

Reinterpreting the Role of the Teacher in Student-Centric Teaching and Learning Process in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

After much introspection and discussion, the teacher community has come to a consensus that the need of the hour is to adopt a student-centric pedagogical approach. The new age teacher of higher education is not expected to neglect any of the traditional responsibilities and roles but is faced with certain novel challenges that did not exist in the last century. Therefore, the teacher in a student-centric teaching learning process needs to wear many new hats without giving up the old ones. Today's teacher must use technology in the classroom; deal with increasing heterogeneity; facilitate skill generation; sift the wheat from the chaff in the realm of domain knowledge; generate work experience for students; inculcate a sense of social responsibility; promote research and innovation as well as encourage leadership roles, promote emotional intelligence, spirit of adventure and internationalism in the student community. These are only some of the considerations a teacher needs to keep in mind, while the time tested role of teacher as counsellor not only continues to remain valid but seems to have acquired a new urgency owing to myriad modern day stresses.

Key words: Learning process, Skill generation, Emotional intelligence

“Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought for with ardour and attended to with diligence” (Abigail Adams)

This ardour and diligence is to be lived and exhibited by the teacher who remains (ideally) a lifelong learner and also leads the

students by example. In this era of artificial intelligence and break-neck speed of technological advancement, it is imperative for the teaching community to revisit its roles, intentions, paradigms and pedagogies. There has been a lurking fear in our minds

that teachers are on their way to redundancy. For many years now the intellectual community has been mulling over this issue. This apprehension has led to introspection and the pundits of education seem to have got hold of the bull by its horns when they claim to have found a solution to this dilemma. The solution by common consensus lies in the need to re-interpret and re-define the function of the teacher. Let us ruminate upon the role of the teacher of higher education in the student centric teaching learning process. The ability to deal with various levels of learners, to identify the special talent of each individual student, to inspire curiosity and thirst for more knowledge, to inculcate the desire to explore and innovate, promote self-sufficiency, to encourage invention and enterprise in young minds is definitely in the purview of the teacher.

We have to help students connect knowledge, confront them with inconsistencies that they have to resolve and help them build a more complex and abstract knowledge base. Textbooks alone cannot accomplish this-the teacher's role is irreplaceable. (Mukunda Kamla, 55)

The new age teachers of higher education have realized that they can no longer claim to be 'knowledge providers' as all the knowledge that they are capable of providing and much more is readily available online for the student to access. There is no dearth of information or technology which makes it more and more accessible for all who seek knowledge. However is today's learner able to make interconnections among the

existing pieces of knowledge or deal with the complexity of these interconnections (and find consistency in the increasing level of abstraction of his semantic knowledge) without the intervention of the teacher? Learning cannot be compartmentalised. It needs to be integrated with life and the teacher promotes and facilitates learning of concepts, principles and skill enhancement including problem solving, creativity, research, communication and presentation skills of students. If teaching was an art and a teacher an artist then the role of the teacher would be to create learning situations, motivate the learner, arrange for conditions that help in the pupil's mental and physical growth, utilize initiative to facilitate learning, motivate creative expression, inspire nobility of thoughts, feelings and actions, promote self-reliance and resourcefulness and help them to realize their full potential.

Teachers have to make special efforts to maximise the more useful aspects of semantic memory change, help the students to connect knowledge, confront them with the inconsistencies that they need to resolve, help them to build a more complex and abstract knowledge base and acquire skills that empower and enable. Time and again teachers need to align their efforts in response to this question of what is it that a student wants or requires to face life? Teachers have to keep in mind that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. It can occur by observing behaviour and the consequences of such behaviour. Learning involves observation

and extraction of information from these observations. Reinforcement therefore plays a role in learning but is not entirely responsible for learning. It has been established that the learner is not a passive recipient of information. Cognition, environment and behaviour mutually influence each other and contribute towards the learning process. *Autocratic* teaching style (Lecture, Lesson demonstration, Tutorials and programmed instruction) is being increasingly replaced by *permissive* teaching style which creates situations for student and teacher interaction and both participate actively in the learning process. It employs socratic method or the question-answer method, heuristics (discovery and investigation), project method, review/critical appraisal, group discussion, role play, assignment, computer assisted/online instruction, brain storming and leaderless group activities. (Kochar, S. K.,85)

The role of a teacher as mentor and guide still remains irreplaceable. The online search engines might help the student to find out facts and have access to data but it remains a teacher's prerogative to provide value based education and to counsel students in times of moral dilemma. In the learner-centred model, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator: guide, coach, conductor, midwife, and gardener. Initially, this may appear that the teacher's job has been replaced by the students. However, the teacher's voice becomes more critical because the teacher is now engaging the students as they work through higher order thinking skills of application, evaluation,

and creation. This doesn't mean that learner-centred teachers stop giving examples, telling stories, and exploring content in front of their students. Values guide our behaviour and conduct, set goals and determine action. We may say that values are those guiding principles of life which are conducive to one's physical and mental health as well as to social adjustment and welfare. Plato classified values into three categories – Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Values may pertain to varied aspects viz. Aesthetic- appreciation of beauty and joy; Emotional- courage, endurance, friendliness, harmony and heroism; Material- love of money, pleasure of life; Mental- impartiality and perseverance; Moral- benevolence, gratitude, honesty; Physical- beauty, grace, health and strength; Social - devotion to duty; Spiritual – meditation, pursuit of ultimate reality. The teacher leads by example and may be a catalyst in the process of self-learning, an agent of ignition for the mind of the learner, a compass pointing towards the right direction, a milestone to measure progress, a deterrent that deflects steps in the wrong direction. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is to examine the usefulness of the teachers' efforts in the classroom – is the focus only on syllabus completion or are life skills (that make the young person either employment worthy or be self-employed) also being engendered? (Bhatnagar, 2016)

Maryellen Weimer offers seven principles for teachers who want to develop their facilitation skills. She provides very helpful,

concrete examples from her own teaching experience and from other teachers.

1. Let students do more learning tasks:

Students ought to be encouraged to do a variety of things that have hitherto been the teacher's domain even if they aren't going to do these tasks as well or in the same way. It's like learning to walk, they will pick up the skills of the discipline as they try it out

2. Teachers do less telling so that students can do more discovering:

Most teachers spend an entire class session reading through their syllabus. Weimer offers a totally different and interactive approach where students explore and discuss the elements and structure of the course.

3. Teachers do instructional design work more carefully:

In short, the lion's share of a teacher's work is done before class. Online teachers have an edge here because their classroom time has been displaced and is most often asynchronous. These days many teachers are moving courses to a hybrid format and finding an opportunity to rethink and better integrate the learning activities in the courses at hand. Instead of just preparing lectures, learning activities for students to participate in are being designed.

4. Faculty more explicitly model how experts learn:

In the place of a polished talk, teachers may explain their own process: what they do

when they encounter difficult learning tasks, how they decide if a resource is worthwhile, and how they encounter new information in their field. Weimer explains that "Students need to see examples of learning as hard, messy work, even for experienced learners."

5. Faculty encourage student to learn from and with each other:

Most students and teachers groan when they hear about "group work" (see the image) but that's because there is an expectation from collaborative projects to work right out of the box. They don't. Later in the chapter, the author shares one such experience and what she learned from it. Given time by perseverance, and improvement through redesign and skill development, group work can be a very effective teaching strategy.

6. Faculty and students work to create climates for learning:

When students are given responsibility for their classroom experience, classroom management becomes a secondary issue.

7. Faculty use evaluation to promote learning:

Students learn to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers. Teachers still issue grades, but the evaluation process becomes formative as well as summative.

Students will have insights that have been never thought of before. The facilitator role means that students will see the limits of their teachers' expertise and their abilities to perceive and communicate. Turning the

tables demands deeper character and developing new skills. (Weimar Maryellen 2002)

Furthermore it may be acknowledged that emotions play a vital role in teaching and learning process thereby making Emotional Intelligence (EI) an important consideration.

When an individual is a teacher and has to face the students as teacher, as counsellor or as mentor, handling them and assessing their requirements with a certain amount of emotional intelligence would do wonders for student as well as the self. As a teacher, one has to face any number of students with varied backgrounds, variety of problems and various temperaments. Though a teacher too has to face mood swings as any human would, the emotional balance that he or she exhibits is what makes them a success. In fact in order to inculcate in the students, a certain level of emotional intelligence, the teacher first has to achieve a level of 'self-management' or emotional balance and stability.

The Five Components of Emotional Intelligence at work are claimed as 'self-awareness that leads to self-confidence, 'self-regulation' that leads to integrity, 'motivation' that leads to desire to achieve, 'empathy' that leads to cross-cultural sensitivity and 'social skill' that leads to inter-personal relationship. All these in turn lead to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Analyzing oneself periodically can be a useful method to remain balanced in the midst of growing challenges in higher education.

Additionally, it is being prophesied that finding employment is difficult and the situation will get grimmer in the coming years and the youth in higher education will need to be trained for self-employment as well as to generate employment for others. The curriculum needs to be designed for skill development and skill enhancement. The teacher should play an active role in formulating and updating the curriculum not only to promote the interest of the learner but also to encourage research and innovation in the chosen field. Learning should not be confined to knowledge acquisition alone but further advanced in the direction of the unknown. It should be a voyage of discovery and eventually lead to invention. The teacher should be able to identify the gifted students and channelize their potential in the right direction. Some steps in this direction would be to involve industry representatives in the Board of Studies for suitable inputs in curriculum development that promote employability skills; organize frequent industrial visits that enable students to observe and develop awareness of business environment and organisational structure; invite high level corporate representatives as guest lecturers to raise awareness, provide access and informal links with corporate management; assign time bound projects to students that involve interaction with business organizations and sensitize students to the nuances of work place; organise internship to provide opportunities to apply the concepts learnt in class to real life situations; arrange for short term training in tandem with potential employers to

facilitate acquisition of relevant and practical experience; provide faculty supervised incubation cell for budding entrepreneurs; simulation of the real work environment through short term/ part time jobs to enable students to experience the rigours of professional organization; tracking the requirements of the industry , regular interaction with the HR department of various business organizations with the aim to helping students make sound career choices; motivate the students to undertake case studies, industry projects, presentations and research work to develop employable skills and analytical abilities; organize seminars and workshops to develop communication skills and awareness on the prerequisites of the job and provide students a platform to work and develop a network which will be useful to further their career prospects.

Promoting internationalism is also expected from today's teacher. The learner should not only identify with a certain locality or community but become a part of the global village by transcending barriers of race, creed or nationality. Education should broaden the student's mental horizons and not be limited to immediate surroundings. Let us consider the aims of education as determined by UNESCO:

- Develop a spirit of respect for culture and civilization of other countries.
- Learn to co-exist.
- Take active part in social construction.
- Play active role in social welfare projects.

- Acquaintance with lifestyle and functions of all the people in the world.
- Ability to critically observe the behaviour of people of all places.
- Motivation to accept the people of all nationalities and cultures as equal.

Apart from these we may say that internationalism also entails the inculcation of the spirit of world citizenship; acquaintance with world problems; faith in the aims of the construction of world community and its values; acknowledgement of the achievements of different countries in different fields (economic, cultural, political etc.); development of free thinking, independent decision making, speech making and writing skills; eradication of extremist nationalism and cultivation of collective traits. This is possible with sensitivity training which is mandatory for the teacher as well as the taught. (Aggarwal, 2010)

Sensitivity will enable the teacher to tackle the varied needs of multifarious levels of learners in an increasingly heterogeneous classroom. With the advent of an inclusive society, efforts are being made to provide educational opportunities and facilities to the hitherto marginalised sections of the population as a result of which the constitution of a classroom is no longer homogeneous. The first generation learners need some hand holding to help them integrate with the rest who come from educationally privileged backgrounds. Globalization also contributes its share of challenges to the teaching learning process

and a teacher often has to use sensitivity while tackling students from foreign countries who need to be assisted and made to feel safe and comfortable in what might be for them an alien environment. Likewise, students who might be slow learners will benefit from individual attention and an appropriately aided empathetic approach. On the other hand, intellectually gifted students need to be identified, promoted and challenged to exercise and develop their superior skills. An enriched curriculum and acceleration of learning process becomes imperative so that their exceptional talent is channelized in the right direction and the education of these gifted pupils should encourage special interests, originality, creative efforts and also engender analytic perception, problem solving ability, employing analysis, synthesis, conceptual thinking, independent study method and scientific objectivity.

As John Biggs points out, many teachers see major difficulties in maintaining academic standards in today's larger and more diversified classes. The problem becomes more tractable if learning outcomes are seen as more a function of students' activities than of their fixed characteristics. (Biggs, 2006)

It is also imperative on the part of the teacher to remind the students from time to time that as a responsible member of society they need to give back to the world what they have taken and much more in order to justify their education. Encouraging leadership roles among students will give them opportunities to take charge not only

of their life and learning but also to reach out and lend a helping hand to those who are less privileged. Breaking out of narrow minded communal mind set is essential. Education should be tool for eradication of prejudice of any kind, be it racial, communal, and religious or caste based. Common (multi-religious) prayer groups, cleanliness programmes, community service or social outreach programmes, social awareness programmes, first aid, training, celebration of national days and festivals, dramas/ plays depicting values, organisation of mock panchayat or parliament, taking initiative to organise a self-help group, writing articles of social significance for local newspapers are some ways in which a teacher may effectively encourage contribution and involvement in public life.

Another point to be remembered is that assessment plays a very important function in the teaching learning process and the teacher is required to be take it up diligently and regularly in order to take the learner forward. Learning and assessment go hand in hand. If the teacher is able to ignite the self-learning spark in the student, half the battle is won. Self-assessment should also be encouraged and a formative assessment is surely preferable to summative assessment as the learning process continues to take place in the formative assessment mode. The questions and quizzes for learning assessment need to be graded according to the capacity and level of the learner so that a mediocre learner is not discouraged and a superior intellect is

not wasted. Assessment entails measurement and evaluation which ought to be scientific and objective. Human possibilities and potentialities are limitless and effective assessment should consider an individual's intelligence, aptitude, personality, interests, attitudes and values in order to provide genuine indication of worth. (Sidhu K.S.2007)

Does it not seem as if the teachers need to have superhuman abilities to do justice to their role in a student-centric scenario? The enumeration of teacher's role in this paper is by no means comprehensive and that itself is a point to ponder. Is it even humanly possible for teachers to do justice to the role expected of them is a question bothering conscientious members of the teaching community today. However, it may be concluded that awareness is the first step. When we are aware of the importance, significance, depth and scope of our role we will never be short of motivation to continue making efforts in the right direction and inspire others to follow suit.

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