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Some Reflections on Effective Teaching and Learning

By: Maithreyi Krishnaraj

A teacher of many decades in schools and colleges reflects on what students get energised by and what teachers could stimulate in their pupils.

Teaching is never a one-way street. It has to be continuously reworked, reexamined in the light of new knowledge, as well as take note of the changing conditions of our institutions.

To be effective, a teacher must be aware of her own attitudes and predilections, her own social background. Likewise she must have some understanding of the students' social and family background: their familial heritage, their caste and class affiliations, and the extent of their earlier learning to be able to reach new knowledge to them.

A famous verse in the Rig Veda emphasises how the interaction between teacher- pupil implies that the teacher and the pupil learn from each other:

*sangachadwam samvadattam, sambho manaha
janatam, samaneeva Aakutihi Samana Hridayani vaha
Samanamastu vo manaha [X-191-2-4]*

This was recited in Delhi University during my time there in morning assembly at the time of V.K.R.V. Rao's Vice Chancellorship. Arindam Chakravarty, a Sanskrit professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, has translated it as: "Meet together, talk together. May your minds comprehend alike. Common to your actions, common to your thoughts, intentions and common to the wishes of your heart, so there may be union among you." (At that time, mass education did not exist; education especially about scriptures was restricted to the upper caste Brahmins.)

As a teacher, I reflect and understand that learning can never stop; one learns, unlearns, and relearns because the context keeps changing. The more persons are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, the better is the stream of knowledge continuously replenished. What is closed in the name of tradition, stultifies, and loses the opportunity to re-examine old beliefs.

The school is not just the link between teacher and pupil. It is also the spirit of comradeship with others. It is interesting that there have always some among students I have worked with who were natural leaders. The idea of having authority was something they enjoyed. Before a teacher arrived, the monitor was supposed to take care of the class. The monitor would keep a ruler, stop those talking and threaten to punish them. In my neighbourhood, once I witnessed a group of girls 'playing school', the one who occupied the teacher's role would enjoy giving orders. I came across this quote, long ago: "Every child is a glorious possibility." Many children lose that possibility. Unfortunately, while there are many channels to discover new knowledge, our education system runs only on one track.

Teacher-pupil interaction inspired by an ethic of promoting creative responses from pupils is an ideal not easily attained, but in my journey I had the rare opportunity of experiencing this. The teacher learns from the pupil just as much as the pupil learns from the teacher. A teacher becomes a guru when she inspires rather than instructs. I remember those teachers who instilled in us the joy of learning; those who made me learn critical thinking. Also, later in my teaching, the help of my students who made me aware of their contribution to the country and the city they lived in. The four cannons of Buddha's teaching resonates thus: *maitri* (friendliness); *karuna* (compassion); *medhithi* (joy in another's happiness); and *upeksha* (empathy for another's suffering). A teacher has to have all four qualities to be a guide, to hold your hand rather than be just an instructor. In holding your hand she must not restrain you from exploring new territories; thereby you share in the student's discovery of alternate paths.

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Some practices that I recall from when I was in school were that we had to write a short summary of each lesson in our own words and give it a title: what is known as 'precis' writing. Grammar was taught in innovative ways through examples. Learning about

grammar was made interesting through an exercise called parsing, to differentiate nouns, pronouns, singular, plural, first person, second person, third person. This is not only in English but is applicable to our own mother tongue. There was such a thorough grounding in the intricacies of the English language. It is thanks to those dedicated teachers that those of us who went through this rigorous regime could read and write English with considerable felicity. Teaching one's mother tongue or regional language must proceed by first practising to speak it.

We had teachers who were proud when their pupils did well; tried to help when some needed help. Teaching-learning was a reciprocal adventure; an experience of the joy of learning. For the teacher a sense of fulfilment if the pupil did well; a concern if a pupil had problems.

When students are given material to go through, it is important to tell them what they should look for. They can ask themselves what they understood and what they did not. Did what they read accord with their own experience? How would they deal with what did not relate to their own experience? An active class, where pupils can question, learn from each other, promotes more effective learning. Thus, pedagogical practice must have all these ingredients: social intelligence, emotional intelligence and empathy if the learner and the teacher are to enrich each other.

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My experience in conducting a refresher course which the University Grants Commission mandated for teachers was another lesson: this time with teachers as my students. The participants had come from several districts of Maharashtra, some of whom were not exposed to Mumbai's more liberal culture which had many employed women from the middle classes. These participants voiced their attitudes to women working outside as undesirable; women should look after household matters and bring up children properly. The response from women teachers helped them understand their own attitudes. When we had a discussion about maid servants who served them and then went home to attend to their own household and children, it brought home the further question of class from the perspective of paid and unpaid domestic work.

Many women teachers in the audience entered into a vigorous debate about the sexual division of labour. If men cook in hotels and restaurants why not at home? When they were young did boys not have women teachers?

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The process of teaching and learning requires our understanding of many essential prerequisites like what thinking involves, how our brain functions, what human beings' capabilities are. Much progress has been made by the faculty of innate curiosity; of seeking to know how a certain object functions. It is through cultivating curiosity that we learn. A good teacher should give scope for cultivating curiosity. In our schools, science is taught like a set of settled truths, not as a method of inquiry, as a way of doing things and as a search for truth. The special characteristic of science is that it does not lay claim to settled truths but rather to 'fallible' ones, which can be open to new facts. In our school system unfortunately, science is not taught to promote an inquiring mind, to allow for experimentation. (Krishnaraj 2020). This is not only specific to science but for instance history can be taught in ways that promote the understanding of history. In S.N.D.T. Women's University, we had a history teacher who would encourage her pupils to explore local history. They could select a locality, find out when it came into being, interview some of the residents, consult municipal records and archives to uncover its past. The students found it fascinating.

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A very important dimension of education is promoting innovation, a new way of doing things. To find new ways one has to deconstruct traditional ways. Such innovations are often found among those we consider semi-literate. Basically, it means understanding a problem and devising a way to solve it. This aspect is rarely followed in our usual teaching practice. Instilling a sense of curiosity, of assisting pupils to find out things on their own is not common in our teaching methods. It gives the pupil a sense of confidence if s/he is encouraged to find out things for themselves. This is especially useful in primary school, where there should be more activity-based learning rather than only reading books. In general, our curriculum should at every level, beginning with primary schooling, give many opportunities for children to have activities that enrich their wellbeing, arts, crafts, music, dance, drama.

Years ago, I had tried group learning (Krishnaraj 1977). I found that group work instilled learning through interaction among participants. The class was divided into small groups with men and women in each group. I planted some statements which were controversial –like dowry is good; women should stay at home; boys should be given hard tasks, girls get the light ones. The class was asked to select a judge. They chose a senior teacher. After sufficient time was given for discussion, they were asked to select someone from their group to present their report. The reports were very good with the groups criticising the prevalent practices and contesting the men’s views. What emerged was a better understanding of women’s contribution to the household as well as their work place and the importance of sharing at all levels, both public and private.

Learning requires a critical understanding; freedom to question; to seek explanations for why certain practices emerged and their validity. There was another incident which helped my class understand how women accept their role as ‘housewives’ as the only site for enhancing their self-worth. I was then at the Research Centre for Women’s Studies at SNTD Women’s University. We held workshops which were to discuss women’s rights and gender equality. There was one woman participant who was very upset. She said “I am not a feminist like you women. I am a good mother. My son is 30 years old but I like to serve him and do not make him do any household tasks”. This is exactly the point, that he is not taught to be self-reliant, help his mother in household, may be give her free time to pursue other interests. Many practices are conditioned; they accept the prevailing ethos. In a US documentary called Latchkey Boys, both parents went out to work. When the boy returned home from school, he served himself the food that was kept, went out to play, and then did his homework. Far from being negligent, the parents had taught him responsibility.

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We have a long way to go. With private, high-fee-charging schools for the privileged classes, we promote inequality, inhibit children from resource-poor households from having the benefit of a good education. The greater the participation, the greater the benefit. All advances human beings have made have arisen out of curiosity, of questioning, of careful observation. It is essentially the spirit of science: of continuous seeking, of not taking facts as settled matters.

The spread of the virus during the pandemic and the consequent closing down of schools has resulted in many children losing whatever they might have learnt. Some good Samaritans set up tuition classes in their own homes or in nearby areas, but much greater efforts by the state system are needed.

This is a unique opportunity to focus on value-based and experiential learning by promoting critical thinking, cultural exchange and teaching in regional languages. Most of all, we need a commitment to education for all. To what extent we can achieve this noble ideal is unclear, given the recent steps by Delhi University to delete from the syllabus Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” and Ismat Chughtai’s works. The first exposes the atrocities against tribal women by the armed forces. The second is an open discussion of female eroticism. Freedom for discussion and debate are the hallmarks of education.

Vasudeiva kutumbhakam. Will we realise that wisdom?

(A longer essay recalls my experiences in schooling and higher education from the pre Independence years and after. 'Notes and Comments. Reflecting on my experiences of learning and teaching' (2021, Vidya Bhawan Society))

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