

How creative are our teachers?

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"DIALOGUE cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance" -- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Friere.

With so much talk about *srijonshil* (creative) questions and examinations and how really *srijonshil is srijonshil*, can we also ask how creative are our teachers (of both Bengali and English medium schools), or what scope do teachers have to “be” creative? Being creative means being generative, producing and disrupting knowledge and letting others produce knowledge. To seek creativity among students, it is important first to explore scope for creativity in pedagogy (the art and science of teaching). We need creativity in pedagogy to create anti-oppressive and non-hierarchical learning spaces, and this can happen when teachers are self-reflexive and willing to engage in dialogue with students.

A teacher cannot and should not solely determine what the classroom should be. Twenty different students bring in twenty different realities the moment they walk into the classroom, and through engaged pedagogy, these realities can be acknowledged to figure out what the classroom could be. It is a political reaching out when the teacher engages in dialogue with students and lets personal narratives surface in the classroom space. Being engaged in dialogue does not simply mean allowing students to talk and participate. Engaging in dialogue means the teacher is actually willing to learn from students too. It means not letting standards define one way of looking at things and creating a homogenous bunch of students.

When co-teaching English grammar to students of grade six at a Bengali medium school, I felt frustrated as I tried explaining grammar (sentence construction). The students were “weak” in English; hence the initiative to teach grammar in an interactive way was taken through pedagogically experimental English workshop classes. We

discussed each other's mistakes openly and in a constructive way. One girl felt very ashamed of her mistakes until I explained that there was no shame in making mistakes.

Being a teacher, it was possible for me to demonstrate that learning should not be a shameful process. However, our education system thrives upon the idea of shaming and creating binaries between “strong/good” and “weak/bad” students. There is no such thing as the good or bad student, but only exclusions and power hierarchies. Grades, golden GPA, prefectship and honour rolls create standards and exclusions in classroom, when some students are allowed to occupy the learning space as winners, while others are not. At one point the shame gets internalised, which further limits students from performing well in class.

A four-year-old, who studies in playgroup, had to sit for an exam few weeks back. She had to memorise a series of answers (exact wording, exact sequence). What happened next is baffling. She ended up getting a B plus in her exam, which upset her mother. It was unnerving to see how memorising and grading had taken over the imagination of a four-year-old. Why have exams and grading in playgroup to begin with?

Thérèse Blanchet wrote about the education system in Bangladesh in the book titled *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood*. She commented: “Children have much to say about the fear, the tension, and the possible sense of failure which such examinations entail. The school system streamlines children early. The successful ones are highly praised and develop a sense of their superior ability. Children who do not succeed for whatever reason are penalised, both at schools and at home, and in all kinds of ways. The education dispensed to children is syllabus-based and examination-driven. The school system sanctions the memorisation of a finite knowledge contained in book. A good memory is very important to obtain good results. Memory is intelligence.” This book was published in 1998. Seems like very little has changed in our pedagogical approach to knowledge production inside classrooms even today.

Shohag, an eighth grader who had mild autism, went to an all boys' school with his brother. They studied in the same class, except Shohag was a “little slow” in learning compared to his brother. He got bullied by his classmates and teachers, and at home, often hit by parents for being a slow learner. Few weeks back, due to study pressure and

mistreatment by the people around him, Shohag had a mental break down and was admitted to Manoshik Shashtho Kendro, where he had to stay for three weeks. The way Shohag experienced exclusion and oppression, made me think about the saying “Education is the backbone of a nation.” The hollowness of the sentence makes me want to laugh out loud.

Engaged pedagogy will allow us to address issues of psychology, power relations and socio-cultural aspects in the classroom. For example, how can a teacher improvise teaching methods if students feel bored, and make the learning process fun? How does a teacher's bad mood or demotivation influence a class, or how can we relate classroom bullying to socio-cultural categories of gender, class, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and age, which create a flux of power hierarchies not only among students, but also students and teachers? Engaged pedagogy is creative pedagogy, where the classroom becomes a risky, yet generative space. Engaged pedagogy will make exclusions visible in the class, and thus entail a discussion of how exclusions are created in the class.

Creativity in education does not simply mean implicit questions in examinations but ensuring an actual creative space. Before making exams more *srijonshil*, we need to ensure that creative space and assess creativity in teachers. However, teachers are evaluated based on how well they “manage” a class through discipline (more discipline=less disruptions=less dialogue=less risk) and through what grades their students get, both very problematic ways of evaluating performance of a teacher. Engaged pedagogy does not only help students, but also teachers, when we acknowledge that teachers and students can transcend their fixed roles in the class.

It really should not be about what kind of questions come in the exam paper and losing our head over whether students can answer correctly or not, but creating a classroom where thinking is valued, where teachers and students can challenge each other, where education will not mean memorising, but liberating oneself, where knowledge is created not only by the teacher, but by everyone in class. It has to do with a new kind of philosophy and addressing the bigger and more dangerous questions of un-learning, transforming and transcending through pedagogy.

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