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What if...?

Give your imagination free reign to give studies a boost



BACKPACKER'S GUIDE

USHA RAMAN

When was the last time you let your mind chase the question "What if-?" in an academic setting? It's a question that we naturally ran with as children, building those castles in the air and exploring fantastic scenarios limited only by rules of our own creation. As the years went by and we grew older and somewhat wiser, something curious happened to our minds. Yes, we still dream and we still wonder about the world – this one and the others we might wish to inhabit – but put us in a classroom, give us a course outline, and all that dreaming and wondering come to a dead halt.

Except of course, when we want to escape the reality of that classroom – then our minds seem to effortlessly wander and have to be forcibly restrained from running away all together.

Thought experiments

But what I'm talking about is taking one idea or concept and really playing with it; understanding it from the inside, taking it apart and putting it back together in different ways just to see how it works (or doesn't), rearranging its parts to see how it looks and what it can offer us when it is upside down or turned on its side. If you're one of those who likes to take apart and re-assemble objects – machines, toys, instruments – you know the joy that this activity can bring. But in some ways this activity is limited by the fact that you know what you have taken apart and you know how to put it together again. The curiosity – and the ele-

ment of play – in this case is about seeing the 'inside' of the object.

Can we extend this to non-physical objects as well? Can we play with ideas in the same way we play with physical objects? In fact, we do it all the time, in unconscious ways. Every time we apply ourselves to understanding something, we are drawing on things we have learned from different spheres to make sense of the new phenomenon. When we meet someone new, we are making judgments based on what we know about (among other things) this category of individual, how they look and behave, etc. We also often connect with people based on possibilities, rather than firm knowledge. Our minds are quite accustomed to juggling information, experience, opinion and conjecture in complex ways to come up with analytical possibilities – and most of the time, we're not even aware of it.

Logic

Why not use this innate ability to play with academic ideas as well? Scholars in many fields do this quite routinely in what they call "thought experiments". You take a concept – or two – that you are interested in, and play with it, pitting it against or combining it with other ideas, placing it in different situations to see how

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it might behave. The process involves a healthy dose of imagination as well as the application of logic and reason. The crucial element is however a sense that multiple possibilities exist. Quantum physics in many ways owes its origins to this sense that one can play with ideas, that all possibilities must be imagined and considered. If not, how would we have ever come to accept the idea that an electron could be both a wave and a particle?

Now, even if you have no interest in physics or philosophy, bringing this element of play into your study can help give you a sense of freedom and open your mind to different – and more individualised – ways of understanding the subjects you have to deal with. Just as physical play exercises the muscles, mental play brings agility and suppleness to the mind. And it can begin with that intriguing question that drives so much innovation: "What if-?"

The author teaches at the University of Hyderabad and edits Teacher Plus.
usha.bpgll@gmail.com

SATHEESH VELLINEZH

