Random Rumblings*: On Being a Professor*

"*When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object*."
- Milan Kundera, in **The Unbearable Lightness of Being**, 1984

Acquaintances and strangers, upon realizing my title as a professor, often question what subject(s) I lecture on.

The query, albeit simple, unfailingly launches my thought process into overdrive.

In almost all academic institutes (schools, colleges, and universities) worldwide, the teaching tasks include preparing lessons according to agreed curricula, giving lectures, and assessing pupil progress, often leading to a presumptuous perception in society that a good teacher lectures well and a good student devours the information and regurgitates the same during examinations.

Traditional teaching methods generally presume the teacher is the only source of information in the classroom. Formal education indeed focused on *teaching*, not *learning*, by incorrectly assuming that for every ounce of instruction, there is an ounce of learning by those who are taught.

Therefore, the prevalent belief is that teaching involves standing on a podium and lecturing to students. These notions are the genesis for the presumptive intelligence gathered by society, leading to questions on what subjects professors lecture on, equating a professor to one who *lectures*.

By and large, the notion of a professor teaching their pupils through lectures is prevalent worldwide, resulting in the presumptive intelligence that *professors can and should impart knowledge only through lecturing*. However, recent research findings surprisingly reveal that what we learn before, during, and after attending lectures is understood without being taught to us formally.

Advances in cognitive psychology now suggest that context and expectations influence people's perceptions and interpretations by introducing a *contextual bias* that affects decision-making. Therefore, the question that acquaintances and strangers confront me with, although primarily an attempt to start a conversation, triggers divergent thinking and deep introspection, nudging me to ponder and question the role of a professor *in toto*.

Against the backdrop of the insights gained, to my mind, the query reveals the questioner's presumptive intelligence that a professor should teach students through lecturing. Indeed, this is a condescending connotation for the students, as the teaching-learning process is a two-way street where the student and the teacher benefit.

The prevalent notion (of who a professor is), having origins of either a benign nature or due to the presumptive intelligence, had wreaked havoc with the entire 'teaching–learning'

process *per se*, with teachers unwittingly presuming that the primary method through which learning can happen is through lecturing in classes, and the learners often believing that the knowledge is acquired primarily by attending the lectures.

Therefore, the simple answer as to who a professor or a teacher *is* would undoubtedly fit the commonly held perception that a teacher is the one who helps people to '*learn*.' But how should a teacher '*teach*' and how does a learner '*learn*' is more complex to answer in simple terms.

The complexity of pedagogy and learning has been addressed by many. Teachers use many techniques to help learning take place. Still, the questions of the best methods for the knowledge dissemination and acquisition processes remain unresolved, and therefore, it would suffice to say that many variables determine the desired outcomes. It is essential to realize that simple notions can lead to egregious perceptions.

Many researchers tried to understand the teaching and learning process to determine the best teaching method(s). Carl Wieman, the 2001 Nobel Laureate in Physics, who has shifted his research to science education to provide more effective instruction at Stanford University, passionately argues that there's a solid body of research to show that if you only lecture to students, they don't learn nearly as much as if you'd used other ways to teach that get them far more mentally engaged — practicing, thinking like scientists. After experimenting with many unconventional teaching methods, Wieman underscores that much more work is needed to understand what sorts of engagement work best, how to learn challenging ideas, and how best to enhance the interaction of professors and students, particularly with new technologies.

With the launch of the World Wide Web, the Internet, and the associated advances in digital technologies, we now see that youngsters and learners of all ages have become much more prudent and practical in realizing that large amounts of data and information on everything are available with a swipe on their smartphones.

Not surprisingly, Russel Herman, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Effective Teaching*, in one of his seminal 2011 editorials titled," *What makes an excellent professor*?", also stresses that a professor must provide opportunities for students to see the world through their chosen disciplines, in addition to quality teaching; as students chose some of the professors as their role models by observing the qualities like - the ability to conduct quality research, the passion for a greater understanding of the subject, and the importance of developing a lasting intellectual curiosity.

I believe that challenging and nudging students to do what's hard encourages them to practice grit and tenacity as they develop new ways of thinking. So, instead of only lecturing to students, I believe that professors should facilitate learners with information on the nonlinear paths of knowledge acquisition and how many of the learned people overcame obstacles in their quest to acquire knowledge. This approach would enable students to discover their resiliency and explore the mark they can leave on the world.

The actual ability of a good teacher lies in influencing original thinking, facilitating learners to ask more questions and thus construct their understanding of concepts. Therefore, my teaching methods always encourage learners to *think* and reach conclusions based on their knowledge so that they *learn* new things.

Although seemingly contradictory, on deeper introspection, one would therefore agree with the general quote attributed to either Xunzi (Xun Kuang), a Confucian philosopher, or Benjamin Franklin (depending on whether one is an Asian or a Caucasian), - "*Tell me, I forget; Teach Me, I may remember; Involve me, and I learn*."

For many worldwide, it would be surprising to realize that the thought processes related to the abstruse questions on *teaching-learning* have much older origins and are not the marks of contemporary pedagogy.

Most Indians and other people familiar with the *Upanishads* realize that teaching-learning is a two-way street, as enshrined in the *Shanti Mantra* of the *Krishna Yajur Veda Upanishads*. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, through the enchanting stories of Satyakama and Shvethakethu, one realizes the complexity, depth, and breadth of many effective *teaching-learning* methods.

Indeed, irrespective of the roles played and techniques adopted by professors, each one makes a significant and positive contribution to transforming the individuals they interact with and is instrumental in changing them by influencing the process with which they learn and act or behave.

Returning from my peregrinations of divergent thinking brought about by the banal question of what subjects I lecture on, my humble response would be, "*After distilling the concepts of the many effective teaching-learning techniques, we experimented and designed a unique program called SPHURTHI* (Societal Problems Highlighted Understood and Researched To Herald Innovation)*. In SPHURTHI, the teacher engages with the students to motivate them, builds interest in the subjects, and imparts knowledge, comprehension, and specific applications in the educational context in many fields of the sciences, engineering, and technologies, aiming to shape individuals' character and prepare them for their future as human beings and their desired work based on several other factors*".

It is always amusing to note the bewildered and lost look on the questioner's face after my long-winded and abstruse reply to such a simple question, mostly posed as a conversation starter.

On a serious note, it is always immensely gratifying to reflect on the scores of students who had successfully passed through the portals of our program *SPHURTHI* and are now occupying elevated positions in academia, industry, and other enterprises globally, standing testimony to the efficacy of our teaching-learning process.

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