

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

How to get the best out of our students?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences and expectations of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star will publish op-eds highlighting the findings of the project.



HOW should we see our students: as customers or products? In my four-plus decades in academia, I have seen them quite differently: as co-creators of knowledge. When they are challenged to think, connect, resolve, and create, they are at their finest. Pushed further, they can be serious knowledge producers. For this quality, my respect has only grown for them. In working closely with them, I have been significantly enriched.

Most students are ardent knowledge seekers and enormously creative in their knowledge gathering, processing and dissemination (research reports) abilities. Placed in the right circumstances and given the right opportunities, they can come up with ideas that are simply brilliant.

While some teachers are able to get the best out of their students, many are not. Students attending typical classes are often frustrated and demotivated; they become indifferent and feel a sense of emptiness—a sign that they are not learning. Consequently, their minds disengage quickly and lose both zeal and creativity.

The testing regimes and assessment strategies of typical teachers are also poor: they stress memorisation and regurgitation. As a result, students miss the opportunity to showcase what they can do when they are imbued and empowered with knowledge.

At BRAC University, I have seen students create Mongol Tori (a Mars rover) and present viable ideas like manufacturing cost-effective sanitary napkins from water hyacinths to meet the needs at lower tiers of society. Creativity is in their genes; for many, it is a survival instinct. Yet, in a large majority of classrooms, this instinct is rarely developed and honed.

I also had the privilege of teaching a research methods course involving graduate students at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. I was delighted when a

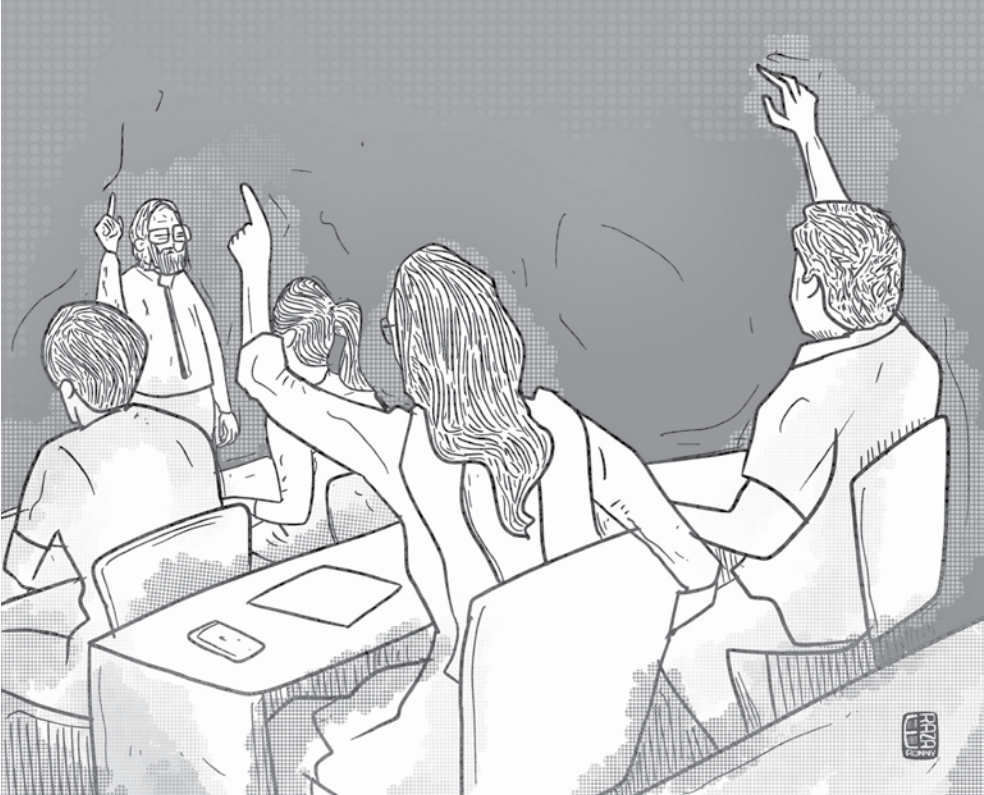
team of three students from the course went on to present a research paper from the course itself at a conference at Yale University. All three chose to continue working with me even after the semester was over.

In my early years while teaching at IBA, I made students go to the factories and business houses to talk to those on the ground, synthesise this learning with textbook propositions and theories, and come up with their own worldview. Aptly ingrained with a spirit of inquiry, the confidence they exude is simply elating. Many of my students have gone on to become CEOs, academic leaders, and high-ranking officials. From afar, I have watched them with pride as they successfully managed their affairs. One such CEO shared his classroom experiences in an article published by *The Daily Star*.

At Penn State, too, where I taught for nearly three decades, my students routinely won awards at the annual Penn State Behrend-Sigma Xi Undergraduate Research and Creative Accomplishment Conference. I believe this was because they were constantly challenged to dip into the unknown, seeking answers. One bright young student emailed me recently saying, “I just wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Without you, I would not have been able to bring the extensive body of research I’ve done to the interview to show all of the things I am capable of doing.”

In January 2020, I was invited to teach at IBA as a visiting professor. Two of the nine DBA students from a course in multivariate analysis are continuing to work with me on retail banking. Another 45 ardent MBA students worked with me on a research project. Designed to glean insights about *student experiences with higher education*, what started as an innocuous class project began to evolve in a manner that was simply unanticipated.

A survey was placed on Google Forms, the link of which began to circulate among the student population in various universities. The rate and quality of the responses were stunning. It became sadly apparent how many students feel neglected, rate their academic programmes poorly, find a serious absence of well-rounded education, perceive



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ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

a lack-of-fit with their academic environment, are unable to build enduring friendships, and rue their teachers who mistreat them and offer little time beyond the class hour to even have a simple conversation.

Dubbed as The Academic Experience Project (T-AEP), the data set from the class project now represents over 50 universities with over 1,200 respondents and is growing as the survey link continues to be shared. The responses are honest, direct, refreshing, insightful, and remarkably prescriptive. Here are three randomly selected voices:

“As an engineering student, I feel that our institutions shouldn’t focus [just] on theoretical enrichment; they should concentrate on applied knowledge. Most

importantly, we need a compact research-based education to compete globally. This is how they can make us [competitive for] the job market.”

“Do the institutions try to build a strong sense of ethics in [their] students? Do they try to [make] you feel the sufferings of the people?”

“Academia-industry collaboration should be improved a lot; most of the businesses are focusing on just making money but not collaborating with the universities to develop the human resources they need to compete in the global market.”

Interestingly, the T-AEP project made a deep connection with the students conducting the study. So, when asked to tell a story about

student experiences, drawn from the data, their pens flowed in a torrential cascade. These stories were converted into a series of op-eds that are stirring, sometimes strident and bitter, but more often making powerful appeals to the higher powers to listen. I am thankful to *The Daily Star* for providing the platform to share these voices. What will thus follow is a series of op-eds every Friday, followed by their Bangla renditions, representing student voices beseeching change.

It is imperative that academics and administrators listen to these voices. They will learn what is not working. They will learn that students need to feel that they are part of a caring institution, which provides goal-directed nurturing, and is able to build their capacities that fit into the evolving 4IR future. I am willing to wager that if our universities can meet these three conditions, the human assets this country will produce will give back to their families, their institutions, their employers and their country in far greater measure than we can imagine.

For optimal returns, it behoves our primary and secondary education system to adopt modern pedagogical tools, hire-train-motivate teaching staff of higher calibre, and become far better aligned and integrated with our higher education goals.

My appeal to my fellow academics is a simple one: Create and develop a culture of listening to these young people. I believe, in their respectful ways, they will suggest how we can engage with them better. Then blend your ideas with theirs to give them an unforgettable educational experience. Bangladesh is making strides as recent global indicators suggest. But the country can do even better as we continue to empower the next generation. They are the future of the nation; for their sake, we ought to provide a better educational experience. **Change We Must!**

Syed Saad Andaleeb is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, and former Vice Chancellor, BRAC University.

This article serves as a preamble to several op-eds about the state of higher education in Bangladesh that resulted from faculty-student collaboration at IBA, University of Dhaka. Students from any institution who wish to contribute additional essays to The Academic Experience Project may contact Dr Andaleeb at bdresearchA2Z@gmail.com.

Rekindling the Joy of Learning

MIMOSA KAMAL and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

“The joy of learning is as indispensable in studying as breathing is in running.”

— Simone Weil

MANY are the number of universities in Bangladesh, both public and private. Large numbers of students graduate every year from these institutions. But how many of them really experience the joy of learning? This question must be answered by the country’s academic institutions.

Few things can bring as much joy as learning something new—a powerful experience that feeds one’s curiosity and provides deep insights about the world around you. It is a vital part of growing personally and professionally. To prepare the country’s future generations as change-makers, they must be equipped with the right education and experience. If they experience no sense of joy in the process of learning, are they even learning anything?

Psychologists portray the joy of learning as an experience of conquering. “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Frederick Douglass contends that challenges are an indispensable part of learning and growing: Students will only experience deep learning when they taste the achievements of small intervening goals. A balance is also required between the tasks assigned and the mental ability of the students. The struggles should be such that students are not driven to states of stress and depression; rather the level of challenge should help them to discover their autonomy, creativity and innate potential. The process of learning will never be enjoyable if the teachers do not spend sufficient time and effort in making their courses vivid and fun-filled. Chances are also high that students



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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will enjoy their learning experience when their teachers love teaching, and when their dedication and passion are contagious.

Getting admission into one of the better universities in Bangladesh requires some effort, and comes with expectations that students will emerge from a rich and deep learning experience. Most students in the first semester of their universities, after conquering their admission challenges, speak passionately about their institutions. However, for many, that passion begins to wane; for some, rather quickly—almost in the blink of an eye. Instead of being drawn into the realms of discovery, they are burdened with rote memorisation and having to spend time

preparing for one exam after another. And as the institutions fail to engage the students mentally and emotionally, often suppressing their innovative and creative ideas, boredom and frustration quickly replace the anticipated joy from the academic experience.

For many, there is no real learning and they wonder—why am I here? At a leading university, one student commented, “This institution should not be bragging about its glory; it should change its intake procedure, enable students to learn, and update [the] curriculum properly. This world needs skills, not certificates.” Unfortunately, most of the students these days have come to believe that the only outcome they are ever going to have

from their university experience is a certificate that may be worth very little.

This situation is common not only in the private universities of the country; some feel it is even worse in the public universities. The nation’s primary and secondary education systems are perhaps far worse.

The academic programmes and curricula offered in the present-day universities are unimaginative, outdated and simply boring. The courses promote neither experiential learning nor allow for developing analytical or problem-solving skills. In Bloom’s Taxonomy parlance, courses in the higher education sector still focus on “remembering”, where students merely recall and recite basic concepts and facts. Some term it as parroting! Reaching higher levels of the taxonomy is something one can only dream about. Even in this era of digitalisation, when students are surrounded with information resources, the academic programmes and curricula are dated and unimaginative, and students are “made to” focus on passing exams that often require them to regurgitate class lectures and notes prepared by their seniors years ago!

The faculty members of the universities are not always to blame. They suffer the deficiencies of an insensitive, ill-trained and non-responsive administrative system that has not figured out how to bring change. Revenues and costs are always big issues, and the faculty are made to slave through unreasonably high course loads to meet targets. If you ask them what demotivates them from being more engaging, interactive and creative, to make the learning process interesting and interactive, one answer will invariably surface: they are overloaded with courses to teach and the overbearing size of a typical class. On top of that, they are expected to handle various administrative responsibilities and conduct

research! They are often so pressured by subtle threats that they shy away from trying to bring any change to it.

To bring back the joy of learning in academia, it is necessary to shake things up a little. Competent, experienced, and motivating teachers often influence student achievement the most. But this requires some element of training. Faculty members, both new and experienced, should thus be exposed to ways in which they can create interactive and challenging learning environments both inside and outside the classroom. Eventually, those who accept, adopt and adapt to new pedagogies (actually, andragogies), and are certified, can become the forerunners of change in the country’s academic environment.

Of course, training must be accompanied by different mechanisms of student evaluation, reasonable teaching loads, and rewards for innovative and creative teaching. Such changes are imperative if students are to be converted into human assets, future leaders, problem-solvers, and conscious and conscientious citizens. Today, new thinking must permeate higher education to make it change for the better. With changed thinking, trained teachers will assume the role of competent and creative souls this nation desperately needs today to nurture future generations. A new breed of teachers, at all levels, can be the pacesetters bringing a revolution to academia in this country, with rich dividends. The question is, who will pave the way? When?

Mimosa Kamal is working on her MBA degree at IBA, University of Dhaka. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, and former Vice Chancellor, BRAC University. The article is a result of Dr Andaleeb’s collaboration with IBA, Dhaka University students to turn the spotlight on higher education in Bangladesh.

QUOTABLE Quote

MEISTER ECKHART (1260-1328) German mystic.

What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Hawk

5 Cartoon pig

10 River catch

12 Game setting

13 Fab Four drummer

14 Singer Neville

15 Star pitcher

16 Spell caster

18 Prison head

20 Luau strings

21 Liberal study

23 Course need

24 Matching

26 Listen to

28 Frodo's friend

29 Woodland grazer

31 Cyclops feature

32 Pop's Andy

36 Small songbird

DOWN

1 Scarecrow fill

2 Writer Jong

3 Antisocial one

4 Galoot

5 Talk show legend

6 Test type

7 Send another way

8 Rapped

9 Big Apple player

11 Stood tall

17 Worker in a colony

19 River stopper

22 Clipped

24 Exhortation from the pulpit

25 "West Side Story" song

27 Mess up

28 Homes to urban gators

30 Ram's mate

33 Port-au-Prince's nation

34 Made a choice

35 Main roles

37 Photo problem

38 Orpheus played one

42 Kilmer of "Batman Forever"

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

10-29

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10-29

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT