

Learn to Teach: A Shared Process

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ABSTRACT

A lot of debate is on among all the stake holders – students, teachers, parents, society at large and the government, to improve quality in Higher education. However, of primary importance is faculty training in new models of teaching and their endeavour to keep pace with the phenomenal knowledge explosion that is taking place all over the world. A teacher cannot be a teacher if she/he does not have the professional gene of a learner. In this article, I will explore the shared process of teaching and learning. I will also look at how one can keep pace with the knowledge explosion, improvise new pedagogy such as preparing lecture video capsules and train in wholesome learning through inter- disciplinary studies.

Key Words: CPD for college teachers, Research, Interdisciplinarity, Technology as an Empowering Tool in Pedagogic Practices

Almost all professions demand a minimum apprenticeship of one to two years to get hands-on training before the trainee graduates start their careers as professionals. The professional courses in medicine, law, accountancy and management, to name a few, mandate the graduate students to go through training programs to supplement their academic learning. These internship programs provide for all students, an opportunity to enhance their academic learning with field experience related to their career, in a variety of settings. A school teacher is also mandated to get practical training in a school as a part of the eligibility requirements to be a teacher. The only field that is out of this mandatory professional apprenticeship is teaching in a university or a college. In fact, to date, there is no pre-training programme available for university and college teachers.

The minimum eligibility requirement for college teaching, as laid out by the University Grants Commission (2018), is a high second class Master's degree in the required discipline and a pass in the National Eligibility Test (NET). Thus

the question arises: What is special about college teaching that it is exempt from any kind of prior training? Can we presume that rigorous academic learning for two years at the Master's level is enough to teach graduate students in colleges? Why does a school teacher have to go through a teacher training programme and not a college teacher? The simple and straight answer lies in the difference in the principles and methods of teaching, namely the pedagogy. The art and science of teaching school students is different from that of college students. In school, the emphasis is on making students learn facts and skills, while a college provides a learning environment where the student is required to think through and apply what she/he has learned. School teachers are therefore trained how to impart knowledge to students, and teach them the step-by-step process to arrive at a solution. Whether it is mathematics or science or language, it is the process that helps to answer the problems based on the prescribed texts. College teachers on the other hand do not follow any one textbook. In fact, even the prescribed literary texts are not read line by line in the class. Instead, teachers are expected to lecture on topics, provide background information on them, identify cross-disciplinary connections related to them, discuss available research on them, and finally it is the students who have to relate the lectures to the recommended reference books. College lectures are meant to be in capsule form, presenting in a summarized form the main points of the topics of discourse. College teachers expect students to do self-study, reflect on different viewpoints of the topic and synthesize them. Hence, college teachers must have adequate scholarship and expertise in the area they have specialized in at the Master's level. They do not follow a prescribed pedagogy; they formulate their own pedagogy to create in students a keen interest in the topics they lecture on, and leave ample scope for the students to think, analyze, deduce and reach a conclusion based on their reasoning. That is one of the reasons why college teaching does not insist on pre-training.

However, what college faculty is required to attend is post-job or on-the-job training, which goes by the name of Orientation and Refresher Courses. As per the guidelines for the Academic Staff Colleges prescribed by the UGC (2007-2012), promotions from one grade to another or for that matter any vertical professional movement requires the faculty member to attend a minimum of one orientation and two refresher courses. Further, the current UGC Regulations on Minimum Qualifications for Appointment of Teachers and Other Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education (2018) even prescribe the number of lectures per week of specified duration, which have taken away the remaining sheen of creativity from these lectures. The UGC quantification of lectures has changed colleges into

schools, with their insistence upon attendance and textbook-based teaching that extends from morning till late afternoon. Also, the tutorials are neither challenging nor intellectual, but useful only for students' internal grades and to bolster the not too flattering marks they get in the semester-end examinations. The teachers suffer from professional ennui resulting from lack of intellectual challenge, mental stimulation and professional excitement; the students suffer from boredom, lethargy and lassitude of a passive mind. It is no surprise that higher education in India does not have a glorious record and is not even close to the top ranking universities and colleges in the world.

This brings us to the oft-repeated and seldom answered question as to how to improve the quality of education in our colleges and universities? The constant refrain we hear from teachers is that the quality of students has gone down, and that they come to the university just to get a paper degree. All they want is instant enjoyment with their belief in YOLO (you only live once). This complaint from the teachers who themselves belong to Gen X (early-to-mid 1960s to the early 1980s), is an attempt to pass the buck to the students, without acknowledging the fact that there is something wrong with the state of the teaching today. The tightening of the noose around the teachers' neck through UGC regimentation that equates the work of an academic with that of an office administrator by specifying the number of hours and classes per day overlooks both the role and the special needs of the college faculty. In this age of incredible knowledge explosion, the present day education does not give the time or the incentive to the lecturer to pursue research in his/her discipline. To keep up-to-date with new concepts, new thoughts, new ideas, discoveries and innovations is far more demanding than pushing files in an office. It is not that one form of work is superior to the other, but it is a fact that office work and academic work make unique and distinctive demands on one's time, cognition and responsibility.

A teacher is also a learner. Although this sounds clichéd, a good teacher is one who keeps learning, not only to gain expertise and the latest knowledge, but also how to impart it to students who are on the threshold of a new phase of learning. Things are changing rapidly and what is new today becomes obsolete tomorrow. This is the challenge faced by the college and university teachers today. Any academic worthy of being called an academic will not rest content with what she/he learnt as a graduate student. With the rapid advances in knowledge and the use of technology in learning and imparting knowledge, academics are under constant pressure to keep abreast with the latest developments in theories and concepts in their discipline, besides a technological approach to teaching. Raising the quality of education requires raising the intellectual caliber of teachers, both in colleges

and in universities. It is said that the last quarter of the previous century was a post-idea period, where our universities abdicated their primary responsibility of generating new ideas to meet the demands of a technology-driven society, with its extended reach through mobile phones, television and new modes of transport. As a result, old values have become suspect, and new values have not emerged to replace them. The new gadget-oriented generation, without sufficient knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of technology, has fallen between the two schools of thought—the old and the new. Research and guidance in research are therefore even more essential at all stages of higher education.

If quality improvement is the goal, it can be bolstered by making research mandatory for all faculty members. This can be achieved by improving the infrastructure necessary for research and reducing the teaching hours currently stipulated at 14-16 hours per week to half the number, so that the teacher functions mainly as a catalyst and gives a capsule of what is to be taught. This will also encourage self-study in the students who will be forced to become independent thinkers and not just passive recipients of knowledge and information.

The teacher's role is three-in-one—that of a researcher, a learner and a teacher. There can be no distinction between a college teacher and a university teacher. At the moment there is a hierarchy not only in terms of professional opportunities of pursuing research but also in promotion avenues between teachers who teach in a college and those who teach in university departments. This bias is exacerbated by the practice of the former being rarely involved in decision making even about issues like syllabi that directly impact their lives. This bias against college teachers in the university academia has to be removed.

At the cost of being charged with indulging in personal reminiscence, I would like to cite the example of Gargi College, University of Delhi. I had the privilege and good fortune to preside over Gargi College that had a host of brilliant researchers in Physics and Chemistry, Humanities and Social Sciences. As a result of the research work undertaken by the faculty across almost all departments, UGC bestowed the distinction “College with a Potential for Excellence” on Gargi College. The college also got a special grant from UGC for its faculty to undertake research and community service projects. The Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science & Technology, Government of India awarded Gargi College the STAR College Grant. The college serves as an illustrious example of how research in colleges nourishes both intellectual and self development.

Another aspect that is of prime importance in CPD is to train teachers to prepare lectures that challenge and stimulate young minds so that they learn to question,

analyze, discuss and understand new perspectives to meet the changing world order. The lectures should be designed to give the students a broad exposure to knowledge. They should have the potential to pique the students' interest and galvanize them to think and learn through self study. To use the analogy of the spoon-feeding system followed in schools, higher education has to lay down the meals and make the students taste, choose and enjoy what they like and what suits their intellectual palate. Refresher courses for teachers should therefore pay special attention to training teachers to prepare capsule lectures that cover the entire course in a succinct manner.

With the availability of technology, teachers should also get training in preparing lecture video capsules with quality content and visual presentation. Lecture video capsules have three segments—delivering the lecture, writing on the smart board, and making a slide show. While the content of the lecture is based on academic knowledge which the teacher has to constantly upgrade, writing on the smart board and making the slide show is equally crucial in a lecture video. Hence the teacher must get training in these as well. Our faculty has to be trained in using the classroom lecture as the base and imaginatively creating a video presentation around it to make a video lecture capsule or at least using smart technology as smartly as possible to achieve a host of desirable pedagogical aims. Let me illustrate with examples. I had the good fortune of attending a lecture in the US by a Professor of Philosophy on Euthanasia. This was nearly twenty-two years back, when I had gone to Carnegie Mellon University to learn about leadership training. The professor spoke eloquently on the topic of Euthanasia and wrote the salient points on the board; he also showed a video clip of a man severely burnt in a car crash. This man was going through multiple painful surgeries and treatment, only to be told that he would be confined to a wheel chair permanently, and would have only partial sight in both his eyes. Thankfully, he had not suffered any brain damage. It was difficult for the man to start a new innings suffused with pain beyond threshold endurance, negligible vision and paralyzed movement. He asked for mercy killing. The video presented interviews with six people—the man, his wife, his son, his attending doctor, a priest, and a psychologist. The video interviews showed discussions on the right to take one's life, the doctor's dilemma, the priest's faith in divine dispensation, the psychologist's attempt to infuse positive thinking and the concerns of his wife and son. The professor ended the lecture and assigned a term paper for the students on euthanasia. He also wrote a list of reference books for consultation. The dramatic enactment of the euthanasia problem had an impact on the students and made them think about this medico-legal-religious issue. On another occasion, I had to deliver a lecture at

the University of Malaga on Beckett's mime, *Act Without Words I*. I used a series of eight cartoons featuring a cockroach trying to climb up a dustbin and being repulsed by a broom in every one of its three attempts. The last cartoon showed the cockroach lying flattened on the floor near the bin. I was astonished at the full throated response of the students to this visual stimulation; I had not spoken a word. The cartoon sketches did all the talking.

Technology has opened many new doors for education in a plethora of ways. The hope of 400 million students, seeking a bright future for themselves and for the nation cannot be realized through the existing colleges where the intake capacity is limited. Their future lies with digitization of education. Writing lessons is different from classroom teaching and requires a different orientation. Since this is a new pedagogy, it is of cardinal importance to train teachers in the art of writing digital lessons and using multimedia technology. Just as only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, the writer alone knows where the difficulty arises in comprehension, and accordingly makes the necessary changes. Teachers need to develop the ability to see knowledge as a whole and not in compartments. They also need special training in digital lesson writing. Those who write for an Open University or for MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) will testify that both teaching orally and teaching through writing demand clear, unambiguous, succinct and straightforward communication. The refresher courses must orient teachers to the twin dimensions of communication—oral and written—and give them training in writing as well as speaking.

The other major training required for a college teacher is that of inter-disciplinary teaching. Stand-alone courses are a thing of the past and integrative learning is not only the most valued today, but is also the need of the hour. Teachers therefore need to prepare for the new age students who prefer linked courses, team taught lectures, discussions and debates, and combo learning. In fact, they learn more from teachers who share their knowledge and perspectives from different points of view. For example, how can a 20th century post-Modern drama be taught without referring to the two World Wars, Existential Philosophy from Nietzsche to Camus to Sartre, the Grotesque and the *Commedia dell'arte* of the 16th-18th century, the Behaviorist Psychology of Skinner, and the Psychology of Jokes by Freud? The teacher has to hence draw references from History, Philosophy, Theatre, Arts and Psychology. Similarly, when we teach Modernism, it cannot be taught without a concerted reference to Literature, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music and Dance. Also, Economics is closely allied to Mathematics, Statistics, Sociology and Political Ideology. This is equally true of sciences, where stand-alone science courses have given way to the inter weaving of Physical Sciences

with Biosciences. The best example of a research involving Computer Science, Engineering and Biological Science is the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Awardee for 2010, Dr. Sangamitra Mukhopadhyaya. She was bestowed this honour for her work on algorithmic optimization in biological data analysis involving pattern recognition using machine learning in large datasets. She has also identified a genetic marker for breast cancer, determined the co-occurrence of HIV and cancers, and helped understand the significance of the brain's white matter in Alzheimer's disease.

It is evident that the interdisciplinarity of teaching involving multiple disciplines adds a new dimension to the teaching-learning process. Therefore, teachers have to be trained to make cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary references. This can perhaps be done by giving them a three-to-six-week course on seminal books in the fields of Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences and Arts can be discussed. These could be books that interweave different disciplines to give a wholesome perspective of great thoughts that transcend narrow stratification and categorization.

Since most universities and the affiliated colleges have shifted to the semester mode, every teacher must be mandated to take a year off after teaching for 10 semesters (five years). Alternately, they could take one semester off after nine semesters, to work on research papers/books for publication. This has to be treated as a part of the teaching workload so that it encourages the teachers to also be learners. It can also meet the rising problem of unemployment among eligible graduates seeking an academic job as they can get ad-hoc jobs that give them an exposure to teaching in colleges. Teachers should be given allowances for computer use and books so that they can access paid international journals and purchase the latest books on the subjects they teach.

Lastly, policy makers as well as the teachers must remember that no college is small or big, or qualitatively strong or weak. It is the teachers and the students who make a college what it is. The effort should therefore be on raising the bar and motivating the students to attend classes and writing assignments. The motto of the teachers should be "I learn, you learn, together we learn". In the pursuit of this motto, both the institution and all its stakeholders will gain credibility.

The suggestions related to CPD of tertiary teachers mentioned in this paper should not be dismissed as messianic utopianism. They are practical and implementable. As stated earlier, a lot of discussions are going on for reforming the higher education sector, but the more we contemplate the change, the more we are imprisoned within the status quo. However, we know that as human beings,

we are pessimistic by experience and optimistic by intuition. Not all is lost with higher education; the academic stars shine still.

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