

Between the idea and the reality: Being a teacher in a higher education institution

It's learning how to cope with students' academic requirements, contributing to the corporate life of the college, as well as constantly looking into one's own personal academic evolution. A teacher needs to be a master juggler, says Prof. Swati Pal

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It is a sad fact that higher education in India begins with a disadvantage. That being the kind of curriculum followed at school and more significantly, the pedagogic methods employed to disseminate information at schools — they do not really prepare a student for higher education. To be precise, the student has no idea why s/he is entering the portals of a higher educational institution or engaging with higher education at all. One is tutored to believe that if one needs a job, one needs to be a graduate, even a post-graduate. So after school, there is an exodus to a higher education institution suitable to the choice of subject made by the student and, of course, her/his ability to 'make it' to the institution. Often, in fact, the choice of subject is dependent entirely on the marks achieved in a subject, regardless of the student's interest in that subject or his/her ability to engage with it more intensively.

Now, the student enters the higher educational institution and is confronted with a host of belief systems: If the choice is humanities, the belief even today is (though perhaps not so overtly voiced), that the student must not be bright. In no time, the student realises that the so-called purpose for higher education that s/he was led to believe in, was nowhere in sight, as the curriculum in college and the 'placements' were completely delinked. The case is more acute when it comes to the liberal arts and humanities where the light at the end of the tunnel (read, employment) appears bleak. When one joins an engineering college or a medical school, one knows that sooner or later, one will be an engineer or doctor. Unsure about why s/he joined college in the first place, shamed by the labels put upon the choice of subject (for humanities students), unable to see the connect between the curriculum and the end result, the hapless student, a byproduct of a hugely utilitarian society, has all the forces geared to making him/her feel as demotivated as possible.

This is the first and biggest challenge faced by teachers in a higher educational institution: A confused, discouraged, disillusioned student needs time, patience, strategic teaching and counselling. So, one may ask what is the problem with providing all of these? let me address these individually. Time. Does one have it? Two decades ago, when I started teaching, there were annual university exams. An academic session was for a year. In those days, I was often at my wit's end as to how to meet the needs of syllabus completion and the cognitive variables of a highly diversified classroom, which most teachers of the university and perhaps elsewhere (though Delhi really is a melting pot at a huge scale) are confronted with. Not only do students within one classroom come from different strata of society, many are first generation college goers, and many are not proficient in even one language, certainly not in the language of instruction.

In my early years as an English literature faculty, I made time to build language skills in students, develop their interest in genres that they were perhaps not very familiar with, and cultivate their interest in the subject at hand. Yes, it was tough even then to ensure that one successfully completed the syllabus, but not surprisingly, with increased proficiency in the language and greater insight into the subject, the teaching-learning process actually worked fairly quickly. At the end of each academic session, it was possible to see a qualitative and quantitative improvement in every student, reflected in the levels of understanding and the results of the student.

That was then. Today, with the semester system, the academic session is split into two semesters of teaching, and there are about three and a half months to each semester. In those months, the teachers and the taught have to deal with syllabus completion, assignments including projects, mid-semester exams, and finally the end semester examinations, which in some courses also mean practical examinations. That's as far as the academic sphere is concerned. Then, there are extracurricular activities which students participate in both in terms of competitive events as well as the intra college events hosted by every college in which students perform for the cultural segment. Classes get disrupted due to various earmarked 'days' that the college must observe — Founders Day, Inter-College Festival Days, Seminars, et al. All of these are essential for the well-being of the students and the college. But the point that emerges is where is the time for that extra attention that one could give to those students who need the push to understand, in the first place, as to why they are studying a particular course? Where is the time to take on problematic issues like language skills that one needs to work upon as often the school system has proved to be woefully inadequate in honing language skills? Where is the time to awaken students to issues beyond the curriculum which may help them build a career? The answer is clear: There isn't.

And now for patience. Given the grim scenario when it comes to being employed in the first place where the conditions that decide academic merit change by the minute (API scores, PhD, publications etc), by the time one is employed as faculty in a college, one has already been tried enough for patience. Pay commissions that defer pay revisions as far as higher education faculty is concerned, procrastination in terms of promotions, research work that becomes pending as the institutional demands swamp time completely, all these 'p' words put patience to test. In the classroom, the impatience joins hands with lack of training and the result is that teaching and learning become a chore, a dismal mechanical act performed perfunctorily. It is important to note the point being made about lack of training. Research abilities, publications etc may make a fine scholar out of a person, but to think that scholarly skills are synonymous with talented teaching is completely erroneous. And it is a fact that higher educational institutions do not ask for or provide teacher training. There are mandatory refresher and orientation courses that college teachers have to complete, but these are not even remotely connected to enhancing teaching skills. For that, one has to rely on experience. Experience is not always the best teacher. And it is gained over time. A novice, who enters the classroom to teach, invariably becomes disillusioned if confronted with students who are unable to respond at the same wavelength as the newly recruited teacher. Inevitably, the teacher curses fate or opts to teach something else (in the hope that the experience of teaching that would be better). Rarely does a teacher in a higher educational institution introspect and self-assess in a way in which s/he is accountable for the lack of interest/understanding on the part of the students. The fault is either with the stars or with the students, never with the scholar teacher! There is complete lack of awareness about pedagogic methods, which is ironic as all academics

are trained in research methodology. Hence, the fact that a 'method' is essential for teaching, that teaching is as strategic as making policies, remains ignored.

So what does one mean by strategic teaching or strategies of teaching? And why should there be a need for strategic teaching? The need arises primarily due to the fact that the classroom in an educational institution, including for higher education, is a highly diversified one. The students have to deal with disparities arising from class, caste, region, urban/rural backgrounds, varying levels of linguistic skills, and in a higher educational institution, even things like whether one has studied in a private or public school and what was the medium of instruction in that school, and of course, appearances! This heterogeneity obviously implies that a sensitive teacher would have to address the different needs of the classroom. This is where emerges a need for strategic teaching. I have often felt that a teacher is like a master juggler. There's so much deftness required so that there are no excesses, everything is well balanced and all the pieces come together neatly, nothing falls, and when it does, it falls into place. So, the teacher has to ensure a balance between syllabus completion and special needs of students; cater to the varied students; heed the fact that any exclusive attention to a particular student may lead to resentment and at the same time, the problems of that student be solved; make workers out of the shirkers; concentrate on text but make the students aware of the context — it certainly means dexterity in the way the teacher handles the classroom situation. Hence, what must the teacher do? let's examine a few probables.

If required, the teacher must speak in more than one language to ensure that students, whose proficiency in the medium of instruction is low, do not miss the bus. So, the teacher must be a bit of a polyglot! Sounds difficult but the fact is that the teacher should be able to translate. Students may find historical backgrounds boring at times; the trick is to find a funny YouTube video and show that in class so that the dead past comes alive. And if it's really funny, the students will get a grip over the subject in no time. For nothing succeeds like humour when the class is listless. Well, does that mean that the teacher must be a bit of a stand-up comedian? That doesn't sound too bad, considering how well-paid the latter are! But certainly, a teacher must retain her/his sense of humour. It is perhaps the only weapon a teacher may be allowed. And, of course, the teacher must be adept at using audio visuals, documentaries, in other words be tech savvy. A huge amount of commitment is required as the teacher must, for example, read and research every possible entry against a particular topic so that s/he is quick to note emergent changes, updates on information and of course, catch those who have plagiarised. Yes, the teacher must always remain a rigorous scholar; respect from all will truly come only if one has the passion to read and absorb knowledge. So the teacher must be like a sponge, soaking in vast quantities of information and disseminating that knowledge in a well-balanced manner. The extra sharp child is as much deserving of special care as the not-so-sharp one. The teacher must be skilled in recognising the difference and ensuring that no child is left bored or frustrated. There has to be a fine line between information overload and inadequate information that takes care of the varying cognitive levels of all students.

One could examine a few probables regarding strategic teaching, but this is already sounding like a tall order. Is it any small wonder that a teacher in a higher educational institution — who has to cope not just with the academic requirements of the students, contribute to the corporate life of the college, as

well as constantly look into her/his personal academic evolution, including publishing and presenting research work — fails to juggle cleverly enough?

Nonetheless, while underlining the predicament of the teacher, it is important to also look at another strategic aspect, that being counselling. Many people dismiss the idea of values and ethics as commonplace and middle class. It is sneered upon as an anachronistic idea and intellectualised as 'space', 'private and professional life', 'privacy', 'moral policing' and what not. My contention is different. I am convinced that if a teacher enters a classroom and uses racist language or makes sexist remarks and then goes on to teach apartheid and feminism, there is likely to be a disjunction as young impressionable minds are led only by example. It is highly unlikely that one can counsel students to avoid gender discrimination or mind their language by teaching them a 'text'. In the classroom, the teacher is as much a text as the ones in the syllabus. It is the responsibility of the teacher to be a text worth emulating. One cannot use cuss words, show disrespect to students, treat them without dignity and then expect that they will heed any advice or mentoring. Practice what you preach is no cliché, it is a reality. By ignoring this aspect, teachers today are doing themselves and their students a great disservice. The need of the hour is a change of attitude, a self-reflexivity, and the recognition of accountability at all levels in providing holistic education to all. The world lacks good leaders, let the space in the classroom be one way to show the youth what leadership should be. The teacher is, of course, the leader here.

Having explained the difficulties involved in providing time, patience, strategic teaching, and counselling, one could shift the focus to a growing trend that has the potential to destabilise the functioning of a higher educational institution. This being the stance taken by teachers towards what they perceive as the 'establishment' with whom, they believe, it is essential to have a conflictual relationship. For as long as the authorities/establishment give in to every whim and fancy of the teachers, it's smooth sailing. But the moment rules are enforced, every possible attempt to oust the rules — by using terminology, such as draconian and regressive — comes into play. Attempts at a dialogue are lopsided as the teachers begin the 'dialogue' with the firm conviction that come what may, they will not be overcome by any persuasion, any logic, any fact. Authorities, too, are sometimes blind and deaf to anomalies and inconsistencies in rules. They are also imperfect in communicating various administrative practices and the subsequent lack of clarity that thus shrouds the truth.

If ever one were to see what stereotyping can do, one need only observe this relationship between teachers and authorities. The fact of the matter is that if teachers and authorities today could retrieve the relationship of trust that traditionally existed, or ideally, should exist, between the two entities, then collectively a more concerted effort could be made towards providing quality education. Till such a time that each perceives the other as enemy, the educational institution cannot progress.

The idea of the teacher in a higher educational institution is that of a detached scholar, erudite, immersed in books, always calm and serene and totally devoted to the cause of higher education. The reality is that the teachers of such institutions are strugglers against time and tide. They may have the best intent but are constrained in several ways from realising that intent. Remaining impervious to this widening gap between the ideal and ground reality is an invitation to disaster for institutions. An institution in itself is just bricks and mortar; it is the teachers and students who make it a temple of high

learning. If a temple needs maintenance, including repairs and renovation, then so does the teaching-learning process and its primary stakeholders, the teachers and students.

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