Let's teach our children well


Asrar Chowdhury

BEFORE my first lecture at Jahangirnagar, like Santiago, I went on a pilgrimage to meet our Alchemist, Jewel Aich. Jewel Da' was a teacher in his 'first life'. Being the Alchemist he is, he cast some everlasting spells. The adda that day transformed my outlook towards teaching. Time and space may have broadened my horizons. I may have moved on in life. True. But, that day I realised what a demanding profession teaching is!

No dark sarcasms in the classroom;
Teacher, leave those kids alone!

- Pink Floyd

Time and space started our discussion. What's the objective of teaching? To help the student get a degree to make them employable on the job market, or to make them inquisitive like that Nazrul poem we all read in our childhood, thakbo nako boddho ghore? The answer is both!

A good teacher is also a good actor and a good storyteller. They master the art of keeping hold of the attention of the student as they tell their story. So the student doesn't get bored. At the same time the student becomes inquisitive. True, a teacher has to repeat topics but then the teacher can't be repetitive. What a dilemma! What to do then? Just break the time into little fragments so the class doesn't feel boring.

Listening to somebody for more than 5 to 7 minutes at a stretch can be boring. So, you pause and then press play again every few minutes. A good book isn't a single chapter, but a continuation of several 'separate' chapters that weave into one continuous entity. A good lecture is also an integration of many small fragments that weave into a beautiful tapestry or a nakshi kantha. Each 'separate' fragment has its own story to tell.

What about space? Time is simply a preparation to reach and then leave space. To prepare for those few minutes of a lecture, a good teacher needs to prepare to 'visualise' the entire space. Where will the pauses come and go? How much content do I cover? Will the students be able to absorb the content? How do I link today's content with yesterday's and tomorrow's? Yes. You do need to plan a lecture. You can 'probably' get away with one or two extempore performances here and there, but not everywhere! Students are always the best judges of a teacher. It's the students who listen to and read our storybook in the little time we have in the classroom.

The classroom by nature is claustrophobic. Four walls and a roof bound all classrooms. The days of the Guru- Shishya learning underneath a tree are gone. But the power of knowledge and the grace of wisdom can transform that very claustrophobic classroom to become as vast as human imagination. That's the "final frontier", "to go where no man has ever gone before"!

A good teacher has to be 'very careful' in selecting time and space. Who am I teaching? Who's my audience? What are my limits? Are there any limits at all? If the calculations go wrong the Guru Mashai can easily end up talking to the board and not the class!

[We are] lead by an invisible hand to promote an end, which was no part of [our] intention

- Adam Smith

Competition in labour markets makes universities concentrate on the aptitude of 'average' students. This is the general pattern everywhere. Bangladesh is no exception. If the 'average' quality of the students of an educational institute is good, it sends good signals back to the existing students when they enter the job market. If this 'average' proves to be reliable over time then there won't be adversity in selecting and distinguishing between students of different institutes. The name of the institute itself carries weight in the job market. Employers 'employ' many 'screening' methods to avoid this adverse selection. This 'average' and reliability of this 'average' is what we teachers first target.

The answer my friend, is Blowin' in the wind

- Bob Dylan

What about that step Neil Armstrong made- "One step for man, but a great leap for mankind"? As teachers, will we be obsessed by the 'average'? Will market forces dictate our every action and policy? Will the classroom "manufacture" only, and not "create"? If that's the scenario, I'm sorry to say, I'd like to leave this classroom!

Do I have any interest in today's story? Of course I do. As an individual and as a community 'we' are also political animals. But then. Wait. Don't, all political animals need a 'natural habitat' to survive and flourish? Today's 'our' day. So, 'we' better beat 'our' own drums. Like it or not. 'We' are different. In Bangladesh and everywhere!

The pen is mightier than the sword. Wisdom is more powerful than knowledge. A good teacher can make mountains move; the winds change their course; and transform a desert into an oasis. Yes. A good teacher is also a good Alchemist. It's these Alchemists who "create" gifted students in the claustrophobic classroom. These gifted students first move their own society and then mankind forward. This is the society that takes Nazrul's poem from the claustrophobic book into the "final frontier". That's civilisationnot to be limited by claustrophobia, either spatial or mental. However. For that you need good teachers.

Good teachers are the harvest of social investment and the reflection of the society itself. It's the responsibility of the society to ensure that safe environment and safe 'natural habitat' for its teachers. Once that's done, the rest is just a matter of time. On International Teacher's Day, let's reflect on ensuring a safe environment for our teachers to "teach our children well". We did it in the past. Why not again?

Asrarul Islam Chowdhury teaches in the departments of economics at Jahangirnagar and North South Universities. Email: asrarul@gmail.com