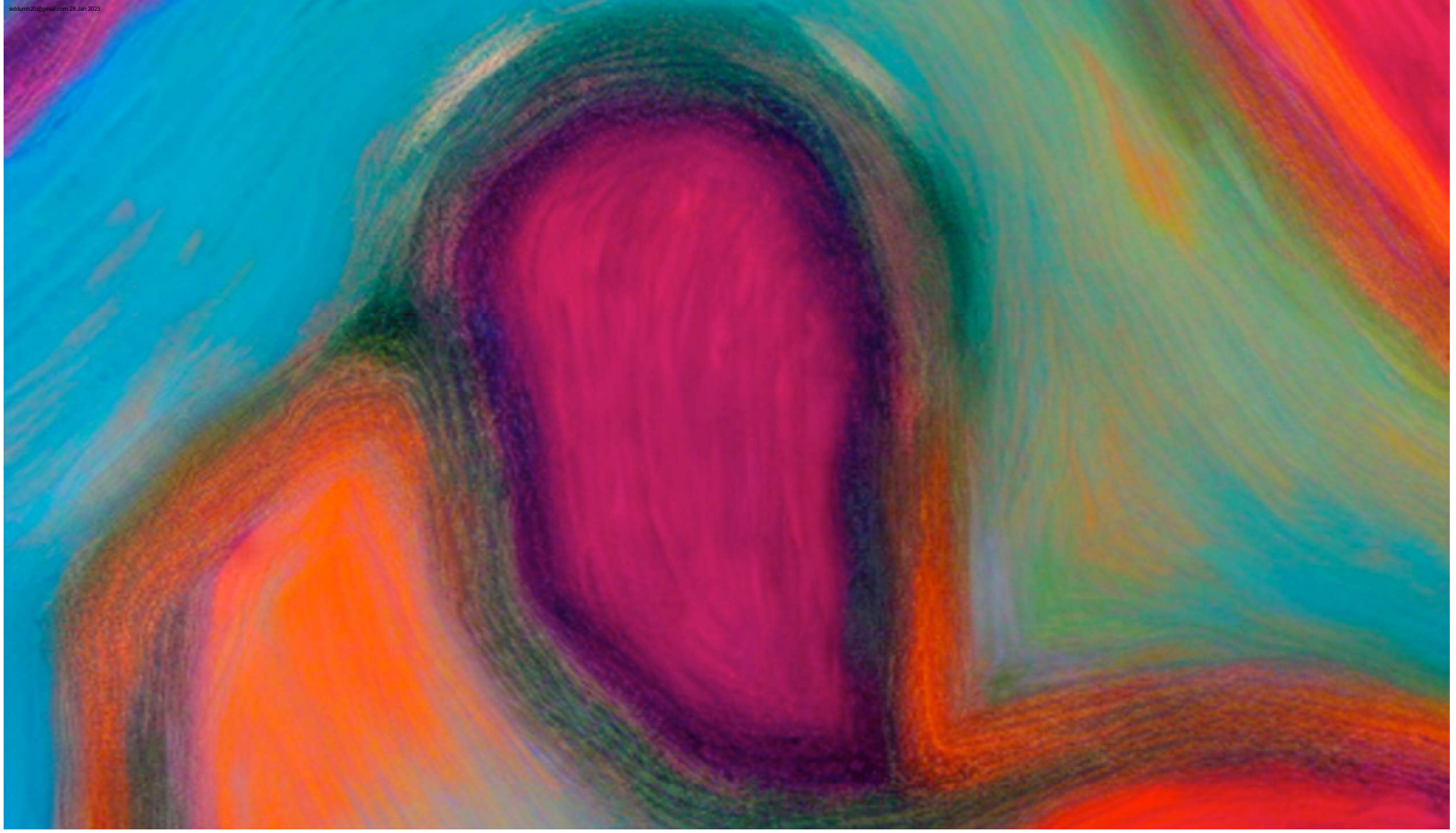

LISTENING TO STUDENTS

"You know, it is one of the most marvellous things in life to discover something unexpectedly, spontaneously, to come upon something without premeditation, and instantly to see the beauty, the sacredness, the reality of it."

During the years I undertook my doctoral degree in ELT, the research methodology seminar had yet to perceive a pair of brooms, a dustpan, and a dustbin as essential tools, tools that became essential in understanding how my students eventually created a flipped classroom for me.

Before I go into detail on how these ordinary, everyday household items became tools of transformation, I will need to go back a little in time.

I live in Bangalore, India. I grew up at a time when the general educational ethos was that a convent schools provided a holistic education. There were several reasons for this perspective. One distinct aspect of that education was cleaning time. Irrespective of where one was on the socio-economic ladder, it was your responsibility to keep the learning environments spick and span! Of course, none of us wanted to sweep or swab, and I did not anticipate that this simple practice would come back full circle when I was a teacher.

And here's where the story actually begins.

I provided after-school support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The program began in 2019 with two students, but soon, through word of mouth, we grew to a small group of twenty. If you live outside of India, perhaps you are unfamiliar with the fact that India's primary and secondary school systems are fraught with problems. Access to education is still beyond reach for many in the country, where several generations of children remain uneducated. The few among these students who eventually succeed do so because they are determined to beat the cycle of poverty and find people and resources who can support them.

How I met this group of twenty was nothing but serendipity.

These students came from a very mixed bag. They had various religious affiliations, and their parents held different jobs. In the group of twenty, most went to a nearby government school, and some never went. All students spoke Kannada and Hindi; some spoke more than three Indian languages, but none knew English well. All of them came from distant villages in the countryside; so, the city was a new space, and playing by its rules was new to them.

I'd visit their homes regularly to ensure they did not drop out. I'd chat with the parents. While I was busy doing that, I noticed one fascinating thing across all families. Their living spaces were shanties, but they were immaculately clean. The young children swept the immediate surroundings and sprinkled water every morning and evening to keep the dust down. I didn't give this much thought except to praise their efforts in wanting to keep a clean surrounding.

So, with great enthusiasm and no experience teaching multilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, I set out to teach these eager beavers. I assumed I could now put into practice all the theories I had learnt in my Second Language Acquisition classes. I took it that Krashen, Corder, Selinker, and the hundred other educational theorists I had pored over during my coursework would miraculously aid my teaching. After all, I had taught college students for years, and all I had to do was adapt the learning strategies and materials to younger learners.

Oh! How wrong I was.

I had students between five and thirteen years of age; so, I assumed learning would be optimal if I divided them into small groups based on their age. I created different corners in the room and assigned spaces to each group. I would then go around the classroom, spending time with each group and teaching them different things I thought would help them learn.

Five months in, and all I ever left the school day with was a feeling of failure. My classroom was noisy, and my students were deficient in class discipline as they ran amok, creating chaos. Students who wanted to focus and learn found it impossible to do so because of the noise. My classroom began to look like a poorly managed daycare centre. A centre where students spent six hours a week doing nothing but running in and out of the classroom while I ran in and out to ensure their safety.

The only time students were well-behaved was at the session's close when they were offered a snack. Again, once the snack time was over, they would grab their bags and run out of the door, leaving me mentally and physically drained.

After five months of this chaos, when I was contemplating quitting, a few fifth and sixth graders decided to talk to me. Like teacher trainers observing their trainee teachers, these students had watched me as I performed in class. They made mental notes about every moment of interaction. Now, they were ready to report their observations and explain to me why things were not working.

They said in their mother tongue:

"You don't have a structure to hold us down. You are using a very Western approach, and we need something else. What will work for us is to feel involved in making this space our own."

They went on to tell me what would work for them. They said, "Here's how you can make this classroom our own space:

1. Get us to wash our feet before we enter what is a sacred space – the classroom is a sacred space for us. In washing our feet, we feel compelled to enter this sacred space with reverence, which means we will maintain silence when appropriate.

2. Let us move freely between groups and help each other. The younger ones feel safe when they see the older students to whom they can relate. So, remove boundaries.

3. Before we finish class, help us by creating a space where we can share our lives with you, because, although you have shown interest by visiting us, you still don't know our lived experiences well.

4.Make it mandatory to clean the classroom before we begin and when we wind up. We are asked to sweep our spaces at home; so, why should we treat this classroom space differently? Hold us responsible for ensuring we leave our sacred spaces clean."

The last point above took me back to when I was a school student and, with my fellow students, did the sweeping and swabbing. So many years later, I finally realised how much this act instilled in me a sense of ownership for the spaces I lived in and used, and for what took place in those spaces.

I thought through their recommendations and implemented them over the next four weeks. I never believed I would find success, but success I did find!

How I did not walk my talk:

Before the conversation with my students, I held the sceptre of learning and, in some sense, all the power. An evolved teacher never operates that way. A true teacher understands surrender. Thus, while most of the chapters in this book describe how teachers Talked to students and then teachers Walked Their Talk before inviting students to Walk Together with teachers, in my case, it was the students who Talked, Walked Their Talk, and invited me to Walk Together with them.

When we began, I didn't give any thought to the fact that my students always removed their footwear before entering the classroom. I, on the other hand, walked in with my footwear. They came from a practice of removing their footwear at home, at their schools, and in class with me. Their caretakers and teachers elsewhere did the same. Sometimes, my shoes were caked with mud, but I still walked in with my shoes on. In some sense, I created a certain kind of dissonance for them.

They washed their feet before they entered everywhere else they went, but they did not do so here. Most students couldn't afford shoes; so, they would walk barefoot to their schools. The schools, anticipating their dirty feet, provided a water tap where they could wash their feet before entering their respective classrooms. At home, too, they had a similar provision. However, I had removed a certain kind of access that they always had–I did not provide a place where they could wash their feet.

They were used to moving around freely between groups when they found learning difficult. They were not restricted by age, only by how much others could help. When they found a younger or older student, they either stepped down or stepped up to learn and to teach. The students opened my eyes to the fact that I had curtailed that freedom.

Story circles were vital to them. The villages they came from had dedicated time for the young and the old to share their lived experiences. I had provided no space for sharing. In many ways, my classes were one-sided. They lacked the richness of multiple voices.

In not asking them to clean up after themselves, I had also removed what they were raised on - a sense of responsibility towards the spaces they use. They were expected to sweep their homes and keep them clean, but I had yet to set that expectation in my classroom. This led to a complete disconnect from an integral space in their lives – why care for something that is not mine?

After I had learned from my students Talk and their Walking Their Talk, this is how I Walked Together with them.

I removed my shoes before entering the room.

I washed my feet too.

I swept the classroom with them each time they did.

I did not speak until we all had a moment to settle in.

Once a week, when they shared their lived experiences, I'd also made time to share mine.

When I dropped my exalted position as a teacher, I realised I had also let go of my ego. If it weren't for the wisdom of these young children, I would have given up five months in. In learning from them, I was more the disciple, and they were my teachers. It felt like a Bodhi moment*.

Note: Bodhi in sanskrit means awakening.

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