

What my students taught me about being a teacher

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My earliest training in how to be a teacher came from my students when I was pursuing an M.Phil.in English Language Education at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad. I wrote a dissertation titled 'Learner-Chosen Topics and Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom,' and this article borrows much from that unpublished document submitted in partial fulfilment of my degree requirements in July 2010. ESL, by the way, stands for English as a Second Language.

My dissertation was based on a field study with school-going students between the ages of 10 and 14 from a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in Dongri, Mumbai. It revolved around a 10-session writing workshop conducted in the summer of 2009, aimed at putting together a community magazine produced by students. The workshop was hosted at a community library named Education Development Board. The students came from a variety of schools and socio-economic backgrounds.

“In school, we are given the topic, and we just have to write. Here we have to think on our own,” said Amreen and Asma. Later when I asked Ahmed about this, he had the same response. From these students, I learnt that the freedom to choose their own topics in the writing classroom did not mean that all was hunky dory in their world. Their unease

came from their sheer unfamiliarity with this approach. It was a major departure from their previous experiences in the classroom, wherein only the teacher had the agency to decide what the students could write about.

In my enthusiasm about introducing them to a new way of learning, I had underestimated the frustration and effort involved on the part of students when teachers like me disrupt traditional classroom structures and routines. By listening to my students, I learnt that teachers -- regardless of how learner-centred they are -- may not be able to fully anticipate how students will respond to something new. I had assumed that students would love the opportunity to write about their life experiences, express their opinions, and enjoy this autonomy but I did not expect that they may not want to think too hard.

It would be unfair to place all the blame on the students. Had I not initiated a conversation with these students, they may not have felt empowered to tell me what their challenges were. I would have remained complacent, instead of recognizing that Amreen, Asma and Ahmed were part of an education system that rewards memorizing readymade essays from essay books or those dictated by teachers. Our conversation made me aware of the fact that I was making higher demands on their

cognitive resources, without providing any support or training.

My students taught me what journal articles did not. While my insistence on learner-chosen topics allowed them to try their hand at different writing genres, it also caused deep discomfort. It was not simply a problem of students being lazy and not interested. It is true that learner-chosen topics have the potential to affirm students' knowledge and interests but it is worth noting that they may also seem threatening to students who are not used to such decision-making in the classroom.

M. J. Vokoun and T.P. Bigelow in their article titled 'Dude, What Choice Do I Have', which appeared in the journal *Educational Leadership* in 2008, wrote, "Choice has helped students create amazing products because it allows students freedom of expression and the chance to explore unusual topics that mean something to them. The enormity of possibilities has also at times frozen a student's thinking."

While observing the responses of different students participating in the workshop, I realized that the challenge is perhaps greater for students who are recognized as high achievers. The predictability of writing topics given in school, and the content that will fetch high marks, are supports that are taken away in the case of learner-chosen topics. Students can no longer stay complacent about succeeding within their comfort zone. They have no choice

but to rethink the strategies that made them successful test-takers rather than writers. I would not have had these insights had I not sought out a candid interaction with my students.

Responding creatively to a challenging situation, they devised a variety of coping strategies to work through their discomfort with learner-chosen topics. One of these was to seek help from their peers or to approach me. Sarah, for instance, was hard pressed to come up with a topic by herself. She approached her peers Qaunain and Asma for support. Having noticed earlier that Sarah was struggling with her writing, and to keep pace with the rest of her class, I asked if she wanted me to suggest a topic. She said yes. Eventually, Qaunain, Asma and I took Sarah through a list of topics that would possibly interest her. Later, other students asked me to suggest topics but I firmly refused, asking them to take their own time with it, but come up with something on their own.

It dawned on me that, while the use of learner-chosen topics has many advantages, it also has its own set of pitfalls. One of those is 'padding', a term that university professors often use to describe inessential material tacked on to increase the length of a piece of writing. In the context of schools, this may be referred to as the 'how many supplements?' syndrome, wherein it is assumed that the more supplementary sheets students attach to their examination answer booklets, the more

they know. It is not uncommon to find teachers who give more marks to students who write longer answers, regardless of whether what is written contributes to the overall meaning or not.

My journal entries from that time indicate my profound disappointment with the realization that students are likely to pick something they know about when asked to choose their own topics but background knowledge does not mean that students will necessarily have something meaningful or interesting to say. They might use that knowledge only to fill up space. Before I ventured into my fieldwork, I had not imagined that learner-chosen topics could be seen by students as a space where 'anything goes'. My experiences with them taught me to consider the gap between theory and practice going forward.

Other coping strategies by students included plagiarism, repeatedly asking for language games to postpone writing, working on collaborative texts with peers instead of working independently, and choosing topics they had previously written about in their own school so that they could regurgitate their material. Asma, Ahmed, Amreen, Qaunain and Sarah taught me the importance of preparing students for new pedagogical approaches, and introducing change incrementally instead of catching them by surprise. I learnt that, if teachers want students to get past the initial resistance, they must be patient and compassionate with students.

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