

WHERE HAVE ALL THE TEACHERS GONE? THE POLITICS OF TEACHER TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS

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INTRODUCTION

All four authors of this paper participated in mandatory induction courses conducted by national universities for their respective academic staff in the recent past. Though we come from very different disciplinary backgrounds in the humanities and sciences all of us had broadly similar questions about the content, aims and the place of such teaching practices within the university. We were left with the uncomfortable question of whether there was an underlying utilitarian principle informing the uncritical promotion of methodologies such as learner centred teaching, reflective teaching practice and highly instrumental and positivist measurement and assessment methods. Given the larger context of declining state investment in higher education, especially in Sri Lanka, and the global commodification of education we were led to ask ourselves if these new teaching methodologies – which in essence attempt to create a more productive and efficient classroom – were part of this new orientation in higher education where the focus is shifting increasingly towards employability of graduates in contrast to the humanistic traditions of university education which seek to produce thinking, feeling and critically conscious individuals who have the potential to be agents of change, whether within their specialized professions or society at large. This paper is an attempt to explore what we feel are the historically established traditions and values of university education and to identify how, what we term, “new” teaching methodologies (we use the term “new” rather loosely because we recognize that such teaching practices have been used for at least 3-4 decades if not longer but are relatively new to the Sri Lankan university system) are potentially contributing to the transformation of the university into a limited space of quasi-intellectual exploration with more emphasis on something very close to vocational training.

THE GOALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* (2010) makes an erudite, impassioned and cogent argument for the need for higher education to focus on larger humanistic goals: producing people who are critical, innovative, democratically conscious and unafraid to question and rise above conformism. These core values argues Nussbaum are important even from an instrumental capitalist-market oriented perspective, because it is a society of individuals with such values that can innovate and drive change, which even late capitalism sees as a key ingredient for sustained growth. While we do not share such an instrumentalist vision of education underwritten by capitalist logic we highlight this aspect here because of the argument often made that certain subject areas such as humanities and liberal arts are of little utility value. One central irony here though is that the Socratic principles of education that Nussbaum propounds in her text are precisely the kind of principles that inform learner-centered approaches to teaching. Reflection, which draws inspiration from the early twentieth century philosophical work of John Dewey (1933) also emerges from an anti-positivist and anti-utilitarian vision of education. However, within the current education discourse both Socratic classroom practice and reflection become methodologies that target more efficient teacher-learner interactions within often overcrowded and under-resourced university classrooms, seeking to mass-produce more and more graduates

for a marketplace hungry for disciplined and productive bodies and minds.¹ The keyword here is efficiency – with an underlying belief that as long as the proper methodology is followed learning will occur, with little or no emphasis on content and what intangible learning a student may gain through the experience of a university education. A university education is not, or should not be, limited to mere classroom or textbook education, though unfortunately this appears an increasing trend with the commodification of education. The university teacher, in this context becomes a mere facilitator and not a creator of knowledge. This is in contrast to earlier understandings where research, dissemination of knowledge and innovation have historically been central to the practice of university teaching. Today, the university teacher is increasingly becoming someone who packages skills and delivers them in an effective manner within the time, resource and institutional constraints that are imposed by the market and larger institutional realities. The Socratic classroom in this scenario translates into innocuous group work and reflection in this context also becomes an apolitical activity that is simply limited to reflecting on method. Am I being a good teacher? Are my classes well structured with clear goals and objectives? become the central questions, leaving out reflection on more contentious issues such as: What are the broader emancipatory goals of education? What kind of people are we educating? What political or ideological concerns should our students become sensitized to? Such reflection makes the classroom a potentially liberating and radical place. It is such reflection that will produce dissent, non-conformity and ultimately change and innovation. This does not imply that the role of university education is to produce rebellion but it is such a fundamentally questioning attitude that lifts university education above the mundane and everyday and turns it into a space of intellectual liberation.

THE ROMANCE OF EDUCATION

We chose the sub-title of this section deliberately and provocatively to challenge the notion of education as a utilitarian activity leading to measurable outcomes that ultimately serve a market economy. To us, education signifies something more than this. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire showed that existing education systems serve the hegemonic ends of bourgeois society. Freire argued for a critical pedagogy that examined the social relations within which the pedagogical encounter takes place in order to transform it.

Arguably, student-centred teaching practice and reflective learning practices were influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy. Yet, the heart of Freire's teaching philosophy lies in his politics: the politics of social transformation which Freire argued was the purpose of the encounter between teacher and student. The absence of such a discussion in new teaching methodologies is revealing. New teaching methodologies are premised on the notion of a teacher who is a "competent craftsperson" (Pinto et.al 2012-74). Within this discourse, the teacher, the student as well as the outcomes of education are conceptualised in terms of a set of measurable competencies. This methodology is uncritically presented as the favoured and indeed, the *only* acceptable pedagogical approach. Certainly, there is merit in learning out how to plan teaching effectively and to organize learning sessions on the basis of learning outcomes. Our discomfort during the training we underwent arose from the lack of space to discuss the social and political relations such teaching encounters engender as well as lack of in-depth analysis of the context within which such teaching encounters are supposed to take place. Such a learning space arises from an acceptance that teaching is a politically neutral activity which only requires technical competence (see for instance, Finlay 2002; Finlay 2008). Even if we reject Freire's understanding

¹ The notion of a productive body is drawn from the work of Michel Foucault and his discussion of how institutions, especially education, serve to generate productive individuals who have internalized values that serve capital and the dominant social order (Foucault 1975: 25-26, 210-211)

of pedagogy as primarily having a transformative potential as too radical, teaching is essentially a social encounter. Such encounters are imbued with the social and political processes within which they are institutionalised. Gender, ethnicity, class, ideology, whether we like it or not, will influence how and what we teach. What does it mean when a discussion on teaching methods strips this encounter of its social and political connotations? For example, in a context where education policy is being reconceptualised in terms of the commodification of education, where the sole measurement of quality is in terms of the employability of graduates and disciplines which are not considered 'marketable' are denigrated, can there be a neutral, apolitical discussion on what we mean by educational outcomes and competencies? When we encounter highly diverse student populations with varying needs from varying social contexts, can we ignore the dynamics such diversity engenders?

New teaching methodologies focus on ostensibly more democratic and liberal teaching experiences, stressing the idea of knowledge being collaboratively constructed through a dialogue between the teacher and the student. This certainly appears to be modelled on Freire's understanding of the essence of teaching as dialogics and dialogue. Yet also implicit in Freire's pedagogy is the importance of social critique. What Freire terms as problem-posing education stimulates reflection and action on reality: education is an ongoing activity and a process of becoming. This involves taking humans as historical beings and taking people's historicity as the starting point of their reflections (Freire 1970). In modern parlance, this would read as stimulating critical thinking. But, can critical thinking be stimulated by an ahistorical, apolitical and neutral teacher?

THE CHARISMATIC AND TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHER

Another practice that new teaching methodologies promote is learner-centred teaching with the concomitant reduction of the teacher's role. The teacher as discussed earlier is reduced to a facilitator and craftsman which seems to be framed by the larger logic that a university education only requires the imparting of a certain set of skills that prepare the undergraduate for the employment market. While critical thinking is often invoked as part of this marketable package of skills, the form of critical thinking envisaged here is impoverished and often limited to something mundane like problem solving skills. While facilitating conveys a sense of collaborative knowledge production and a democratic learning space, this depends also to a large extent on the content of the learning experience. When this content is determined within market logic, the extent to which the more emancipatory and humanistic goals of education that Freire, Nussbaum and others talked about can be achieved is questionable.

While authoritarianism in the classroom is something most would decry, the charismatic teacher we feel has an important function within the university context. Charisma sits uncomfortably with new teaching methodologies because it is an often intangible and immeasurable quality leading to equally intangible outcomes such as inspiring students.

Even a cursory look at education theory suggests that the definition of a "good teacher" is highly contested. (Pinto et al. 2012) Three dominant discourses about teaching are the charismatic subject, the competent craftsman and the reflective practitioner. But as Pinto et al. (2012) argue these three discourses are invariably intermeshed with each other in actual practice and all teachers engage to some degree in all three. A fourth alternative they propose, drawing inspiration from Freire, is that of the transformative teacher. Such an individual is someone who makes the space of teaching into a critical encounter imbued with notions of social justice. A transformative teacher is able to inspire his or her students deconstruct the normative and lay bare how various political, economic, social and conceptual discourses shape what we perceive as real and normal. This is inspired from a perspective of equity and equitable social change. However, questioning

the normative is not simply a political or ideological act. If we approach it from a purely conceptual or knowledge production perspective norms still have to be questioned. Thomas Kuhn (1970) spoke of paradigm changes and how such changes are vital to the progress of science or indeed any field of knowledge. This is only possible if the normative is relentlessly questioned. Newton would have never developed the concept of gravity had he considered objects falling to the ground just a normal phenomenon. The curious scientific mind is untiringly questioning and is not satisfied with platitudes or complacent answers. The charismatic teachers we encountered shared a similar curious spirit. They may not necessarily have been transformative teachers but they have had a major impact on our lives and inspired change in us and invited us to look at life from fresh perspectives.

These teachers were rarely methodical or structured in their teaching and were essentially “unprofessional” in the sense the term is used today. But it is precisely this non-conformity and their willingness to challenge authority and convention that helped us cultivate some of these values within ourselves. They were also Socratic in the sense that they used their charisma to encourage students to question and critique. The inspiration such teaching generates is an affective quality that is not assessable but it is an intangible benefit of learning that can perhaps have more influence on a student than all the measurable learning that taking place within an institutional context. Charismatic teachers were also often the teachers who were explicit that teaching is an irreducibly political activity and that there are no neutral pedagogies. Because of their exuberance and charisma they rarely attempted to appear neutral and instead laid bare the prejudices and ideologies that drive them as individuals and in turn invited us to reflect on our own ideological makeup.

Within the current professionalisation of teaching in general and the pressure on university academics to conform to such professionalism specifically, who defines what a good teacher is and how do such definitions relate to the larger political context? The contours of the general discourse on higher education in Sri Lanka are fairly well established. The higher education ministry, officials, some sections of the general public and decision makers in the private sector see Sri Lankan higher education as archaic and non-market oriented. Funding for structural reforms in higher education by multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank also target employability and skills that suit the marketplace. A general consensus is being created in society that the Sri Lankan university system has to undergo radical change and modernization. Even within ‘practical’ disciplines such as engineering the impression has been created that there is insufficient focus on the needs of the industry. It is within this larger institutional and political context that the new teaching methodologies are being built into the professional practice of university teachers. With this kind of dominant utilitarian thinking it is not accidental that the idea of a charismatic teacher is being displaced and more emphasis is being placed on a “competent craftsman” or a very limited notion of a “reflective practitioner”.

CONCLUSION

What we have explored in this paper are the new teaching methodologies that we have encountered in university teacher training and try to critically relate them to changing notions of higher education. Global and local higher education policy reforms are pushing for market-oriented, cost-effective higher education which focuses on producing employable and skilled graduates for the labour market. We have argued that this is a sharp deviation from the notion of higher education as having a liberating and emancipatory function. In this context, we have also considered the changing role of the teacher as an agent of social transformation to a facilitator managing class room experiences efficiently. We have shown that while learner centred and reflective teaching practices are based on radical teaching philosophies, the focus on the techniques of teaching over teaching content has stripped it of its radical and transformative

elements. We argue further that this has led to the disappearance or the under-valuing of the charismatic teacher and the potential of such teachers to inspire students and to cultivate critically questioning and intellectually challenging learning environments.

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