

# 9/11 in the Classroom

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Supreme Court has ruled that privacy is a fundamental right, but it is obvious that the limits on the rights of the citizen and whether or not they are being curtailed are up for question. The collection of biometric data was one among several concerns that the right to privacy raised. This judicial process resonated with a similar concern that was taken up in the aftermath of 9/11 in the United States. As the Patriot Act came into effect, concerns about the evasion of individual civil liberties were brought to the fore. Finger printing and other biopolitical practices at airports became the norm after 9/11.

Clearly, a critical study of 9/11 and its after effects- one that critiques aspects of dictatorial non-constitutional policies of government is useful for non-US contexts as well. What is at stake here are not just our physical freedoms but also freedom to think and explore the world in new ways. Thus, the need to inculcate critical thinking keeps on increasing in this fractured world but unfortunately the space for humanities keeps on shrinking not only in higher education, but also in secondary and senior secondary level. In such a situation, what role can pedagogy of language play in nurturing critical thought?

It is here that one can see that language pedagogy is a natural ally to nurture critical thinking. This relationship between language teaching and critical thought isn't an external one, but the very nature of language teaching involves nurturing the voice of the students; this includes nurturing new ways of seeing, questioning and responding to the world.

Developing upon this premise one can say that bringing important social political events into language classrooms is not only a good practice but I will argue that it is also increasingly becoming a necessary one. Development of the voice of the students and comprehension are some of the examples where this becomes evident.

In this spirit, using the context of my research on the American culture in the aftermath of 9/11, I will examine the value of a non-traditional teaching practice of using a short film on 9/11 in the secondary and senior secondary education sector. At the heart of my argument is the conviction that critical thought- the ability to think and question core concepts- is at the foundation for practice of not only good citizenship but also language teaching. I would like to assert that good citizens can be nurtured through good humanities and language/ literary education.

## **Language Teaching and Literacy in School**

It is common knowledge that language teaching in schools is combined with the aim of literary education. When students learn a poem, not only are they learning new words, and inculcating diction, they are also learning literary techniques such as alliteration and rhyme schemes. The literary and the linguistic are inherently inseparable within the realm of the narrative. When Bhattacharya (2012) describes how oral and visual traditions in India can be incorporated

in the Indian classroom, her assumption is that narrative and language are intrinsically linked. Similarly, when students encounter a poem or a short story in a textbook, they are not simply encountering language, but also venturing into newer worlds in and through language. Bhattacharya (2012) notes the need for students to meet within language both the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. This terrain of the unfamiliar then becomes a way for the students to have newer contexts and worlds opened up to them.

Literacy is "the ability to read independently a text of one's choice, and understand it" (Amritavalli, 2012, p.1). It involves the use of critical tools to read a text and achieve a certain level of comprehension. The aim of literacy is not to have students simply memorize the answers, but to enable them to think independently. Thus, to be able to think critically is very much a part of the way we conceptualise literacy itself. This can be facilitated through certain teaching methodologies and extra classroom aids. Sinha and Malshe (2017), discuss the use of the visual texts (such as graphic novels) to supplement the teaching of the linguistic (and the literary). Other skills such as having students translate a poem in a multilingual classroom so that each language speaker can learn from another language speaker has also already been noted. Yet, the core point remains, as Agnihotri (1995) states, that there is a need to develop critical thought so that social change follows from such awareness and inquiry. He notes how classroom teaching has become increasingly monolingual even though multilingualism has cognitively been linked to excellence in the classroom. Moreover, our attitudes to languages are also linked to our cultural attitudes such that the multilingual classrooms are also a path to a multicultural society. Students interact and learn about other cultures through their textbooks and classroom teaching. Amritavalli (2012), asserts how

"[p]edagogy is not a matter of covering the syllabus or of imparting skills or knowledge, but of affecting individual minds." (p.3). Affecting individual minds has a direct relationship with sensitising them and making them more prone to questioning their surroundings, so that they in turn can become responsible citizens. I will turn to my research on American cultural politics after 9/11 to explore ways through which this can be done.

### **Teaching 9/11**

The question then presented to me is how best to inculcate the notion of independent examination that studies of 9/11 can foster in the classroom? For this, I would like to refer to a film titled *11'9"01: September 11* (2002). The film comprises of 11 independent films by directors and filmmakers from around the globe. Released shortly after the 9/11 tragedy, the film follows the impact of the tragedy in the United States as well as across some other countries. In doing so, it makes a statement about the world as a globalized village. For the purpose of my article, I will concern myself with the first segment of the film, directed by Samira Makhmalbaf. This segment is not only about the tragedy itself, but it is also about how to make a group of young children understand what tragedy is.

Set in Afghanistan, the film shows a remote village of Iranian refugees, preparing to build a bomb shelter. Some residents are busy making bricks from mud while the children discuss a local resident's death in the village. A young unnamed burqa clad teacher passing by comments that atomic bombs (presumably to be dropped by the United States) will not be stopped by a mud shelter. She motivates the children to come to class with the promise of free books. Once all the children have gathered in the mud cave that is the classroom, the teacher talks about "an important news". Upon

being asked what important incident occurred in the world recently, the children can only respond with local news. "Someone dug a well and two people fell in and died", says young Esmat, who was one of the children who was helping to make the brick shelter. As the children discuss the possibility of what this "big event" could be, the teacher calls them to silence and supplies the answer about the "very important global incident". After explaining how two airplanes hit the World Trade Center towers, the teacher promptly asks the children, "Do you know what a tower is?" She explains that a tower is somewhat like the chimney of the brick kiln. She then asks the children to hold a minute of silence for the victims of the tragedy. The film ends with the children gathered near the chimney of the brick kiln, and the teacher encouraging them to imagine the height of the WTC towers as compared to that of the chimney.

This short film, through its 11 minutes, 9 seconds and 1 frame makes several important points about the nature of the tragedy as well as its pedagogy to young unassuming children. First, it notes the impact of the global on the local such that *glocal* events are registered. While the persons dying in the well seems to be a more pressing concern for the inhabitants, the fact that they died while creating a bomb shelter is important. The residents of the village understand the looming threat of war on their land in retaliation to the very global event of the World Trade Tower tragedy. Second, what is also highlighted here through the children is the innocence of the people faced with war; the director is thereby criticising the belligerent US policy. Third, the film highlights the importance of learning. The teacher meets illiterate parents and children who do not have any idea of modern concepts such as clocks or towers or atom bombs. She ventures to teach them nonetheless about the tragedy. She does so in highly creative ways, equating the World Trade

Center tower with that of the brick kiln's chimney—the highest structure the students have encountered—in order to create sympathy towards the suffering of the people who died in the tragedy. Fourth, the film makes the viewers think about their world and their place in it. If 9/11 was a glocal event, then it must also be thought through in both global and local ways. The film makes a statement about the necessity of doing all of these four points together.

For the classroom, the film becomes not just a piece of art that is available for viewership and teaching (if adequate technology is available), but rather it becomes a *metaphor* for the teaching of 9/11 in general. The teacher in an Indian classroom too is usually devoid of any tools (except a textbook and a prescribed syllabus) to aid in the process of teaching glocal events such as 9/11. All that is available to the teacher are her or his own words and imagination. The teacher, the film seems to argue, must teach *creatively*. She or he must venture to take the help of concepts already available to the students to facilitate the comprehension of the concept under discussion. To give an oft-cited example from Saussurean (and Derridean) linguistics, teaching a concept would be similar to opening a dictionary for a particular word. This word can only be known if other words explaining the first words are available and understood by the student. Otherwise, the learning of a concept becomes an endless opening of different entries in the dictionary. It becomes the task of the teacher to ensure that a new concept is available in a manner that uses previously learnt concepts, similar to how the refugee students learn about the WTC towers through the chimney of the brick kiln. Agnihotri (1995) states how discourses readily available to students interacting with non-readily available discourses need to be at the core of revolutionary pedagogy. Events such as 9/11 have much to contribute to such a pedagogy. Further, it is this sort of revolutionary pedagogy that the film

*11'9"01: September 11* tries to argue in favour of, in order to develop the skills for critical thinking in students such that they can examine independently the global events that affect their own surroundings the most.

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