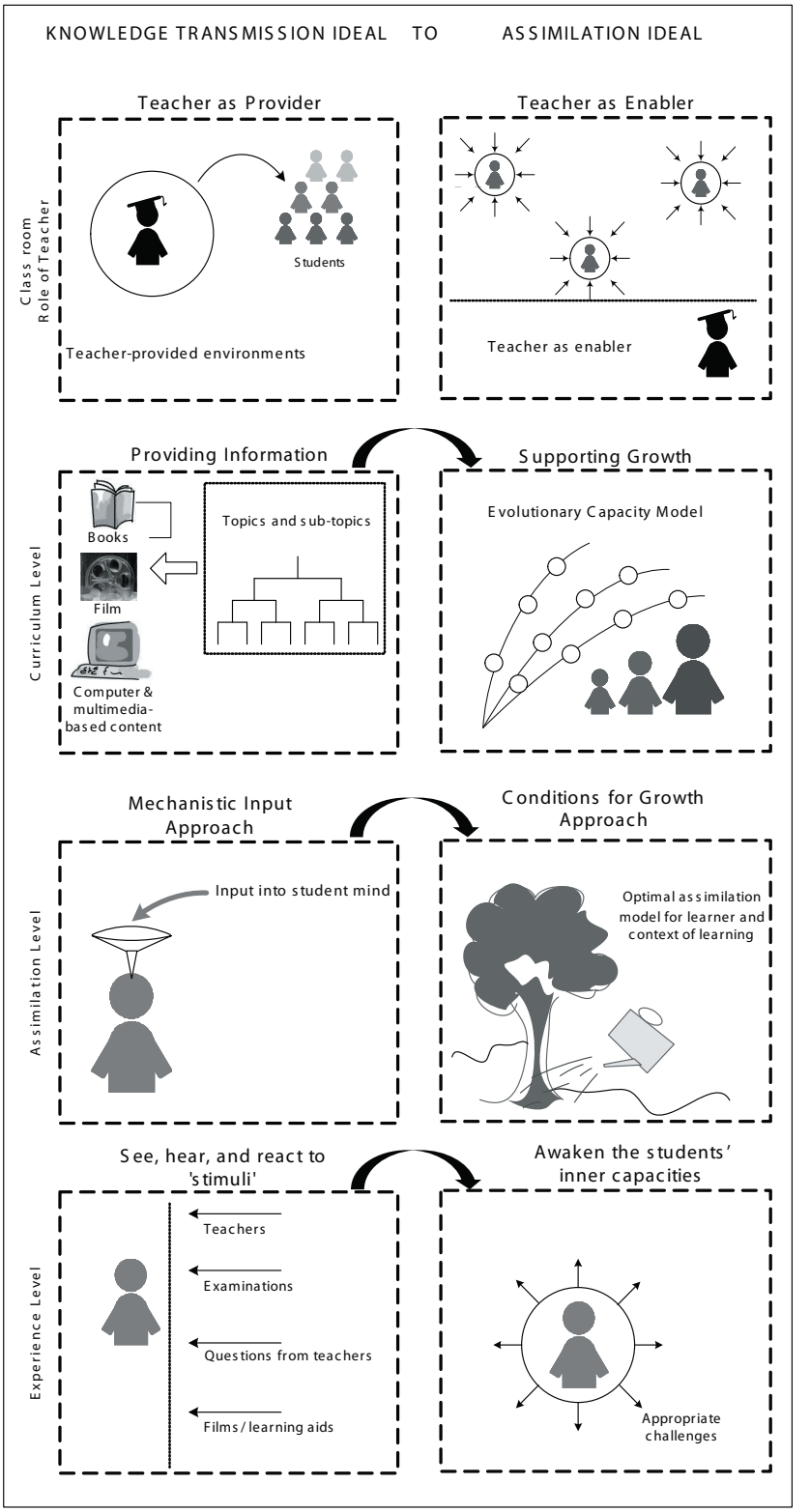
FIGURE 1



Assimilation of Knowledge

This paper proposes that teachers who seek to integrate the man-making ideal into the contemporary educational system could potentially accomplish their objectives if students were able to assimilate knowledge. Assimilation of knowledge means not just comprehension of ideas but the translation of ideas into a transformed human being. Put differently, assimilation of knowledge results in developing the student's capacity to transform himself, the situation in which he finds himself, and the possibilities open to him by effectively leveraging the ideas and knowledge available to him. However, a school or educational institution that seeks to promote such an assimilation of ideas by its students will need to bring about fundamental shifts in thinking at all levels of the educational design. These shifts are explored next (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2



Shift 1: Role of the teacher • From 'teacher as provider' to 'teacher as enabler'. Assimilation means that the responsibility for self-transformation is awakened in the student. This responsibility is invoked when the teacher subtly modifies his or her role in the classroom from 'provider of knowledge' to 'enabler of learning'.

Shift 2: Classroom Context • From 'providing information' to 'supporting growth'. What is communicated by the teacher in the class? In the current educational model teachers elaborate upon what is already available in the textbooks or provide alternate sources of information that may be more relevant and comprehensible. In the assimilation model the teacher provides 'triggers for learning' so that the student's capacity to engage with the subject matter is improved. Such an approach amplifies the teacher's contribution to the educational process and the student's love for and involvement with knowledge and self-development.

Shift 3: Instructional Approach • From 'mechanistic input' to 'conditions for growth'. In the mechanistic-input model information is an asset 'poured into' the student's mind, much as fuel is filled in a motor vehicle. In the conditions-for-growth model knowledge is viewed as a nutrient or catalyst that can invoke, speed up, and ease the student's struggles with knowledge and capacity development.

Shift 4: Educational Experience • From 'see, hear, and react to stimuli' to 'engage with challenges'. Knowledge is born in a space beyond the senses. It is born within the human being, deeper, beyond the senses. The trans-sensory nature of knowledge means that we ought to go beyond the current obsessions with multimedia and multisensory educational experiences to create challenges that invoke inner excitement that comes from meeting challenges head-on. The outcome, as in the case of the other shifts, is deeper ownership of knowledge, greater assimilation of ideas, and awakening of the evolutionary potential in the heart of every student.

Practical Models of Education

We now translate these principle-level shifts into a practical model for classroom education. At the heart of this new model is the recognition that the relationship between teacher and student is neither a 'push' relationship in which the teacher just gives knowledge to the student nor a 'pull' relationship in which the student's self-effort and practice are the main cause of growth, but it is a 'sense-respond' relationship where the teacher enables assimilation of knowledge by the student.

In the assimilation model both teacher and student are seen as 'co-creators' of the learning experience. Co-creating involves a journey that brings together teacher and student, who at the beginning of the process are far-off from each other—not in physical or emotional terms, but in terms of knowledge. Through this process they exchange thoughts fluently, until finally teacher and student become one. In this final stage the student undertakes a conscious practice, which the teacher enables, until they become one single entity learning together. This is a vision of education that reflects an ancient Indian tradition: the idea of teacher and student as one single whole, with the teacher enabling the student's growth and the student growing in the environment provided by the teacher.

Illumine Knowledge Resources, a knowledge-enablement laboratory based in Mumbai, has translated, through its research over the past decade, this vision of assimilation into a simple four-step architected journey used by the teacher or the educational leader to achieve predictable and replicable assimilation outcomes. This model, easily adoptable by any school or educational institution seeking improved quality of education, is described next (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

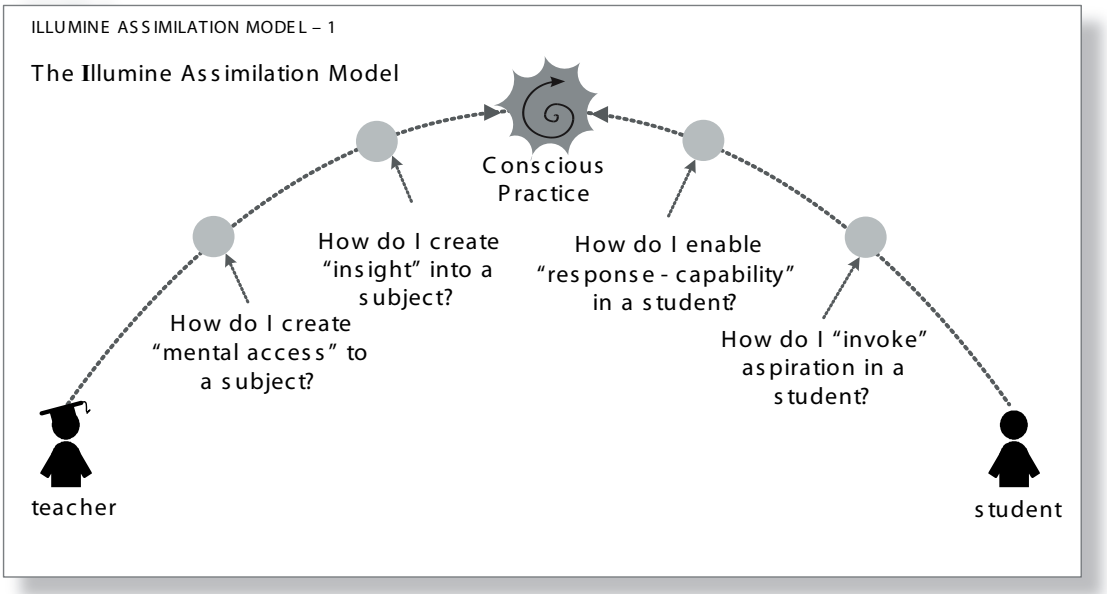
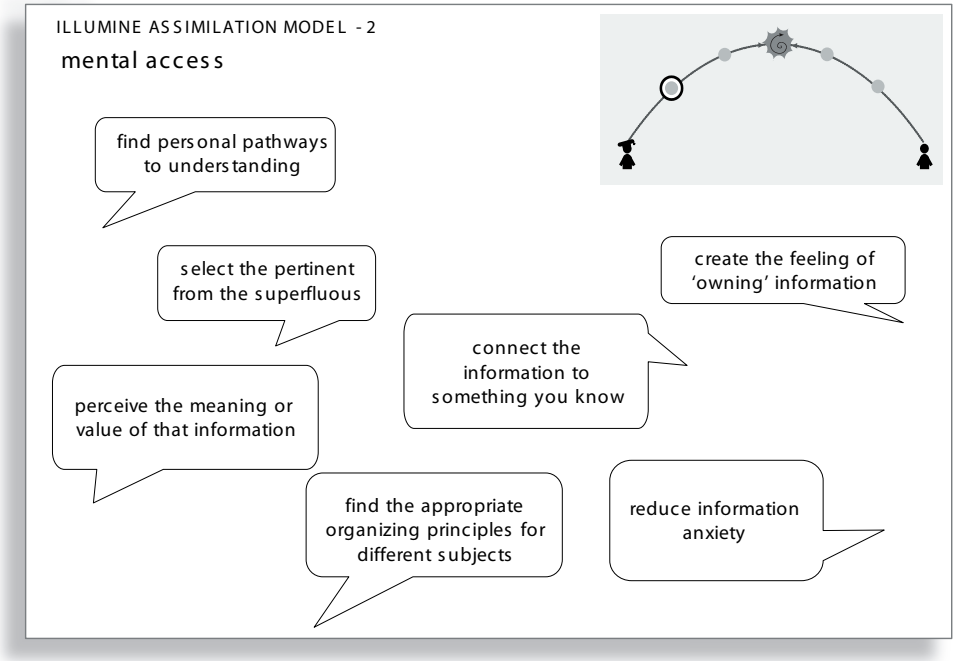


FIGURE 4



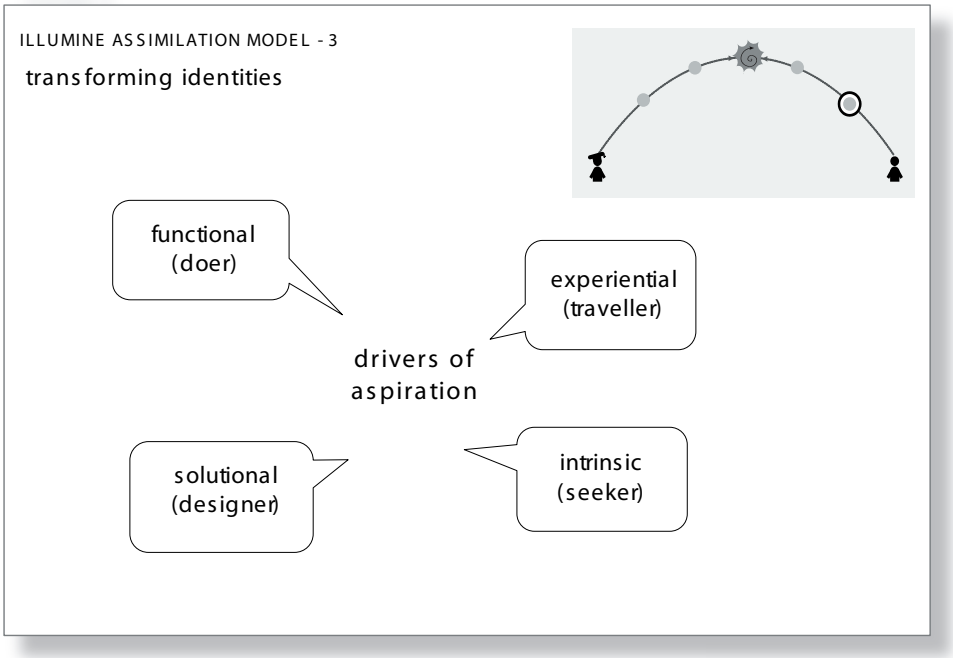
The Illumine Assimilation Model says that the teacher in any classroom needs to address the following four key dimensions of the assimilation challenge: i) provide mental access to the subject matter—knowledge transmission goal; ii) invoke aspiration in the student—human capacity goal; iii) create insight into the subject—knowledge transmission goal; iv) support response-capability in the student—human capacity goal. Each of these dimensions is explained in the subsequent sections.

i) Mental Access to the Subject • Firstly, it is important to recognize that 'mental access' is different from 'physical access'. A glaring example of having only physical access to knowledge occurs when a student repeats something verbatim from memory but is unable to explain that subject in his or her own words. Mental access implies providing a means for the student to 'make sense' of the subject matter—in the context of his or her own knowledge and experience. One method of creating mental access is by providing a newcomer with a map. A well-known example is the map of the London underground railway. Visitors to London make sense of London by using this map, instead of using a geographical map. Figure 4 provides some examples of how a teacher can create mental access to a subject.

ii) Invoking Aspirations • Mental access is not enough, because the student has to aspire to learn. If a student does not seek to learn, there is nothing a teacher can do. Therefore, the next step of the journey is to awaken the student's aspiration. This requires a shift from 'ambition' to 'aspiration'. The surest signal of ambition is the urge to acquire things. If a student wants to merely acquire knowledge, then he or she will never feel like learning and will instead find faster, shorter ways of getting quick results. How is aspiration invoked? A student, in order to aspire for more understanding, more capacity, more assimilation of knowledge, must see the value and purpose of knowledge in the context of his or her deeper identities. Students have different identities with respect to knowledge (see Figure 5).

• A student with a functional identity thinks: 'I am performing the role of a student. My function is to pass an exam, so let me learn what is relevant for the exam.'

FIGURE 5



• A student with an experiential identity thinks: 'I am a traveller. I want to experience knowledge. So, I shall read widely and learn from a wide range of sources and subjects.'

• A student with a solutional identity thinks: 'I have this problem, how do I solve it? Let me search and learn whatever is necessary to be able to design a solution.'

• A student with a seeker identity thinks: 'I seek because I find that knowledge is inherently or intrinsically beautiful. I feel transformed by it.'

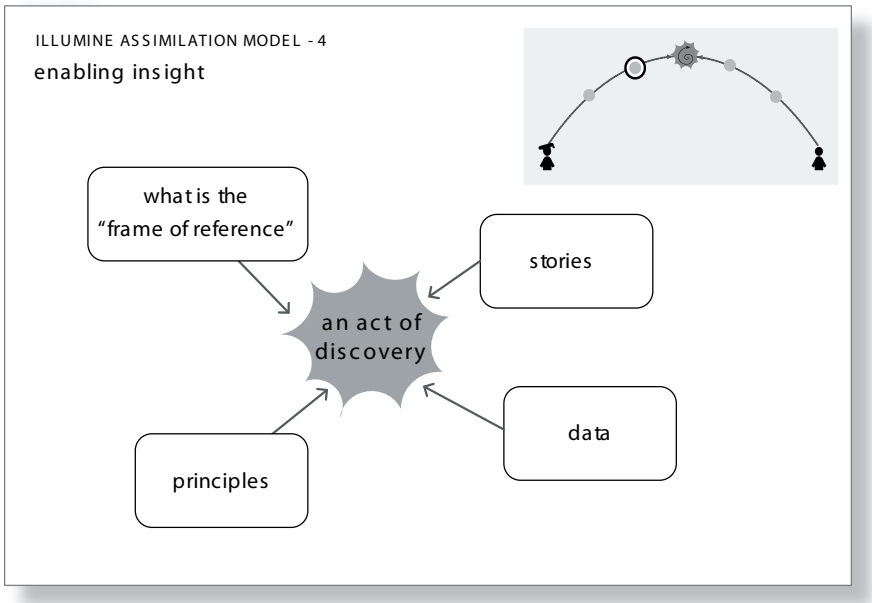
• If the student somehow acquires a 'victim identity', he thinks: 'I am a victim of the system, a victim of my teachers, and my parents' requirements.' For such a student, engaging creatively and freely with knowledge becomes very difficult.

In the light of the above, an effective teacher enables students to identify and adopt appropriate identities that encourage assimilation of knowledge.

iii) Enabling Insight • The third step in the assimilation model is enabling insight. Insight takes place when the student develops an 'inner recognition' of the ideas being presented by the teacher. This inner recognition is an act of discovery by the student. The role of the teacher at this stage—after providing mental access and invoking aspiration—is to provide triggers for this act of discovery (see Figure 6, next page). Students achieve this inner recognition through a variety of mental capacities. They include the following: a) reasoning, the use of data; b) perception, the use of frames of reference; c) narratives, the use of stories; and d) principles, the use of scenarios. The teacher encourages the development and utilization of these mental capacities in the student, enabling thereby the discovery and recognition of inner knowledge and insight in a more predictable and systematic manner.

iv) Creating Response Capability • The fourth step in the assimilation model is to create 'response capability'. Once inner knowing is generated in the student, the teacher directs this knowledge so that it manifests as dynamic human capacity. This manifestation of dynamic human capacity takes place when the student faces appropriate—not too hard, not too trivial—challenges, both within the knowledge domain and in the real world. How is a challenge different from problems set in every examination? The difference lies in the outcomes

FIGURE 6



sought. A teacher who sets 'problems' wants 'answers' or 'set solutions' to the problem. A teacher who provides 'challenges' wants the student to respond 'creatively', without the student being necessarily right or wrong (see Figure 7). This creative response comes only when the student goes beyond the boundaries of memory—reaction—and enters the realm of possibilities and potentialities. At this stage, knowledge is being assimilated into transformed human potential.

The Final Stage: Conscious Practice

By this stage, the teacher has steadily enabled the student in the journey of assimilation. First, the student gained mental access and thereby made the subject mentally proximate. Second, the student's aspiration was invoked as a consequence of alignment between the subject-matter and his or her own self-esteem. Third, the student was enabled to discover insights and thereby develop inner knowing. Fourth, the student was encouraged to leap beyond memory and previous knowledge and enter the space of evolution in and through knowledge.

Now the teacher and the student are together, in cognitive terms. The next goal for them both is to continue growing and evolving in all aspects of knowledge related to the subject at hand. This continued assimilation and consequent evolution will take place when both undertake a conscious practice of the subject, a practice which is combined with awareness of potential improvement and growth. This last stage is usually the realm of truly committed teachers and truly committed students. For the rest, to achieve success in even one or more of the steps of the assimilation journey will mean a great advancement over the current reality in India's educational system.

FIGURE 7