



On Good Teachers and Learning

Krishna Haresh

Setting the context

For better or for worse, we have school systems in place now in human societies. Whatever kind of school, mainstream or alternative (minus some forms of home-schooling), children go away from home and parents to another group of adults called teachers, to engage in the activity called education. Education in schools is a specific kind of an activity with more or less clear goals. Schools have taken on a big part of this project of learning as their business (in the occupational sense and the economic sense). Schools hope to prepare individuals for a future vocation.

It is not just a norm to go to school: it is normative unless you absolutely cannot afford it. For most parents who can, education is clearly necessary for their children for their intellectual growth, vocational placement, upward social mobility and a host of other similar-yet-different reasons. A few may look upon education as a spiritual movement towards nurturing a humane being.

On the whole, schools are looked upon as preparation for life and schooling seems to tie into the need for a secure future (either in the form of a passionate occupation or a progressive pay-scale), or for self-actualisation. Students' goals for their own education are driven not just by parental aspirations (as well as some of their own), but are also conditioned by the demands of a society, locatable in the preoccupations of a particular social milieu. School systems are not independent, disconnected players on this wide field. They often promise to enable or guide individual students in specific ways, in ways that neatly supply to the demands of an existing society, or a new and enhanced society-to-be.

Teacher as an individual

Now we can talk about a teacher. Unfortunately, a teacher often ends up becoming just one element of this school system, a cog in the machinery to use the cliché, put in place and pace to maintain the set momentum towards future successes and perpetuate the established tradition of vocational and academic training.

However, in my opinion, teachers do not belong to anybody or anywhere. They are neither representatives of particular institutions called schools, nor are they agents of a society that has employed them to mould young minds to serve its own demands. They are independent inquirers who engage with the process of learning. They are not propagandists of particular ideologies, they are reflective critics of all ideology. They are not exemplars from an adult world, but are adults stepping out of that world to look back and comment on a society that many adults have created impulsively and often times, compulsively.

An individual teacher seems to have the capacity to make an impact on students and their learning rather directly and forcefully. Often, many good ones in our lives leave behind deeper lessons for long-term contemplation. As I recall attributes of good teachers in my life, I see what makes them so. Based on their students' responses and needs, they seem to be unconditionally loving, yet conditionally reprimanding, open-minded individuals. They are knowledgeable yet willing to learn, well-prepared for their classes while being flexible and spontaneous. They show high energy in interactions, high initiative in organising learning material. They are non-formal in their interactions, attentive, making themselves approachable and responsive. They are firm yet compassionate, and emanate a deep sense of responsibility to something that is far greater than the students and the classroom, and, over time, they also show themselves up in our minds as similar-to-oneself, fallible human-beings. Often these teachers are not conscious of their own goodness, and this makes them humble. And very admirable.

Teaching as a vocation

A colleague recently shared an article about teaching and teacher training from The Economist. It seems what matters most to many parents, like classroom sizes, streamlining by ability etc., has almost no bearing on a student's successful experience of learning. The latter seems to be most influenced by teacher expertise, what the teacher actually does in the classroom with all students

concerned*. This finding may not be surprising, but is indeed useful, considering the huge number of studies that were used to arrive at this which establishes that the teacher seems surely to be the primary agent of influence and change in a vast system of education.

Further, the article suggests, good teaching is often believed to be an innate artistic talent that individual teachers are born with. While this may be so in rare cases, it is clear that classroom teaching is mostly a sophisticated, skilful craft that people can learn about. The skills may be learned, honed in on, techniques understood well and executed effectively.

This kind of teaching practice, as understood and explained by behavioural science, can be learnt, for example, in the domain of Educational Psychology. Classical and contemporary research in the subject has enough information to give us ideas for a lifetime about classroom education. The research is full of useful theories and models: about teachers and students as people with teaching styles, learning styles and personality styles; about children's developmental milestones in cognition and moral development; about ideas useful to educational institutions for organising their space for effectiveness; about inclusive education for special learning needs and so on.

One cannot ignore insights this domain offers. Learning about effective teaching practices can only enhance the learning experience of individuals.

Good teaching and a good teacher

Added to learning about effective teaching techniques, which one must surely periodically do and redo from, I think one needs to be interested in understanding the very culture of teaching and learning one is contributing towards creating. I would like to briefly discuss a few questions that have the potential to do this and even alter the ethos of a classroom and school. These questions have inspired (and even haunted) me in my journey of teaching. These hope to elicit reflection from which diverse actions may emerge, rather than simply suggest directives for specific action in daily practice.

A preliminary point: while it is important to acknowledge a good teacher, I feel we must explore good teaching rather than dwell on identifying individuals as good teachers. Teaching and learning is what is important, what is at the core of the

educational process. Evaluating a teacher as good or bad focuses too much on the person and their particular ability. The evaluation of a person in a role has beneath it a particular belief, about a well-defined, more-or-less stable identity or personhood with unchanging abilities. This we need to be skeptical about.

These reflections are not my own and are inspired by many thinkers. I would like to take up questions by one such speaker and thinker from the last century, namely, J Krishnamurthi, well-known for his dialogues on life and education. Keeping these questions alive to inform the process of teaching and learning may be looked upon as what makes a good teacher.

What does it mean to have the right relationship?

Relationship seems to be at the heart of learning, at least in a school. Not just an honest, broad-minded relationship between students and teachers, but also between colleagues, between teachers and parents. This would mean neither competing for importance with another as an adult, nor comparing oneself in terms of ability and prominence in the process of education.

In the same vein, would it be possible to see students for what they are? Seeing an individual's experience of learning for what it is, without relativism? Can a teacher become aware of one's own need to receive student approval and admiration? And find a place of relationship which is wholly and deeply responsible, observing self-interest and personal ambition as they arise?

How may we explore order in the classroom?

Exerting control in the classroom has become the hallmark of a good teacher! Eliciting obedience and establishing order gives one a deep sense of fulfilment it seems. I am not proposing that a chaotic, disruptive classroom means anything better. However, it may be necessary to refrain from battling the need in oneself for control over students and the situation. One must find a way to allow for the process of learning to unfold, without asserting authority of personal knowledge or experience. These two will gather rightful regard in the light of an affectionate relationship. While being unsure of content or being incompetent in dealing with students in a classroom or subject matter leads to confusion, the opposite does not guarantee effective learning! Classroom discipline is not about regimentation of student behaviour

but encouraging the curiosity to learn. This cannot come about in oppressive teacher-student relationships.

What does fear and resistance do to learning?

Schools have become a lot about performance. Often, finding a good school has become a proof of good parenting for the parents! Learning cannot be all about this. Evaluating and assessing performance are tools to understand skill development in students. Judging one's learning constantly using these tools, looking upon learning as purely accumulative and performative, can only cause nervousness and anxiety in both the teacher and the student. These tools can't occupy the whole process of learning! Classrooms and relationships in schools often instil fear of a subject and performance. Can we understand how this fear of performing has become an impediment? Not just understanding the fear of performance in a subject or in a relationship, but observing to learn about fear itself? Learning is an emotional experience more than we care to admit. Understanding this may offer the clue to solving the problem of resistance to work too. Then no other extrinsic motivation may be necessary.

How shall we understand motivation?

We, as adults, seem to perpetuate various forms of violence in our lives. The tendency to resort to rewards and punishments while addressing the problems of learning is one such. It is possible to observe directly the violence of this system of motivation. It is quickly obvious why punishment is violent, but it may not be clear why rewards are. Picking out expected behaviours and rewarding them, associating rewards to conforming behaviour reduces students to Pavlovian dogs in my opinion! Affectionate and sincere encouragement, effective praise, reasonable reprimand are not what I am referring to here.

A simplistic system of rewarding and punishing tends to encourage conformity, mindless obedience to authority and quell creativity. Surely, we can learn Math and English literature, and learn about the violence that goes into manipulating another to learn about Math and English literature too!

The four questions above seem to have direct relevance to a teacher while engaging with a learning space. Now on to some more seemingly complex questions that I feel a teacher cannot afford to ignore for long in the business of teaching.

What is the role of conditioning?

It is important to realise that our motivations and fears in life are not ours alone. They are shared in our consciousness as a society, conditioned meticulously and systematically over generations. Would it be possible to see this? That "we are the world" (in Krishnamurti's words, not Michael Jackson's!). We are conditioned to feel in particular ways: fear of failure, the future, of authority etc. Our feelings may tell us more about how we think rather than the true nature of the world? Maybe observing the dynamics of this conditioning within us, is to be free of its overwhelming grip?

How may we go to the root of something and being free of it?

Some questions may open up the way we think about the human brain. We often imply that the brain needs to be woken up from some sort of a stupor to learn, that we need to develop techniques for attention or else, we are lost in the vortex of inattention. But what if the human brain is ever-prepared to learn? What if the impediments to learning are strong feelings of personal experience and threats to this system that our thoughts are constantly generating? What if observing this arising inattention is 'paying' attention? How can we peer into and play with this proposition, together as teachers and students?

What is the nature of our experiences and who is the experienter?

This question does not exactly sound like a question that teachers and students need to take up. Maybe monks, nuns or ascetics, and even adults, but not students it seems! However, education seems to hold the possibility of engaging with these questions. These questions are important because our 'self' is the lens through which our experience of the world is processed. And we seem to understand so little about these experiences as we don't learn enough about the lens itself! A good teaching process (via the medium of a good catalyst, the teacher) definitely raises our curiosity about what is being learnt and how to learn it better. More importantly, it seems extremely necessary to observe who is learning too. To observe the contours of the narrative of an autobiographical self, the self that constantly, determines one's role or behaviour in relationship to another. The self that repeatedly shows up as a performer, be it teacher or student or parent or whoever else.

What is the nature of the mind of this personal self, and the factoids we gather along the way as truths about ourselves and the world? We could simply talk with students about all this. This may open up a contemplation that impacts all learning along one's life beginning at school.

Good education

We often cross paths with good teachers in the classroom and along life's amble from here to there. Good teaching via a good teacher ignites sparks, births an inquiring mind, makes good education possible. An education that is not only confined to domain knowledge of specific subjects. An education that keeps alive constant observation and listening to the world within and outside.

References:

- * From the article titled **Teaching the teachers**, in the Education Reform section of The Economist online, published on June 11th 2016.
'In a study updated last year, John Hattie of the University of Melbourne crunched the results of more than 65,000 research papers on the effects of hundreds of interventions on the learning of 250m pupils. He found that aspects of schools that parents care about a lot, such as class sizes, uniforms and streaming by ability, make little or no difference to whether children learn...What matters is "teacher expertise". All of the 20 most powerful ways to improve school-time learning identified by the study depended on what a teacher did in the classroom.'
- ** **A Flame of Learning: Krishnamurti with Teachers**, published by the Krishnamurti Foundation of India, 2005.