

Notes and Comments

Reflecting on my Experiences of Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

This reflective note takes the reader through the rich and varied experiences of the author as a learner as well as a teacher. The journey illustrates the importance of using creative methods of teaching. It also brings out the characteristics of a good teacher. A good teacher is inclusive, gives students opportunities to explore, supports them, helps them to learn the values of social responsibility and is empathetic.

My School Life

My earliest memory of school is of being admitted to a municipal school in Class 2. In those days, there were no admission tests. The school had mats instead of desks and chairs, and we carried a "slate" and wrote on it with a piece of white chalk. Our day began with prayers and national songs. We were taught various crafts using corn stalks. We learnt folk dances. We had to recite the multiplication tables till 16. I think memorization is valuable because, at that age, children cannot grasp concepts. Let me narrate a story to make my point. Isaac Asimov, a science fiction writer, tells the story of a spaceship that ran off course and because its equipment was defective, it could not retrace its course. An Indian on the team who had memorized the coordinates could steer the ship. So, memorization is not bad.

During the recess, while we shared our home lunch, we would also share stories of movies. I feel online learning misses out on this association with classmates. Some classmates would imitate the teacher, adding to the fun. It was just harmless fun for us. Once, when I was imitating the teacher in the classroom, he walked in unexpectedly. I saw the pain on his face, as he regarded me as a good pupil. I felt ashamed of myself and never did it again. This experience made me sensitive to the feelings of others. A school fosters a spirit of comradeship with others.

The Curriculum

The curriculum emphasized book learning; arts and craft, and dance and music. In the mornings as well as the evenings, the pupils assembled to greet the sun, or to see the setting sun. Teaching, I think, is not about the textbook; it is primarily about teaching ethical values and responsible actions.

Textbooks

The lessons in our textbooks gave us scope for imagination. A few lessons in the name of promoting patriotism were based on leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. In the senior classes, most of the lessons in our textbooks were about saints, miracles and faith in God. I feel faith plays an important role in the emotional health of an individual. It provides us with the crutches we need to cope with the mystery of our existence. Whether these Hindu mythological stories are true or not, they do help to overcome the feeling of being alone.

Teaching

During my schooling, I experienced both inspiring and mundane ways of teaching. I remember how we were taught to read. The teacher would make us stand in a line and read from the textbook in turns. Each child would read one paragraph and hand over the book to the next in line until we finished the chapter. The teacher, who had dozed off, would wake up when we finished reading and we were dismissed. Perhaps teachers who followed such practices were not paid well, or it could be a lack of interest in teaching, or perhaps they did not attend any teacher training course. Such teachers kill the joy of learning.

But not all learning experiences were so dull. Some teachers gave freedom to students in their learning. For instance in the art class, since I could not sketch models of human beings, my teacher allowed me to sketch a creeper. My art teacher liked my sketch and hung it on the wall. Our geography teacher also made us learn in creative ways. She made us draw pictures of the rotation of the earth on its axis and its revolution around the sun. We drew and coloured pictures of the planets; we also drew maps of the continents and filled in the countries. The

geography teacher organized an interesting game. In one row stood a line of girls with the names of countries marked on a sheet of paper pinned to their blouses; in the other line stood the girls with the names of the capital cities marked on a sheet of paper and pinned to their blouses. The teacher called out the name of a capital city; the girl who had the name of that capital city pinned to her blouse had to run to the girl with the name of the corresponding country pinned on her. For example; when the teacher said Lima, the girl who had Lima pinned to her blouse had to run to the girl who had Peru pinned to her blouse. Similarly, Nairobi had to run to Kenya. If we failed, we were out. We enjoyed learning geography through such creative methods.

Our physical education teacher would play the piano and one of the students would call out the name of a bird or an animal, for instance, "butterfly". The students had to imitate a butterfly, or fly like a bird when the name of a bird was called. It was more fun than the usual PT drill. Our English teacher taught us how to use a dictionary. We pasted a blank sheet after every lesson in our textbook; we would look up the meanings of the difficult words from the lesson and write their meanings on the blank sheet. We also wrote short summaries of each lesson in our own words along with a title.

Teaching methods should be such that they promote critical thinking. I once had to write a term paper on Marx when I was at university. I went to the Gadgil library and took notes and prepared my term paper with lots of references. I got a zero for my paper and was grief-stricken. Then I met the professor to seek an explanation for the zero. He told me "you have quoted a lot of various [sic] authors. But where is YOUR opinion, YOUR understanding?" I asked him if he would permit me to redo the paper. He agreed. I read the question carefully and then rewrote my paper. He gave me an A+. I never forgot the

importance of critical thinking and how it should be included in the curriculum. When I was doing my Masters in Economics, we were introduced to great thinkers like Adam Smith, Keynes, V.K.R.V. Rao and Amartya Sen which was again a different way of learning economics.

I realized that there were many ways through which learning could become a joyful experience. It was up to the teachers to find these ways.

Teachers

Our teachers took a keen interest in teaching. They made the students who did well help those who did not do so well. The headmaster took his job seriously. The day Rabindranath Tagore passed away, my school gave the afternoon off to the students. I spent the afternoon playing with friends. My mother became anxious when she found out I was not in the school. The next day, the headmaster scolded us, saying that we should be ashamed of ourselves for creating worries for our mothers. I never forgot that incident. In my view, the Headmaster is responsible for educating the students about their responsibility towards their parents and society. The Principal of the Shimla School usually led the morning assembly. When she learnt that my father was hospitalized with typhoid, she led the morning assemblies with prayers for his recovery. I recognized the importance of empathy in a teacher—a genuine feeling for another person's pain.

A teacher must also be inclusive. Our school staged a play for the annual day. I confided to my teacher that I could neither act nor sing. She accepted this and gave me the role of a guard where I had to stand with a staff beside the princess. My teacher made sure that everyone had a part and no one felt left out. It was just a wonderful way of making me feel included!

Learning From Being a Teacher

My learning continued when I became a teacher. Once I had to teach Class III boys in a school in Mumbai for three months, as their regular teacher was on leave. These students were from different backgrounds. The boys did not like my appearance; I wore handloom cotton sarees and did not wear much jewellery. The boys said "Miss, our teacher always wore such good silk and zari clothes, and nice ornaments." But they accepted me in due course of time, as I introduced them to activity-based classes. They loved story-time and acting in plays. They would all shout: "Miss, drama, please." A teacher's self-esteem depends on the response of the pupils. My self-esteem increased because I was able to engage the students through new teaching methods.

When I had to teach Economics, I tried different ways of teaching. I used films; took students on field trips to see a working factory and to a science laboratory. We went on hikes; ate together; stayed together. The principal appreciated my efforts and gave me a lot of support. Teaching with creative methodologies is not just the responsibility of the teacher, but the principal as well. I had to teach economics to students who had never learnt the subject and thought that it would be very tough. I taught them the basic concepts by linking economics to their everyday life—cumulative income of the household, its management, apportion for different uses, prioritization of expenditure, dealing with shortage through loans and microcredits and saving. Students were excited that they could relate to these concepts and that they were practising economics.

When I was teaching economics to Class IX and Class X students in the Kendriya Vidyalaya, one student felt that I was showing favouritism. I spoke to the

student and realized the truthfulness of the accusation. I invited him to put up a poster display on the evolution of money and banking and acknowledged him as the artist on the posters. His efforts were appreciated by other teachers and students and he no longer felt neglected. I took this as an opportunity to recognize the strength of every student and create situations where these could be used. I always ensured that the teacher-student relationship extended beyond school to encompass the lives of the students. I stayed in touch with some of my teachers just as some of my students were in touch with me.

When I was writing the School Leaving Certificate Examination [SSLC], one of my teachers held my hand, and said: "I was aware of the sadness in your life". Years later, when I was in Chennai, I went to meet her. She was now retired. She was pleased and welcomed me with genuine affection. "My faith in your courage is fully rewarded, knowing you have achieved much." Those were the teachers who were proud when their pupils did well.

Conclusion

Teaching-learning is a reciprocal adventure; an experience of the joy of learning. The teacher feels a sense of fulfilment if the pupil does well, and concern if a pupil has problems. It is a harmony between the head and the heart. Mere intellectual excellence in teaching produces arrogance. Empathy, to me, is the mark of a great teacher. The four cannons of Buddha's teaching resonate with my notion of a teacher: *maître* (friendliness); *karuna* (compassion); *medhithi* (joy in another's happiness); *upeksha* (empathy for another's suffering). A teacher should be a guide, to hold your hand, rather than just be an instructor. In holding your hand, however, they must not hold students back from exploring new territories. Instead, teachers must share in the student's discovery of alternate paths.

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