Teacher: 'guide on the side'

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MR. Peter Shah is running ninety-one and all his sensory organs are still functioning though he had to spend a week in a local clinic because his lungs refused to go with him. Mr. Peter Shah has been my teacher in the mid fifties, about half a century back. He taught Bangla alphabets to the fourth grade students, in our English Medium School. With the World Teacher's Day around the corner on October 5 the best way for me to mark the day was to go and visit one of my few surviving teacher, whose teaching life spanned over forty-one years. Jacques Martin Barzun, the eminent French-born American historian of ideas and culture while talking about teaching and teachers once said 'teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.' Only inspiring teachers and mentors can perform the act of teaching and mentoring and their memories are often everlasting, at least to learners of my generation. Back in the fifties when Mr. Peter Shah gave us the first lesson in Bangla using the popular textbook 'Baillo Shiksha' by Ram Sunder Basak he just unfolded a total different world to us. I still wonder how Ram Sunder Basak could produce such a wonderful text for the beginners, priced at two anna (twelve paisa). Ram Sunder Basak by producing that wonderful book proved to be a brilliant teacher by his own rights.

The philosophy of teaching is often misconceived and misinterpreted. The popular belief and practiced idea of a teacher is that he (she) is a 'sage on the stage.' It is a teacher centered philosophy rather than being a 'student centered one,' where teachers are conceived as the 'guide on the side.' The later philosophy of teaching makes active learning possible and no learning is more lasting than the one that has the potentialities of providing a platform for active learning. As a teacher one has to appreciate the fact that students have strengths, and the goal of education is to assist students in identifying and building upon these. Most meaningful learning takes place when students are motivated and finds interest in what they are learning. If they have a voice in the learning process that contributes in shaping a belongingness and ownership to the process. Such learning is more meaningful and lasting. To do any of these the teacher has to encourage arguments and discussions by the students in the class



The great Greek philosopher Socrates was a superb teacher. He believed strongly in the power of arguments and discussion as a tool for educating people and conveying ideas across to an audience. Socrates did not believe much in writings as a powerful, educational tool. Instead he would wait in public places such as the marketplace or public baths, prompting others to answer his questions if they had time to listen. Instead of 'educating people' in the modern sense, which he considered in his days comparable to indoctrination, Socrates would prompt the minds of those he was talking to and let they themselves draw their own conclusion. Socrates would claim that he was not teaching people anything and that it was their own minds that did the thinking. To claim he knew anything would contradict one of his most well known saying: 'Wisest is he who knows he knows nothing.' Because of this, the Oracle of Delphi said that Socrates was the wisest man in all of Greece. Today we as teachers often claim that teachers know everything and students are a bunch of idiots. Not true. Once I was trying to share a common joke involving Pathans, not realizing there was a seventh generation Pathan student in the class. The student protested and I just simply apologized. It was a good learning experience for me. As a teacher never try to share joke with your learners involving any community or ethnic minority. However Socrates had his own critics and the memories of the critics have faded away with the passage of time.

Socratic's philosophy often contradicted those of the Greek elites and the rulers. Socrates was arrested for 'destroying the ideals' on which Athens was built. Socrates was tried before a very strong court comprising of 501 citizens of Athens. The members of the jury were chosen by lot. There was no judge or special jury. The entire group of 501 citizens will vote. The majority will decide Socrates' fate.

Socrates made a very powerful speech in his own defense. He said he teaches as he does because it is his way of serving God and Athens. He said it is not true that he wants to destroy the ideals of Athens. He argued that there was just one important lesson--to know what is right and do it. Socrates was found guilty as charged and sentenced to death. Socrates spoke again. He did not condemn those who voted him guilty. He announced he believed in speaking his mind no matter what