

UNDER-GRADUATE EDUCATION

Of Teaching and Learning

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What I have realized, after spending a considerable length of time in the field of education, working and thinking about it, in both formal and non-formal educational practice, that there is precious little “learning” involved in the so-called education system that is current. I would rather re-christen the current School-College-University system an “arrangement of academe” which does not include “learning” *par se*. Not that, it is completely incapable of imparting any learning at all, although a number of scholars would say that. In fact, the exchange of learning that sometimes occurs between the teacher and the student in a class room is essentially *coincidental*. I do not subscribe to the view that the present system is totally barren, but it does not impart knowledge. Whatever little “learning” is received and given usually happen through personal equations between the teacher and student and even this too, happens outside the academic ambit of the classroom.

I do not think any improvement is possible if we do not change the very basis of this system. Yet, knowing full well that no dramatic change is likely to happen anytime soon, and having spent all my working as well as retired life connected with academia, I cannot but suggest a few, implementable ‘patchwork’ reforms.

I am not proposing a change in syllabus right now, as that will not change anything. The syllabus, on its own, or dealt with in present parameters, does not impart knowledge. What the students learn and what we teachers educate them about are some ‘tricks’ that help the student pass examinations, ‘schemes’ to get more marks, some “tactics” that help to score better marks in examinations.

For quite some time now, the graduate colleges have practically stopped being places where education is imparted. Yet they ought to have been institutions where teaching and learning were practiced to the full. If we close all the colleges right now and instead create only centres for enrollment/registration for future examinations, the system will carry on nevertheless. The students will continue to enroll; they will sit for three tests in three years, and will either fail or pass. After appearing in such tests successfully they will appear in two more tests at University and eventually will get a Master’s degree.

Students no longer attend classes to learn, teachers no longer to teach. Not that none of the teachers are serious about teaching, not that none of the students wishes to study, yet the crux of the matter is that teachers do not find attentive students; students, in turn do not find learning an interesting proposition. So the whole system of learning which by nature depends on exchange of ideas and interests, collapses on its own.

ADMISSION

To find the reason for this state of mutual disinterest we need to go to the beginning of the current practices. The process starts when a student comes for “admission”. The system provides a “merit list” (I do have a lot of questions about the thing called “merit” but let us leave it for later) which ought to have regulated the whole admission process. But in practice, after a while this “merit list” ceases to work as the repository of students who can enroll in a transparent manner. It then becomes an unimportant factor. Rest of the students (the number of which would surprise all) procure admission on the basis of recommendations, political or otherwise and by other means as well.

How pervasive these recommendations are can only be understood by those who are involved in the college administration and the actual process of admission. Recommendations pour in – from the office of the Governor, from Ministers, from Universities, from the Education ministry, from offices related to the running of the institutions; to all of these the college is obliged in some form or the other. Not giving in to these pressures may mean harassment in future from these departments. And to ignore the recommendations from Students' Unions or political parties is a sure way to invite danger which can lead to mental and even physical abuse. All political parties play this "recommendation" game. Not one political body irrespective of their ideologies stays away from this practice. Gangs of professional miscreants and groups of students (and "ex-students") supported by parties of all political hues, sometime sell their recommendations for cold cash. It is futile to look for political ideals, or even the thought of embellishing the party funds, in the context.

The reasons are simple: sheer opportunism, making money and exercising and asserting power. The end result is to make money, to establish personal fiefdoms, to corrupt the minds of impressionable and innocent youths. The teaching and non-teaching staff of any college can provide innumerable examples of such incidents. There surely are some socio-economic reasons behind these, but it is difficult to remember those reasons when actually handling the admission process. Yet, ask any college administration and you will get the same reply everywhere: "Such things do not happen here".

Colleges have only limited number of seats as per University regulations. They cannot exceed this limit, but are forced to do so giving way to these "recommendations". As it also means extra income for normally cash-strapped institutions, college authorities do not discourage this practice.

These 'recommended' students do not care to attend classes. They not only "buy" their admissions, but also ensure that they can pass their tests and get "sent up" without attending any classes. This arrangement of indiscipline is sustained by the powerful political lobbies who stand to gain by inclusion of these loyal students into their cohorts. So at the time of admission itself the student is assured of being free of the pressure of compulsory attendance. This arrangement also helps to manage sitting space and other compulsory amenities for the excess number of students who are admitted, over and above the regulated number of seats.

Some teachers too are involved in this racket, but they are not too many in number – maybe a two percent of the total teaching population. A portion of the administration and the college office is very closely involved in this.

This vile ambience cannot be changed by only changing the syllabus. Besides, the change of syllabus is also often profit-driven, selection of books being a large source of under-the-table income of the people in charge.

Some improvement in transparency is possible if the whole process is made web based, but then many colleges have their own limitations. Some have financial constraints, some technological, or some other problems. But to stop corruption in admission to a large extent, online admission process is the only way.

And even in those colleges where the number of students does not exceed limits, students still stay away from classes as they believe there is no correlation between attending classes and passing examinations. In the classrooms, the teachers urge students to study what their syllabi offer, but the students are unable to answer questions just by studying the books prescribed. They expect that their teacher will actually give them the ready answers and they will get through just by mugging those up. They do not study their subjects but just memorise the answers. They believe that by writing the "correct" answers they will pass the examinations. And this is not entirely untrue. Fact is, the student pass exams simply on the merit of their answer scripts; there is no test to find out what actually he has learned.

There is a popular belief that the teachers make so much money by giving private tuition that they are no longer interested in taking their regular classes. This is not entirely true. There are many subjects and departments in many colleges where not a single teacher gives private tuition. Yet even in those colleges students do not show any enthusiasm about attending classes. However, private tuition continues to thrive. I know about a college where no classes are held after 2 in the afternoon in a particular discipline, as teachers and students both leave for private tuitions. There are both college and school teachers as well as non-academic persons involved in running this type of parallel institutions. The coaching centres have more clout than individual teachers and are powerful brand names who attract students.

To curb this habit of non-attendance in classes, we will need to eliminate the malpractices of admission process first. Based on only the merit list only the eligible students should be taken in. This may lead to regular attendance in classes to some extent.

PERCENTAGE

Implementing the present rule on attendance will also improve what is known as the “percentage” system. Admittedly this rule is not a panacea, but in this discussion we will limit ourselves to the present regulations. It is true that students will have no more incentive to study if they are forced to attend classes, but on the flip side withdrawal of this rule will result in mass absenteeism altogether. Now the students, especially those who have come through the “backdoor” know that institutes will not be able to take any disciplinary actions against them, because they have the backing of the political parties or some powerful establishments whom the college authorities do not dare to challenge.

The college or the University may bar students from appearing in the exams and in some cases they actually do so. But if a students (rather persons masquerading as students) begin to agitate against such a corrective step then the affiliating universities just back out leaving the colleges to fight it alone.

If the rate of attendance improves, the teachers will feel enthused to take classes more sincerely. As it is, they see new faces each time they go to classes. A smaller number of students admitted as per regulations will help to bring back the appropriate ambience for learning, even in the current circumstances. As a result, the mutual exchange of knowledge beyond the realm of examinations will receive a facelift laying the ground for real “learning”.

ADMINISTRATION

Another major problem of ensuring proper administration is finding a suitable Principal. It is seen that in spite of there being vacancies and no dearth of qualified people to fill up the positions, the positions remain unoccupied as no teacher wants to sit on the throne of thorns. There are persons who are willing to take the chair, it is often found that the candidate is found influenced by some group with vested interest. Sometimes, hunger for power and extra money also helps. Of course there are people who want to take up the responsibility having pipe dreams of ringing in reforms. But they are always in for a rude awakening all too soon. There are many such examples. One cannot practice strict discipline in the current context of the colleges and universities. Some persons claim that this can be done, but a summary survey of success stories will show that the feat was achieved by keeping the Students’ Union or their political mentors satisfied. The Principal cannot take any disciplinary action against any erring student or staff member. The laws of the land may give notional support, but the ground reality does not permit implementation of such actions. The principal, who is expected to run the college, must have some administrative powers; however, in reality the power rests on the other side.

SCARCITY OF TEACHERS

Not only are Principals scarce in colleges, there is major dearth of teachers too. Though scarcity of teachers is not the sole reason for classes going empty in colleges, it is a major one. Casting a class timetable for the whole college is a terribly tough job, even if teaching staff strength is not a problem. To make a workable routine one has to balance everything – availability of classrooms, availability of teachers, number of Honours and General subjects involved, total number of hours available during the

college hours. Otherwise one will face the problem of overloading in one area and falling drastically short in another. This may result in having enough teachers but not enough classrooms, or vice versa, or a small number of teachers will need to take too many classes without a break.

WOULD-BE TEACHERS AND THE TAUGHT

The students find it difficult to choose the streams they should study. They usually flock to those subjects which would purportedly will improve chances of securing employment. Their aptitude is not properly assessed and that lessens the chances of their doing well in their chosen areas. The school system can only coach him to learn the “tricks” employing which the student can get through the examination hurdles successfully. The problem becomes alarming when some of these students become teachers themselves and eventually become absolute failures and help to create more failures like themselves. The students undoubtedly need to be counselled regarding their abilities and to find which subjects are suitable for whom. Otherwise this problem will continue.

EXAMINATION

Another area in undergraduate and postgraduate studies where major chaos exists is the complex system of examinations. Problems plague the processes of question-setting and later, in the process of assessing the answer scripts. Especially in subjects in the Humanities stream, there is no objective standard for such rating papers, resulting in wide discrepancies in the way of awarding marks from examiner to examiner. There also exist differences between the ratings of internal and external examiners. The internal examiners usually shy off rating students of their own colleges poorly. There are many instances when a professor had to suffer “punishment” for not being generous in awarding marks. That apart, there is also the problem of insufficiency of time for examining answer scripts. Hard pressed for time, the teachers often cannot do full justice to assessment norms and the answers are marked erratically. If it can be made compulsory for each and every teacher to accept the job of checking answer scripts then the number of papers to be allotted per teacher for checking will come down, giving a reasonable amount of time for assessing papers. Providing proper training to the examiners is also a must as it is an established fact that properly trained examiners show less discrepancy in awarding marks. Although this particular proposal regarding training has often been forwarded to the university quite a few times, nothing fruitful has emerged so far, notwithstanding the fact that implementation of this proposal is neither difficult nor expensive.

APPOINTMENT OF TEACHERS

It is often heard that the standard of NET and/or SET or such qualifying tests for appointment of teachers to colleges are too tough, resulting in a very low rate of success. However, I believe that the standard should be set very high. There ought not to be any concession made in the standard when recruitment of teachers is concerned. Passing a qualifying examination as well as possessing stringently reviewed academic performance level ought to be the only consideration when a teacher is to be recruited.

At one time the UGC had ruled that there should be at least one teacher for every forty students. The student-teacher ratio is abysmal today. Temporary part-time teaching staff are recruited to bridge the gap in numbers. But the trend is now turning towards recruiting on contract. There is an incredible difference between the salary drawn by a permanent full-time college teacher and teachers under contract. These temporary teachers are often forced to show servile mentality towards authority as they are dependent on them. As a result they cannot devote themselves to work and spend a lot of their time either agitating or lobbying for permanent posts. This is not true for all the colleges, but there are quite a few such cases.

It is often said that there exists an absence of right candidates. It is simply untrue. There is no lack of qualified people. There are candidates who have successfully cleared the NET/SET examinations. The deficiency is not of good candidates but of good intentions. □□□