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Teaching like learning matters

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We teachers are always preoccupied with one problem: How do we teach such that most of our students learn what we are teaching? Of course, it would be great if everyone learns everything that is taught; but one who has taught knows that this is seldom the case. What happens when someone truly learns? If we develop a good understanding of the process of learning, maybe we could teach such that the likelihood of students learning increases.

The phenomenon of learning

When one learns there is a transformation of the mind; there is a change in the way one sees the world around such that even familiar events take on a different meaning. For example, if a student learns that laws of gravity determine how natural objects behave, she sees natural events differently than she did before. She sees that she has to put more effort in lifting an object, as against moving the same object along a horizontal surface. She now knows when we lift an object we are moving it perpendicular to the earth, whereas when we move it along a horizontal surface we are moving it parallel to the earth. This leads her to further questions about the orientation of gravitational acceleration, about friction, and about force. The knowledge she acquired changes how she experiences the world. Her mind is transformed by knowledge. If it is *her* mind that has transformed, surely it must be something *she did* herself, intentionally.

Is this point so important? I think it is. If we accept that a learner *has to* do something herself in order to learn, the objective of teaching changes. Rather than focussing on ensuring the student learns, we would focus on creating situations in which the learner has no choice but to start the process of learning herself. What might this process look like?

Discomfort as a trigger for learning

When a student learns it is essential that some new thoughts are introduced into the student's mind and she is aware of the thoughts. The thoughts are accompanied by a realization that there are questions associated that she does not have answers for.

For example, when we teach gravity, we point out that objects always fall towards the earth. If the student understands this idea, sees the phenomenon occurring around her, and is concerned enough by it, it is bound to raise more questions in her mind: Do objects always fall towards the earth? How come balloons don't fall down the same way a stone does? Why do objects always fall towards the earth? Is the earth like a magnet then? What are these 'laws of nature' the teacher is going on about? and so on...



At this moment, some things have to happen for students to take the learning process further:

The student has to *know that she has to* answer some other questions to understand why objects always fall towards the earth. She has to know there must be some method to find answers to these questions (call it the scientific method). She has to realize that she will have to do some more work to answer these questions. She has to be in a state of *discomfort*, which will go away only if she continues thinking. She should *want to* continue thinking and she should not be able to shrug this off. This discomfort is a necessary condition for learning since it propels students towards putting the required effort into learning.

About indifference and indifferent students

But our mind is always crowded with thoughts and questions. We don't even notice some thoughts, we are indifferent to others. Sometimes we are aware, but we just don't care. Why would students care to find answers to questions in science, mathematics, ethics, or social science that we teach in schools? As teachers we try various methods to create this discomfort in students. We ask questions that we know students may not have a ready answer for. We create scenarios that will engage the student and lead them to a point when they face a question. But students are often indifferent to this process and this indifference takes different forms.

Sometimes students do not think that a question and its answer will reveal anything deep or of lasting significance. In short, she finds it uninteresting and useless. In such situations, the student would not be involved in the class at all. She would not even listen, because it does

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not matter to her.

Sometimes students are not indifferent, but they are motivated by wrong reasons like the desire to please grownups (in a class, the teacher). This manifests in a different attitude. *"I am supposed to do this in school. If I do this, it will make me look good. It is likely the teacher will congratulate me for asking a cool question."* While these motivations lead to effort on her part, they are misdirected. Her discomfort is not directed towards learning but towards pleasing the teacher or herself, and giving answers she thinks adults want her to give.

There is a third category of students who are ostensibly engaged and learning. They are attentive, responsive, creative, they speak, they listen, they ponder over things and sometimes even anticipate questions. But their engagement is merely intellectual. It is not triggered by a felt discomfort. There is a search for answers that are right because they think that is what students are supposed to do, to find right answers. This is a performance that authentically plays to the gallery, but precisely because all this does not bother them. They are detached in a way they think a good scholar ought to be.

All these are attitudes of indifference, albeit in different forms. What is the right attitude for students to have, so that they learn? When we say students have to feel the need to think, this statement exposes an existential aspect of discomfort. The discomfort is visceral. It is a nagging dissatisfaction that is not only an intellectual exercise. It also acquires moral import – *"I do not know. I have to know. I cannot 'not know' this"*.

Of pedagogy

How can one create this attitude in a classroom? Part of the answer lies in the pedagogical process and part in the nature of the environment we construct in a school.

The pedagogical process should be a means to create this discomfort with regard to specific questions that we usually term learning objectives. We should lead students into situations when they are aware that they do not know something, and what they don't know is necessary to know. The teacher's tone should not be a condescending *"You don't know"*, or a patronising *"You don't know. Let me tell you"*, or a utilitarian *"You don't know. You should know because it is going to be very useful to know."* The teacher ought to have the tone – *"You don't know. This has to be figured out"*. The discomfort with not knowing has to be placed as something the student has to resolve herself. She ought to be answerable to herself for the knowing or not-knowing because the answer matters to her not only in class, but in her lived life.

Pedagogy and the school environment

This cannot be achieved by changing the pedagogical process alone. Pedagogical processes in the class are an integral part of a student's larger school experience. The moment she walks into school, she has entered an institution that she perceives in a certain manner. Her attitude to pedagogical processes and hence questions raised by the teacher are predetermined by her attitude to the school experience. What conception of a school can create the *discomfort* we discussed so far?



In general, schools are conceived in two different ways – as closed or porous spaces. The closed-space conception of school aims to create perfect individuals by insulating them from the imperfect, real world. The environment and teaching-learning methods are modelled around the idea that students should be immersed in certain ways of thinking that will make them ideal human beings (depending on how the school thinks of an ideal human). Children become students in these spaces, and do things they ought to do in a school. But then after school they continue to live their normal life. This conception of school creates a distance between the school and the world, and hence between the student and the pedagogical process. Students then perform for the benefit of the teacher and the school and engage with learning as a mere intellectual exercise.

These schools are airless spaces where the students' attitude is: *"I don't have to live there. I hold my breath and deal with it. After school I can continue to live the way I do. The content and the sense of learning does not affect me in any way"*.

The alternative, a porous school, is based on the idea that all that is being learnt in school is useful for the student: schooling is preparation for life. A porous school interacts with the real world to generate useful learning experiences. Field trips made to post offices, government offices, or slums are sources of knowledge for students to learn. The school functions like an institution separated from the real world because its objective is preparation for life in the real world. To prepare students for that life, experiences outside school are objectified and a post office, slum or other institutions in the real world are viewed through a lens of curricular usefulness.

Neither a closed, nor a porous kind of school can create the existential discomfort that triggers true learning. In both forms of school, there is a rupture between the child's life and learning objectives.

What a school ought to be

For learning to matter to a student, the school has to be conceptualized as an open institution where real-life questions are as legitimate as curricular experiences. When people come together it is inevitable that problems from the real world – questions of science and technology, views towards differing historical narratives, clash in moral values, political formations and associated socio-political concerns – manifest in the school. These problems should be engaged with directly like one would engage with curricular questions. Subject areas and the syllabus should be used as means to respond to these problems and the curricular objectives.

If the school is perceived as an integral part of the world and the child's life, the child will perceive the classroom as a space where questions from her life are discussed and theorized about. The curriculum and pedagogical processes will become means for the student to reflect on her own life and to find responses to situations she deals with; whether they are questions about gravity, the caste system or economic

inequality. Then questions raised by other students become her concerns as much as her own questions become for them. The classroom helps her find answers to questions she and others have, and also introduces her to new questions she has to think about and resolve.

This is what Dewey meant when he said “I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. ... I believe that the school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.”

The discomfort, which is the trigger for learning, does not remain an external problem that one can be indifferent to. It becomes something one needs to respond to and resolve oneself, for which one will have to engage in the act of learning. Teaching and learning then become collaborative processes that feed off and benefit each other.

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