

Thus spake the toymaker

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PHOTO: MURALI KUMAR K.



*To cap it all Arvind Gupta:
‘If you are passionate about something then you are sure to rub it off on to others’*

Arvind Gupta is not only a toy maker but an excellent story teller as well. He takes an old newspaper and starts narrating a story about a captain sailing on his ship. Now a paper boat is ready. “It’s very hot and the captain needs a cap,” while Arvind says this he tears a bit here and a bit there and a cap is ready. “Suddenly there is a bad storm and the captain is looking for a life jacket to save himself...” goes the story and the cap gets another make over — it becomes a lifejacket that is handed over to a very excited teacher. “It is like a poor man’s origami. I started making these toys in 1978,” Gupta says as he deftly pins a broken needle with a long string of thread to a little paper bird that he has just made. Then he starts to twirl it above his head and Arvind Gupta’s innovative teaching aids are made from materials that have been discarded as waste the little paper bird is flying over his head!

“A lot of science goes into the making of these toys,” says Gupta who has used match sticks, rubber slippers and other discarded stuff. “This is a creative way of learning science,” says the man who has also written numerous books on toy making. There are books on science, maths, and literature in various languages on his website.

“Coming from a Hindi speaking belt, I know that people there are not so familiar with English. I dedicate three hours everyday to translate my books into Hindi so that they can reach out to a larger section of children,” says Gupta who uses technology to reach out to a wide range of people and children across the globe. “Cyberspace is free today. Everyday there are at least 12 letters of thanks from children, which is very touching. The website records that 20,000 books have been downloaded by children of all ages from all over the world.” How do these ideas crop up in his head? “Ideas come from children. We think we teach them, but actually we learn from them. They are visual thinkers. Activities are the best method to teach. The whole world is a laboratory, where you can do things with ordinary stuff. These toys are simple, easy to make and children do not feel threatened by them, as, if they are damaged they can create one more. Children look at things differently. For them everything is science. They need to experience the world before they learn. Children learn without being taught. We have to just provide them with an experience. Science does not mean wearing spotless white coats and working in a lab,” says Gupta who was in the city to conduct a workshop for teachers organized by Sutradhar.

When asked about whether teachers would apply his methods when they are burdened with the specter of completing the syllabus, Gupta said: “If you are passionate about something, then it is sure to rub off on others. Such activities teach children that they can imbibe joy out of science. But sadly, these days learning in certain schools has become unpleasant,” says Arvind who has also worked with spastic children for eight years in Delhi and held workshops in 40 schools across the country. About his kind of work he says: “We build on a legacy and not start from scratch. We too learn through activity. We have adapted by constantly working with teachers. They are nothing fancy. Teachers too are perceptive these days. Gone are the chalk and talk methods. Activities are in. We have to adapt to different needs. This method is good for slow learners for whom definitions do not make sense. Activities give a lot of joy,” Gupta says. Gupta works in the IUCAA (Inter University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics) funded by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust. As you speak to him you realize that not a minute has gone by when he has not been making a toy or demonstrating a simple technique while talking. He has also made some toys and devised activities for the blind and for the Montessori methods. For details log on to <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/>

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