

RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM

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Who is a good teacher?

What does it mean to teach?

These are questions I have asked myself constantly and continue to ask as I enter my fourth decade of teaching.

Teaching for me has been about striking a balance between pedagogy and lived experience both inside and outside the classroom. Pedagogy involves both the method and practice of teaching, which is like a science or an art and somewhere I feel that we as teachers may have forgotten both as we compete with larger forces beyond our control, both in the classroom and outside it.

The aim of pedagogy is the full development of the individual and no doubt in these fast-evolving times we need a holistic pedagogic practice.

But what does this entail?

Does this mean a practice that changes the educating process and questions our roles as teachers or educators? Does it mean that we need to raise questions about whether we teachers are free thinkers in how we perceive our role as transmitters of knowledge, values and ideas?

Or does it mean that we raise important questions about how we practice the art of teaching and aim to provide a holistic environment for our students and their growth as individuals?

Right at the beginning let us ask ourselves whether we are truly engaged in the process of educating or have we abrogated our responsibilities as teachers? One way of addressing this question is by asking ourselves whether we are true enablers of knowledge or just mediators of a curriculum.

That is, have we become mere masters of regurgitation and relics of the art of dialogic conversation?

We now live in a time where we have to try and find a balance between curriculum, knowledge and the market. The education system is facing an increasing need to respond to new skills and demands generated by a rapidly changing and globalising world. The teaching fraternity has become like a middleman between industry and society as educational institutions are focussed on churning out skilled and qualified manpower resource that can also be an efficient work force in the future.

No doubt, educational institutions are required to respond to the process of innovation and adapt their organisation and pedagogies to cater to the needs of diversified groups of students, society and industry.

And in this institutional churning, teachers are key players in the overall transformations taking place for we, as teachers, have to find a way to ensure that as the world around us becomes more globalised and liberal, there is a grounding in reality that we are able to provide to young minds.

With these ideas in hand, I believe what we need today is a holistic education that addresses the need not only for academic excellence but also individual growth. This can only be possible if we have an enabling environment that is supported institutionally and ideologically from both the pedagogic framework and the curriculum, and how the teacher interprets it in the classroom.

The classroom as the institution, the individual pupil as the stake holder and the teachers as the shareholders are the critical elements of the holistic education process that has slowly lost its foothold as we compete with other systems of knowledge.

These new knowledge systems stem from the technological advancements being made each day, which not only intrude in our lives but also take over our minds.

It was J Krishnamurti who stressed the need to constantly create a balance between the outside and the inside and the psychological and the technological. He believed that nothing can exist in a vacuum and we must constantly search for a fine balance between the elements. What a visionary he was.

This is where the dilemma of education and teachers arises — for the classroom is not just a part of an institution or physical structure, it is, in fact, a moral space and an ideological construct where the external order represented by society constantly engages through questions, conflicts and contradictions and new ideas.

The social reality of the classroom is made up of what the different participants bring to the table. And in this interface an important question to consider is whether teachers and students have the same goal.

A student can be oriented towards success and clear goals, acquiring knowledge, carving out a future or just passing time, as back benchers do. On the other hand, a teacher is committed to their classroom, an ideology and pedagogy. But let's not forget that they also desire professional advancement, personal gain and status transformation.

And it is in this space and environment that change has to come from dialogue that develops qualities in both participants by enabling them to engage on multiple levels. As teachers we have to ask ourselves the important questions of what legitimises us as teachers and what is our role. Is it only to teach, to impart knowledge, to raise questions, to alter institutions and structures or is it also to give our students agency and space to grow?

We should also ask ourselves if we as teachers have agency? Are we prejudiced? Are we rigid and intolerant or are we open to criticism and to questioning ourselves?

Each of us must also introspect and enquire if we still have the will and heart to teach or have we become slaves to an ever-changing curriculum and methodology with the ultimate aim of getting the numbers!

I believe that the classroom today is a debated space where we have forgotten how to think out of the box, to engage, to churn our thoughts and methods as we engage with students who themselves are floundering confused slaves of a competitive environment!!

So, we must stop and reconsider our methods and our goals. As teachers we must look inwards and confront ourselves and accept and believe that the only way forward is to change and reconfigure the equation between the teacher and the taught between the pedagogy and knowledge, for there is no denying that some of us have lost the art of teaching and have become masters of regurgitation.

To rethink our pedagogy, we must begin by asking a fundamental question: how do we as teachers nurture students' creativity and appreciate their world, help them step out with confidence and self-belief that they can deal with the vicissitudes of the wide world, which they are training to confront, come what may.

How do we tell them that the education system is not to there to vex them but is a forum through which they could discover themselves and their potential and acquire an exactness of purpose — an education of the being, not just of the mind?

We can only do this when we recognise that nothing is trifling for a young mind. Julian Opie once said that children are faithful and committed to their own folklore and it is the duty of a teacher to negotiate this space that is the conscious culture of a young mind. Piaget too has raised questions about who we are teaching and what is a young mind's conception of the world that includes us, the teachers.

A young mind sees everything from her point of view and in addition to believing that it is right she believes that all others think like her. She maybe blind to a multiplicity of perspectives and has her own sense of truth and her own reality. The contents of her thoughts and speech are a unique outcome of intimate beliefs, mental tendencies and predilections. There is prejudice, fear and preference as well and yet an unquestioned acceptance of life around; young minds are unperturbed and go with the flow.

And as teachers it is here that we face our first stumbling block. We do not know how to traverse into this world of young minds, having long forgotten it ourselves. Thus, following the curriculum blindly seems the easiest way to negotiate this terrain.

But we must not seek the easy way out or the path of least resistance however tempting it may be. Instead, we need to re-engage with the world of the classroom elementally, as today we also struggle with the monster of technology, which has replaced traditional knowledge sources.

We need to go into the classroom and engage with our young students and teach them to tinker with the world around, for their own world has become insular and they are blindsided by the hydra-headed monster of technology and the sloth that comes with it.

It is our ethical and moral obligation to engage with our students and teach them to look up, to think, to question as educators and engage with the world around them. For if we fail to do this then we are abrogating our responsibility. At the same time, we too have to overcome our own egocentricity, our pedagogic pursuits and the fear of failing to follow the curriculum.

To all of us I say, the curriculum is only a peg... let us not hang ourselves from it!

For it is only when we have a liberated conviction will we be able to return to the art of teaching. We need to ask ourselves if we have done our duty towards our students — I believe we can do that only when we stop seeing ourselves as teachers and mediators of a syllabus and instead see ourselves as enablers of knowledge.

As an enabler, a teacher has to be a risk taker, like an entrepreneur; a risk taker as someone who believes in a whole different pedagogy.

Ask yourself every morning before you step out of home on your way to teach:

Do I have a mission and do I give my students vision?

Do I give them choice and create social value?

Am I relentless in my pursuit and am I constantly learning?

Do I see myself as accountable and a student as my teacher?

Am I thinking?

But most importantly, am I listening?

I believe if we do not have these questions in our mind before we enter the classroom then we are no longer enablers of knowledge and have indeed lost the art of teaching.