

The role of the teacher

By | Sep 5, 2014

As I look back on my student years, I can count a handful of teachers who not only helped me decode the subtext of Shakespearean prose, generate a testable hypothesis or critique the operational definitions of abstract psychological constructs but who also moved me in intangible and mysterious ways. Even as I write these words, I feel their presence for they taught me to weigh the worth of every word. Each teacher had a unique teaching style and waxed eloquently on different subjects; yet, each in his or her own way, coaxed me to reason, reconsider and reflect. As I matured from being an unsure high-schooler to a more opinionated college-goer to a more balanced and nuanced doctoral student, my mentors played a significant role by challenging me to continually refine my thought processes. Whether it was a heated discussion in class or a one-to-one meeting in an office, or an encouraging comment on a term paper that made my heart sing, I cannot explain why I still feel a deep connection with these mentors; a connection that extends beyond their individual personalities. Further, even though I formally left the portals of academia years ago, I still find myself yearning to learn, to grow and extend myself. Interestingly, my inspirational teachers were themselves role models of continuous learning, and that is probably the greatest lesson they imparted to me.

Unfortunately, my experience is not representative of most students. Many adults recall their student years as being dull, lifeless and boring. For many students, school and college work is perceived as drudgery; something that has to be done and gotten over with. Even today, teachers can stifle children's innate curiosity, make them dislike a subject or worse, label them as being "poor in studies" or "lazy." A number of individuals recount having "found themselves" and flowered only after leaving the confines of academic institutions. Between these two extremes of highly gifted teachers who inspire students to seek further versus suboptimal ones who discourage children from reaching their potential, lies a vast spectrum of educators who vary in their ability to understand, communicate and motivate students.



Intriguingly, the role of teachers has not changed dramatically over the years even though there have been sweeping changes in other areas of our lives. India, and the larger global community itself, have witnessed seismic shifts in the last two decades with the advent of the Internet Age. The Internet has indeed transformed myriad aspects of our daily lives right from the way we connect and relate to people to how business is transacted across international borders. The old-fashioned book and newspaper are rapidly being replaced by digital versions. With Smartphones and WiFi connectivity, the average citizen can now be a reporter. Even though the Internet has revolutionized communication, media and business, it has not brought about similar shifts in education. Granted, schools have Smart Boards,

audio-visual rooms, computer labs and Instant Messaging Services and universities offer a galaxy of online courses. Schools also require children to do some 'research' online, but most often this ends up being a cut-copy-paste job. Yet, at a fundamental level, education, and the role of the teacher or professor, has not been altered significantly by technology.

Classes are still, by and large, teacher-led. While the teacher does most of the talking, students tend to be relatively more passive. Further, the entire class follows the same curriculum. Individual differences are brushed aside as teachers teach to the average student. As a result, kids who are gifted in a discipline and those who have specific difficulties have to fend for themselves. Often, the former get bored while the latter may struggle to cope. Neither boredom nor frustration is conducive to learning. We also continue to require students to memorize factual information, even if we do not insist on verbatim recall. As technology has made in-roads into children's lives as well, teachers also have to face a generation of

children who have diminishing attention spans for traditional methods of instruction.

That the role of the teacher has not been transformed radically over the years is both a blessing and a bane. At its core, teaching is about touching another person's life in an almost mystical way. It is this magical aspect of teaching that can never be supplanted by technology. The ability to reach out, connect and kindle passion in a burgeoning mind cannot be taken over by a machine, however 'smart' it may be. And, for this reason, we cannot and should not do away with the traditional role of the teacher, which is to ignite young minds and hearts.

That said, the teacher may use non-traditional means to connect with every student in unique ways. Teachers may harness the immense power of technology in innovative ways to deliver more personalized and relevant lessons. The idea of a one-size-fits-all type of education should become passé as children receive lessons tailored to their needs and proclivities. Even the idea of the traditional classroom can be turned on its head as Salman Khan of the Khan Academy has shown. Instead of the teacher delivering content in class, students watch videos of the lectures at home. When they come to school, children do problem sets as the teacher moves around the room assisting students if they get stuck or stumble. According to Salman Khan, the teacher's time is more valuably spent if she helps children through the reasoning process. Further, all children do not have to move at the same pace. Each child can go on to the next concept or level only when he has mastered the previous one.

In addition to embracing technology to provide children with more personalized lessons, we also need to shake off certain assumptions that shackle education. We need to recognize and respect that "human intelligence is diverse, dynamic and distinct," as educationist Ken Robinson writes. We continue to prize verbal and logical-mathematical abilities and provide short shrift to other aspects of human development. In order to help children blossom, we need to celebrate differences between them and encourage them to find the medium that best expresses their potential. We also need to emphasize the competencies that will be valued in the future. According to Howard Gardner, the world will require people who are masters in a discipline, who can synthesize information, construct knowledge or products by being creative, get along with diverse people and who have a well-developed ethical conscience. Interestingly, most of these competencies cannot be 'taught' by a computer. There should always be a place for face-to-face interactions in the educative process.

In the future, I see the role of the teacher morph into a mentor. She may not necessarily have to 'teach' a subject in the conventional sense as she may use videos and other online tools to deliver content. But human exchanges should also play an integral part for the teacher to strike a chord within his/her students. I believe that the teacher will remain at the heart of the teaching process; it is she who will help the child find meaning, that is both personal and relevant, in an ever growing sea of information.

This article, by Aruna Sankaranarayanan, was published earlier in the July 2014 issue of Teacher Plus.

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