

Educational Approaches

The overall approach we use in each subject or school is largely determined by the viewpoint and experience of the staff, classroom organization, number of students, type of curriculum material, and availability of enrichment materials. However, all teachers should be familiar with various ways to teach to allow for flexibility.

Any of these would be acceptable for teaching academics to devotee children, and all can be academically effective if used wholeheartedly. However, generally we want to emphasize an educational approach that is based on sense control, discipline of the mind, and respect of authority. It is wise for each school to decide on an overall approach. Then, other philosophical approaches can determine the program for a particular section of the school, e.g. older varnasrama students. Another approach is to use a different educational approach for different subjects. For example, a school could teach reading, penmanship, arithmetic, and grammar with standard textbooks. History, geography, composition, and science could be taught using the unit approach. Bhagavad-gita could then be taught using the classical approach. It is most important to know and understand the approach behind what goes on in the classroom, to study it, and get the most value from its advantages. It is also important to know what each cannot do. We don't want to simply put teachers in classrooms with material and not have a clear picture of how we view education.

Different educators have analyzed approaches to education differently. The editors of *The Teaching Home*, divide education into classical, traditional, early academics, principle, worktexts/mastery, delayed academic, unit, delight directed, Charlotte Mason's, and John Holt's. In her *Big Book of Home Learning*, volume 1, Mary Pride divides the academic orientation of home school suppliers into back to basics, classic/traditional, computer-assisted, free of invited, principle, public school, textbook/workbook, unit, video, and Waldorf. Eric Johnson, in *Teaching School*, discusses a textbook-based approach, unit study (with year-long themes), and an eclectic program that combines Charlotte Mason's and John Holt's ideas. In *Baby and Child Care* Dr. Benjamin Spock advocates the unit approach, comparing it to the spiral of most textbooks. John Bear, when examining learning for a mature student, divides approaches into practical life experience, correspondence, self-study, learning contract, and traditional.

The following summaries are based on a thorough study of educational publishers such as Konos and Saxon as well as the many courses and materials mentioned in the bibliography of *Vaikuntha Children*.

1. Classical

The classical approach to education has children spend the first years primarily in memorization and organization of details. When the child matures and starts to argue and contradict, he is taught how to present his ideas and realizations in an elegant and persuasive manner. It should be clear that the higher stages of this system are meant for brahmanas and maybe ksatriyas. This system was used in ancient Greece when higher learning was generally for intellectually inclined students.

2. Standard/Spiral

The standard method used in most Western schools presently relies primarily on textbooks. Students read the material silently or out loud, or have the selection read to them by the teacher. The teacher adds insight during and after such reading. Such additions are often based on suggestions in the teacher's edition. The class then practices the lesson as a group, perhaps with examples on the chalkboard. The student then demonstrates his knowledge by answering questions, demonstrating (as in science) or performing some activities. The teacher plans the lesson, presents it, gives guidance, and evaluates the student's progress.

Most standard textbooks employ a spiral approach. For approximately three to four weeks, one topic area of the subject is covered. The student then takes a unit test on that area. Then, for the next month, another area is studied with another unit test. Each year the series returns to the same topic areas again, covering more quickly what was studied last year, and presenting a more complex understanding of that area. Each year one or two new areas are also introduced. Within each month's topic area study, one or two days may (or may not) be used to review old material from that year.

This standard method has the major advantage of ease for the teacher, particularly if he is inexperienced or pressed for time. All the research, diagnosis, remedial work, and evaluation is built into the textbook and related materials.

If you learned with such an approach in school, you probably know the major drawbacks. By the time the student comes to the topic again the next year, he has forgotten it. Because a topic is “dropped” for a considerable time after each unit test, students don’t see the relevance of their learning. They are not using it. So, why is it important? It is also very boring to work on the same concept, every day, for three or four weeks. This is compounded by the student’s lack of understanding, which makes the material difficult. In fact, it is very difficult for long-term understanding to occur with a spiral. Work is then boring and hard. The teacher cannot understand why most of the students do not “get it” after studying the same thing one month a year for five years.

The spiral approach works under three conditions: first, if the student is individually interested in the subject and uses the knowledge frequently in independent work outside the classroom; second, if the teacher supplements and modifies the textbook to overcome the problems; and third, if the subject matter (spelling comes to mind) is of such a nature that the student is practically forced to keep using the knowledge daily. In the third case, however, understanding may not occur in many students unless the teacher reminds them of the principle taught in the book when doing a related assignment.

3. Principle

The principle approach uses Srila Prabhupada’s books as the basis and guideline. The teacher researches the scriptures to identify Krsna’s purpose and principles for a subject; reasons from these truths through the subject with the student; relates the principles of the subject to the student’s character and talents; and has the student use notebooks to record the individual application of spiritual principles to his life.

Although scripturally based, the principle approach relates subjects to scripture, rather than scripture to subjects, as is done in the concept or unit approach. The teacher starts with the subject—geography, for example—and then finds passages of scripture to explain or highlight various points. The students are involved in such research, keeping detailed notes for further study.

4. Mastery Learning

The mastery learning method uses texts, often “worktext” in which the students write, which can easily be used to establish an individual program of learning. The texts are self-instructional, requiring minimal guidance and control by the teacher. These enable a teacher to easily handle a large and diverse group of children, while allowing each child to work at his own pace in each subject. Students progress only when they demonstrate thorough knowledge of the material. This is accomplished by having the student himself, another student, or the teacher, check his work frequently (every two weeks is the maximum). The student must then correct all mistakes, or otherwise work on problem areas. Students who don’t score very well on periodic tests must repeat the section until it is mastered.

The purpose is to have work “overlearned” so that “automaticity” can be achieved. At this stage the mechanics become automatic, letting the student concentrate on higher levels of thinking. For example, we want a student’s ability to decode reading, or to understand the relationship between symbol and sound, to become automatic. Then he can progress to comprehension and analysis.

4a. Programmed

Programmed learning is mastery taken to the limit. It takes the student through the material in very small steps, testing constantly. In this way, a student rarely makes a mistake. Any misconceptions are immediately rectified. This type of learning is stable and rarely forgotten. Students also learn more quickly than by standard methods. It is used in some textbooks and by expert tutors. This type of learning is easily adaptable to computers.

4b. Incremental

Incremental learning also teaches a subject in very small portions. However, unlike programmed learning, which may work within the framework of a “spiral,” incremental learning never drops one topic to go on to a new one.

Everything learned is practiced and used constantly. Suppose we aim to teach ten different grammatical conceptions within one year. First we teach part of concept one, then we practice concept one for a week while each day introducing the first parts of concepts two, three and four. We continue practicing all concepts introduced and then teach the second part of concept one. This method is extremely effective because it makes learning natural and easy. Skills and materials are rarely forgotten, although learning appears, at first, to take longer than with standard textbooks. The students really “master” the information, using it “automatically.”

5. Unit

The unit study approach combines the study of several subjects around a particular theme. The theme can be mundane or based on a study of Prabhupada’s books. This approach is particularly useful for multilevel teaching since all ages study a topic together, but have different individual assignments and projects. For example, the teacher may select a verse and purport from Bhagavad-gita as the day’s theme. In English class, students in the younger grades identify the nouns in a section, while older students write sentences with those nouns. For history and geography, students have a project or discussion based on topics mentioned in the verse and purport. For spelling and composition, students at all levels write about the verse and then study the spelling of difficult words. Principles of logic are studied with reference to Srila Prabhupada’s arguments. Units can be determined on a weekly or monthly basis, as well. In such a case, the multilevel class studies, for example, fish. All subject areas are then tied into this theme. Students research and write about fish, draw fish, center their mathematics around fish, study how fish influenced history or about different fish in different geographic regions, and so on. Again, each student or group of students do individually assigned work within the general area.

This approach clearly places a large burden on the teacher, although once lesson plans are prepared, they can be used again the following years. Programs using the unit approach are commercially available, needing modification. Please note that the initial reading instruction (phonics or linguistics), and basic mathematics computation need to be taught separately from the unit studies.

5a. Concept

There’s a modified unit approach sometimes called the concept approach. It has the ease of multilevel teaching found with unit studies without as much teacher preparation. For each subject, the teacher determines one concept that all levels will study together. In mathematics, it may be fractions, or in English it may be verbs. In logic it could be recognizing relationships. She gives the same general instruction to all the students but then each student or group of students does work on verbs according to their ability level. This was commonly used in one-room schoolhouses.

The concept approach can be used by modifying standard textbooks. The teacher, with the concept of “poetry,” finds that section in each of the teachers’ editions she would need for each level. She decides which of the suggestions she will use to introduce the day’s lessons. She then notes which pages in the student editions each pupil, or group, will work on after her introduction. If the concept calls for students to work without a text, she notes what individual assignments mentioned in the teachers’ editions should be assigned to each student.

Certain publishers have made concept/multilevel guides available that correspond to their materials. At this writing, none is suitable for devotees, and have use only as a model.

(We could argue that most standard textbooks teach a particular “concept” of each subject at a time. The “concept approach” as described above applies to a multilevel or individualized classroom only.)

6. Delight Directed

Delight directed study is a unit approach that is based on the student’s interests. The teacher designs ten or twelve assignments, covering all academic subject areas, from that interest. This is restricted to very organized and experienced teachers, or teaching a very small number of children on a tutorial basis. It also works better for older students.

7. Real Books

The “real” books approach of Charlotte Mason involves a minimal amount of time in learning the basics of academics, such as reading and arithmetic. Other subjects should be learned by reading and discussing related books (not textbooks). The children should be involved in “real life” activities as much as possible.

8. Informal

Informal education, advocated by John Holt, is child-centered and directed. It is often called “unschooling.” Teachers must be ideal models, allow their students to be involved in adult activities with them, surround the students with good books, and respond with careful attention to the child’s interests and concerns. This approach can be valuable in certain subject areas, particularly with some older students.

Informal education is used far more often in a home school rather than an institution, as it is by definition anti-institution and anti-regimentation. Parents who practice John Holt’s approach completely do not initiate learning experiences or attempt to “teach” their children in the ordinary sense of the term. It is not unusual for children educated in this way to delay reading until they are nine to twelve years old, and to focus only on subjects that interest them rather than heeding a syllabus.

A surprising number of children who are educated at home with informal approaches learn as much or more than they would have in a more structured, teacher-directed program. Their learning is sometimes no more imbalanced than a traditional pupil who does not pay attention in particular courses. It should be carefully noted that many of the parents who are attracted by Holt’s ideas are very well educated and provide a stimulating academic environment in their home as the children’s hourly fare.

The disadvantages of this approach are obvious in cases where the parents are not extremely academically inclined with a tremendous amount of time to personally interact with their children. The educational results are also unsatisfactory when the child is not intensely interested in academic pursuits. A home with many nonacademic distractions, such as television, will more likely produce an illiterate than a child who is excited about learning. In a school, it is common for a completely informal approach to lead to chaos, disrespect for teachers, and poor academic understanding. This is probably due to the social distraction, and the fact that most schools are too isolated from the types of experience and opportunity that allow some parents to have success with this approach.

It should be obvious to the reader that detailed instruction for the Krsna conscious teacher in all of the above approaches does not now exist. However, even if the school uses primarily a standard textbook approach, mastery learning materials can be used for certain courses at certain levels. If we see a student with a great interest in a particular subject, we may help him develop an individual program of learning and take him out of the standard textbooks for a while. Some students need primarily hands-on activities as they mature, while others thrive on intellectual rigor. In addition, some approaches are geared more for homogeneous classrooms, some for multilevel, and some for tutorial teaching.

Before leaving the realm of educational approach, we should mention some that have little, if any, place in a Krsna conscious school. Ironically, these sometimes attract devotees because the practitioners are often favorable to Krsna consciousness. (This often comes from a “Whatever you want to do is okay” attitude.)

1. The Montessori approach is to put children in a highly structured, “rigged” environment and then let them learn on their own. Prabhupada called it “artificial.” Yet, there are certainly some good points, such as the use of concrete objects for teaching young children, that we can employ in our teaching..

2. The Steiner, or Waldorf method, was developed by an eccentric philosopher after his success teaching a boy who had serious physical and mental handicaps. Although many Steiner schools don’t teach evolution as the exclusive truth, their entire approach is based upon it. Steiner felt that an individual evolves intellectually parallel to the evolution of mankind. “The development of each child (is) a microcosm of the progress of civilization itself.” Of course, this was pure speculation, in addition to the fact that mankind didn’t evolve! (This was probably based on the idea, now rejected by science, that the human embryo repeated the evolutionary process.) For example, “Reading as such is deferred, often even into the second grade. Reading follows acquisition of writing—just as man himself had