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## Context to the nugget

Ashish discusses his perspectives around how we should educate ourselves for the future. He speaks about STEM versus Liberal Arts and the role each plays in informing our mental models.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving forward Ashish, you have a unique insight into leadership given your journey at ChrysCapital, at Ashoka, Central Square Foundation and so on and you also have an insight into what's on young people's minds in terms of the people that come into Ashoka and graduate from Ashoka and so on. As we think about educating ourselves for the future, how do you think about, how people should think about that choice, you know STEM, Liberal Arts, something else? If a 6 or 18-year-old walked in to your office and said, you know, how should I think about this choice? What are some of the themes in your head?

Ashish Dhawan (AD): Yeah, so look I have a bias here, but my general belief is that we look at what the 21st century requires. I think it requires you to be a somewhat broad thinker, to be a critical thinker firstly, to be able to analyse and think for yourself, think independently, to be a good communicator both in written form and in oral form. It requires you to be able to connect the dots between different disciplines and different data points and to be able to deal with ambiguity, requires you to be a lifelong learner, a lot of people are in knowledge industries where things are changing every few years and so you need to stay current, you need to be a lifelong learner and we believe you need to have an understanding of the other or have a social conscience to be successful. So, my own sense is, I think, STEM is extremely important, India needs lots of engineers and we did the right thing by in a sense prioritizing professional education. As a poor country, you do need a certain crop of engineers and lawyers and accountants and a variety of management people etc., professional people. But if you look at it Deepak, I mean, even today with our engineers, of course, I think the Indian IT industry got built because of the few engineering or three engineering colleges, the better ones, and so that was critical. So, I am not suggesting for a moment we do away with that. All I am saying is that in all aspects of education whether you choose STEM or you choose to major in something else that you should be well-rounded, so you should be exposed to other disciplines. So, what I would ideally like is that the IITs, the first year students learn how to write, they improve their writing, they get exposed to other disciplines early on, economics, philosophy, politics and with the best faculty, getting exposed to it and not so much the 101 course, but the ways of thinking. So, as opposed to the 101 economics where you are trying to just mug up the facts of microeconomics and macroeconomics, it's really how does an economist think, how do ideas get developed in their economics, what are the tools that an economist uses. So I think, if you can get that broad exposure across different disciplines, it's these ways of thinking, I think, that helps you later in life. As I told you as an investor I had to think like a psychologist, I had to think like a historian, I had to think like a

macroeconomist, I had to think like a data analyst and be able to synthesize all that, to become a good investor is my belief. So, I think, giving that broad education around ways of thinking is one. Two is, I think, making education more Socratic. So, wherever it is it's I think the flipped classroom, which is you read, you come to class and class is more of a discussion versus a sage on stage. Some amount of lecturing is required but I think given the online world and everything frankly somebody can record their lecture and you could watch it and come to class. So, I think, having more of a Socratic, I mean, why are you doing this physically, I think, so that you can have more of a dialogue and push people and through that people also learn, you know, you learn to think critically, you learn to build an argument as you express your own argument, you learn to listen to others and filter out noise and at the same time know which arguments to build upon etc. So, I think, you are constantly thinking and participating in the discussion particularly if it's not too large a class. So, I think, the evaluation in Indian higher Ed needs to move more towards more holistic value, this idea of an exam and people bunking class and then just studying for the exam is a fallacious one. I mean, you know in life that's not the way life works. So, I think, being assessed on classroom participation, on papers that you are writing every week and eventually some exam which may have a smaller weight, so a more holistic evaluation. So, I think, what Indian higher Ed needs to do is not a question of STEM versus Liberal Arts. I think we need all, people need to study different disciplines but my main premise is this system of higher Ed needs to move to point towards greater student choice so that student is in control and when the... it's learner-centred and when the learner feels he or she is in control that's great. Two is they must have choice. So, this idea of breadth and depth and they can mix and match, they get exposed to certain foundations, but then they can mix and match and obviously you need certain minimum depth in a particular discipline, right, but it doesn't have to be the same degree of depth that a narrow education offers you. A third is around the pedagogical approach with more active learning, more of the Socratic Method in the classroom. And the fourth is around the assessment being more holistic and well-rounded. I think those are and setting up, I think, the residential setting like the IITs or IIMs, I think, the reason they do better is versus a day college is that a lot of your learning happens like through your peers at that age, when you are 18 or 20 and so being able to construct it in a way where there's lots of 2:00 a.m. discussions in a hostel room or somewhere in a library, I think, is absolutely critical for young minds to develop and future leaders to develop. So, I think, the residential context also is quite important in my sense if one were to build future leaders for the country.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When I look back at my 4 years at IIT Madras, actually some of the courses I enjoyed the most were Microeconomics, German and Introduction to Modern Linguistics. They opened my eyes to a very different perspective and gave me an alternate lens to look at the world. Of course, I didn't quite use those lessons right away but I do think they made a difference to my mental models.

I had asked a similar question to Pramath Sinha (PS) who Ashish speaks about earlier in the conversation. He had an interesting take on the question.

PS: *"I then start by saying listen it's ok that you don't know there's nothing wrong with that because otherwise people are under pressure that they are confused or they don't know and they ought to know and how come they don't know and so on so taking that pressure off and then helping them understand honestly what you specialized in will not matter in fact this whole thing about specializing in a subject and then being in a career and aligning to that as you know is tenures it happens sometimes but increasingly happens less and less. So, when it's important to measure in something it's not really that important to measure in the right thing and so that kind of releases the tension of a lot of parents and children when they realize and sometime they don't but most of times*

*you can actually show the parents themselves that what they measuring and what they are doing now has no connection it puts the choice in perspective and so that then it opens up whole host of possibilities about what this kid could do? And I think that's when you move to the point of saying ok so what are your choices really? And there are host of choices I mean you could choose to go just study science or psychology or history or go abroad or stay in India and it takes the pressure off having to get the decision right"*

DJ: If we use the metaphor of an automobile, a lot of us grew up in a paradigm where there was an emphasis on building a strong engine. This made sense in a contest where speed is the differentiating element which works if you are in a career path with long roads and limited diversions. In a career that looks like a maze, the critical element in the automobile becomes the steering wheel. Back to what Pramath says, I guess we all need to start moving from focusing on the quality of the decision to the quality of the decision making process. Do tune into my conversation with Pramath Sinha if this is of interest. You can go to [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com) and click on the Guests section.

## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Pramath Sinha that is referenced: [Educating ourselves \(and link with leadership of the future\)](#)

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### Ashish Dhawan - Nuggets

- 65.00 Ashish Dhawan - The Full Conversation
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### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive’s / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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