

ON BEING A TEACHER

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Teaching as Provocation

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THERE are probably as many conceptions and practices of teaching as there are teachers. To teach is to take part in the tradition of teaching; and the tradition offers both constraints and opportunities to its ever-increasing constituents. If the tradition offers a spiritual home to some, to others it constitutes a set of provocations. But paradoxically it is only against the backdrop of a taught tradition of teaching that one may be a rebel!

The tradition defines 'teaching' and provides means of distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' teaching. Just as literary theory creates and sustains models of 'classics,' But as with literary theory, so with educational theory, what we should not miss is the simple fact that dominant conceptions of 'teaching' (like 'literature') are bound up with ideologies in service of power. Unless, therefore our rigorous self-reflection is available, the rich diversity and individual autonomy of teachers remain only an appearance of freedom within the framework of necessity imposed by traditions.

To the question, "What does one really do when one teaches?" there are, of course, the familiar answers. Answers which tell us, for example, that teaching is

- an *entrepreneurial process* in which aggregates of intellectual (scientific) capital and labour produce systematic transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the taught;
- a *partnership process* wherein the teacher and the taught learn together in asymmetrical ways;
- an *enabling process* in which teaching is regarded as an activity consisting in helping others to learn;
- an *ideological process* where the practice of teaching, and theories about teaching, are either supportive or subversive of patterns of dominant power;

—a *missionary process* envisaging teachers as evangelists of knowledge and proselytisers of rationality, conceiving teaching as a vocation;

—a *mercenary process* conceiving teaching as a mode of production of exchange-values of knowledge addressed to the creation of income, and the means of income, sufficient to meet the hazards of ever growing material needs and the demands of unconscionable sociability (e.g., teaching stints overseas to provide for dowry payments for Professor's "double-graduate" daughters);

—a *professional process* in which certain knowledge-jobs and cognitive tasks have to be routinely performed as in any other profession.

These seven images of 'teaching' do not, of course, provide even a glimpse of a whole range of other notions of teaching. These include, for example, teaching career as a background to or means of

—pursuing of administrative or trade union career paths at campus and national levels;

—social mobility, especially for the scheduled castes and tribes and other disadvantaged stratas and classes;

—organized assertion of gender equality;

—pursuit of other mid-life passages such as leadership roles in national, educational, research or scientific organizations, policy-planning, United Nations systems assignments;

—ex-officio credibility in public and political life (just note how so many politicians flaunt their 'professorship').

These—and associated uses, symbolic and instrumental—of teaching careers certainly affect, in major and minor ways, current theories and the practice of teaching. They must also affect somewhat social and political development. They cannot, therefore, be ignored. But in what follows I look upon teaching as a set of processes and practices which a group of people commonly called 'teachers' engage in for a substantial portion of their thinking lives. And to my mind these seven images capture, in myriad ways, the traditions of teaching which provide both constraints and opportunities, as the case may be, to the future entrants to teaching.

But, first, let me begin with a retrospection on myself as a 'teacher.'

II

These seven images of teaching did not emerge to consciousness when I first began teaching in the late sixties at the Sydney Law School's Department of Jurisprudence and International Law. The lamented Professor Julius Stone, a renowned authority in both these frontier fields of legal learning, was among the foremost practitioners of the model of teaching as an entrepreneurial process. He believed that the classroom must be the site for transmission of knowledge in all its evolutionary complexity and contradiction.

This required not just the mastery of fields of knowledge but an enormous preparation for each class. He was simply unapproachable for hours before his class; as one saw him go to the classroom one found him as full of nervous tension, after thirty years of teaching, as a novice teacher! For him, each class was an occasion to update a section in an encyclopaedia of knowledge; each dialogue in the classroom was a starting point for reformulation and research.

Now this great teacher is no more; and all we have left are a few scattered memories. A couple of generations hence only his books will remain; not his face or voice. Somehow we have all accepted the distinction between the 'oral' and the 'written'; teaching perishes with the teacher, whereas the corpus of writings survives. In a sense, as Jacques Derrida said in a different context, writing is a "carrier of death" signifying the absence of the speaker.

Teaching, in the profoundest sense of the word, has always appeared to me to be *sacrificial*, a process in which the best articulation of personality is achieved in the least lasting form, a process in which the teacher herself is, as it were, fire at the altar of knowledge.

From the first years of teaching in my life at Sydney I learnt less sublime truths, too. I learnt that teaching requires a profound inversion of roles: the teacher has to be taught and the taught in turn teaches something to the teacher, the receivers of knowledge are the givers and the givers are the receivers. Large graduate classes, all oriented towards the career of legal practice, always asked me, by their very existence, two leading questions: "What are you good for in the long run? And what good can you do for us here and now?" The collective presence of the class, even today, in itself constitutes this interrogation.

Try however I might, I could not answer these questions by redoubtable displays of erudition in the classroom. The second question I began to answer first. The good I can do for you, I said to myself and still say, is to try and address the problems of a future which is not yet impregnated with knowledge that was gathered in a past which was not mine. To me this is the central problematic of all pedagogy and one which requires the utmost fierce integrity to keep in view.

The "past which was not mine" is no idle turn of phrase. There is simply no way, for example, in which I can successfully communicate the transaction of discourse on natural law in the Catholic tradition from Thomas Aquinas and Dunus Scotus. It took me years of empathy, not just erudition, to enter the spirit of theological tradition of Christianity and years as well as to grasp Abu Hanifa's crucial distinction between murder and culpable homicide not turning upon the intention, as in modern law, but on the method of causing death or the justifications of slavery in Aristotle or untouchability in Manu. In ways I cannot articulate here, even when it possesses more than fugitively haunting relevance, I cannot make their past mine.

III

Nor indeed can I possibly make my students' future my own. The present which I share with them prefigures somewhat their future, but I am already obsolescent. Try how hard I might, I simply cannot grasp modern 'rationality' which discourses the safety of nuclear weapons or the inevitability of some 'costs' entailed in experimentation with new forms of life, in the creation and reckless proliferation of lethally hazardous chemical substances. And the world of the future is the world of irreversible advances in science and technology which will fundamentally alter in ways which I can vaguely imagine, the very conception of life and nature through the ongoing cybernetic and biotechnology revolutions.

As a teacher, I constitute the site of articulation of both a past and a future which are not my own to an audience for whom the present is merely a prologue to future they will live or endure as a daily reality. To the question: "What good can you do for us?" my inchoate answer has been to offer a critique of the past and the future, with equally tenuous grounding in both. I wish for a greater coherence in my

approach but it has so far eluded me.

I have found it relatively easier to answer the first question, as it turns out. To this question: "What are you good for?" I say: "Do not merely look at what I say; look at what I do with what I say." I simply cannot carry conviction about what I say to young minds unless they see that I mean what I say about the rule of law, human rights, human dignity.

It is this question which led me to struggle successfully for a course on law and aborigines at Sydney in the face of entirely comprehensible faculty opposition. It is the search for an answer to this question that has led me to bouts of social and legal activism in India, in many a context, outside the classroom. Students constitute a jury every year which determines whether a teacher is guilty or not guilty of treating knowledge as a Brahminic preserve or using it, outside and inside the classroom, as a sword, as a hoe, as a broom, the badges of inferiority of all other *varnas*.

To my mind, teaching and learning are acts of social intervention and they are complete when knowledge accumulated the erudite way is enriched by knowledge earned through encounters which interrogate tyranny, injustice and exploitation enacted before our own eyes even as we 'teach' and 'learn'.

This is a position which carries enormous strains: it dislocates received frameworks of scholarship and science, confuses bounds of relevance, disrupts agendas of scientific work, demands accountability, in most excruciating forms, to the classroom and the society and finally (without being exhaustive) exposes you to a nagging feeling that one is not really good at any thing. I for one certainly wish that I had found some other way of answering this first question. But it is too late for me now to start all over again.

The silent pressure of these questions has made me learn the truth which Paul de Mann celebrated through the phrase: "dialectics of blindness and insight." Even as I felt I was 'transmitting' knowledge, I realized that I was the carrier of mighty nescience in so many ways; what I do not know is far greater than what, at any given point of time, I can justly claim to know. Very early on, I developed an approach to teaching as a *confessional activity*. Every time I bite at the fruit of knowledge, I have to say, I realize the core of my ignorance.

Wrestling with this truth, I learnt yet another: specialization is a

way of negating teaching as a confessional activity. Producing its own brands of certitude, specialization reinforces the authority of the knowledge makers and givers. At the more basic level, it constitutes a very special kind of response to one's scholarly finitude; if one may not take all knowledge as one's province, may we not make our province as constituting *all* knowledge?

In a confused and confusing way, I have sought fulfilment as a teacher by avoiding any claims to specialization, by always being engaged in encounters with the unfamiliar. The 'taught tradition of teaching' suggests that I must be comprehensively wrong.

The 'taught' tradition of teaching projects powerfully the message that teaching should be a *rational*, never a *hedonistic* process or activity. There exist deep differences between 'rationalist' and 'hedonistic' approaches on every single dimension: knowledge, pedagogy or ideology.

The 'rationalist' standpoint regards knowledge primarily as a set of exchange values: the hedonist primarily as a set of 'use-values'. The 'rationalist' approach demands disciplinary loyalties; the 'hedonist' thrives on riots of multi-disciplinary sensibilities. The 'rationalist' stresses the 'objective', the indeterminacies and pluralities of knowing and knowledges. For the hedonist knowledges are (to use Stanley Fish's striking metaphor) "self-consuming artefacts."

Hedonistic teaching seeks no escape from one's scholarly finitude; rationalist teaching conceives teachers as beings tinged with the infinity of knowledge they bear and create. While rationalist teacher speaks the language of 'reason', her hedonistic colleague affirms the "passion for teaching." For her, teaching, or to put it differently, creative communication in and out of classroom, is a lifelong and lively mission; for the rationalist, teaching is just one of the many modes of creating and sharing knowledge, and compared with research and publication often a subsidiary mode. The 'rationalist' affirms the weight of erudition: the 'hedonist' iterates the joy of reaching out other minds through interpersonal communication and dialogue.

The endowment that the rationalist approach seeks to create is 'tough' minds, capable of wrestling with real life problems in a distinctly disciplinarian mould. The 'hedonist' seeks to create a "soft" training of the mind and inculcates a "soft" awareness of the

multidimensionality of life's problems. If for the 'rationalist' the definition of the problem is the beginning of an ordered enquiry and its 'solution' its terminus, for the 'hedonist' the definition of the definitions is a problem and every solution appears as a disguised problem.

In terms of pedagogy, the rationalist teacher tends to sift the "bright" from the "blighted" students, while the 'hedonist' tends to maintain a community of learners. For the 'hedonist', students are more than units of cognition; they are rather full, whole individuals with life histories and futures. The teacher is no *guru* possessed of charisma of knowledge; but an equally bewildered companion and friend. The classroom is the site of collective ecstasies and catharses, essentially therapeutic for both the teacher and the taught. For rationalist teacher, the teacher-taught relationships are principally cognitive, not personal. There are no hurts, no joys; rather orderly exchanges of knowledge through performance of tolerably well-defined roles which structure appropriate social distances and alienations.

The teacher-taught relation here is especially a disembodied one, a relationship between the 'producers' and 'consumers' of knowledge. Bonds of sharing so conspicuous among the 'hedonist' teacher-taught relationships are seen as threatening with anarchy the manicured gardens of ideas in the rationalist processes of 'teaching'.

The hedonistic conception of teaching leads to the politics of commitment to causes; the rationalist conception tends to maintain a respectable, and safe, distance between knowledge and 'politics' of action. If the hedonist, acerbically, accuses the rationalist colleague of sublimating her lust for power through scholarship, the 'rationalist' condemns the hedonist doing propaganda and politics from the sanctuary of superannuated tenures.

The hedonist regards extra and co-curricular activities as integral aspects of teaching and learning; and for some amongst them, extended coffee-table conversations on life, letters and politics are as important as classroom teaching. For the rationalist, the latter is forbidden almost totally; the former is tolerated as a necessary evil. The 'rationalist' has, being a disciplinarian, a horror of crude politics, be it 'teacher' or 'student' politicking through unions. These disturb the life of the mind; and interrupt, in unseemly ways, *cogitus cognitus*. The ideal of a university is a citadel of knowledge without the

lumpens, the loud-mouthed, politicking semi-literate students and teachers who mistake profoundly the area of knowledge with that of power.

Student and teacher 'politics' has to be tolerated as stoically as vice-chancellors who come and go, ruining in their movement *the* university as a site of reflective contemplation of matters which outlast daily acts of politicking. If the *lumpen* teachers bring about accelerated wage benefits, the prince among professors accepts these gracefully; these entitlements are an aspect of her natural right for which she could have waited in the certain knowledge that they cannot be thwarted for too long.

The 'hedonist' cannot, in contrast, avoid being immersed in campus politics; for her, everything becomes a matter of 'principles' despite the fact that nothing remains a matter of 'honour' in its rough and tumble. The 'hedonist' thinks she learns from real life struggle as much as through studies, teaching and research; and has passionate commitment to altering the conditions and institutions in which knowledge is 'produced.' The 'hedonist' does not take conditions and processes of democracy as given but as ones created through acts of struggle. For her, knowledge and power are related, even to a point where one might have to say with Foucault that it is power which creates knowledge.

For the prince among scholars, teachers (who, as it were, consider teaching almost as a sensuous activity) constitute the *lumpen* elements, not to be allowed to storm the citadel of the aristocracy of the mind. For the best among the 'hedonistic' teachers, there is nothing but hostile pity for the best and the brightest rationalist who teach and know but have not lived; for, they have not experienced through teaching "the daring of a moment's surrender—which/age of prudence cannot retrieve."^{an}

One could further refine and define these contrasts. You might say that they are overdrawn. Perhaps, but these point to differences not in degrees but rather of the kind. The difference is that between discipline and joy—a difference that comes dilemmatically alive in other arenas of life as well. And a difference which cannot be banished by awkward mutations such as "joyous discipline" or "disciplined joy."

IV

As a student in Rajkot, Bombay and Berkeley, and a teacher in Delhi and Duke, Sydney and Surat, I have lived with teachers and students who have proved living embodiments of some of these contrasts; and I have myself ambivalently moved from one to the other in time, place and circumstance.

In as impoverishing a society as India, and as turbulent and traumatically changeful, I do not feel quite at home with the rationalist model. And I have found that the understanding of the hedonistic approach, and acceptance of some of its elements, as catalytic not just for me as a teacher but for entire campuses, and more crucially the processes of life which surround campuses. For me, being a teacher in India is to be a deeply fractured, deeply wounded being, constantly in throes of transition, forever being evicted from utopias and yet, forbidden by history from desisting from struggles here and now for whatever 'justice' against injustice.