

Teaching Then and Now

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When I applied to be a secondary school teacher approximately three decades ago, I was interviewed by the Teaching Service Commission. One of the questions I was asked was whether I would teach as I had been taught. I naively responded in the affirmative. Like me, many secondary school graduates believe that they had “good” teachers, generally. We were impressed, no doubt, with our teachers’ content knowledge, and perhaps particular teacher traits that helped us to be successful, academically and otherwise.

In an earlier column, I wrote that the 21st century teacher in Trinidad and Tobago can no longer function in the static mode for years on end. Even without formal professional development, today’s teachers are being exposed to new thrusts in education, including the accompanying jargon and expectations. For the untrained teacher, particularly, these are often in conflict with what they had perceived teaching to be as students, or as novice teachers. Many tend to accept modern trends in education as an occupational hazard, or as stipulated requirements of the job. They do not necessarily “buy into” new approaches or standards.

Yet, one must understand the conundrum in which “with-it” teachers may find themselves. Administrators who still cling to the “ideal” quiet classroom expect teachers to employ group work where students have to communicate orally. Some teachers often find themselves trying to quell the excitement and enthusiasm of their students because their colleagues may prefer students who work quietly. So that “student-centred” teaching reverts to “teacher-centred” teaching.

This is not to say that student-centred teaching implies poor classroom management. However, expectations must be realistic if teachers, in the quest for maximum learning, employ strategies such as drama, music, and role play in their lessons. Such activities must promote adequate learning, including learning outside the written curriculum. Achieving objectives such as showing respect, acknowledging other’s needs, and appreciating one’s context are some of the affective areas that teachers can highlight within their attempts to renew their craft.

The classrooms of past generations were characterised by flashcards and bristol board posters as teachers attempted to provide visual stimuli and gain students’ attention. It was an attempt to graduate from the “chalk and talk” approach. Admittedly, there are still schools locally that are not sufficiently equipped to allow each teacher in every lesson to replace such teaching aids with information technology (IT) resources. This means that although some teachers know that IT can be a great asset in delivering the curriculum, they do not have easy and sufficient access to it. However, there are some schools where IT is available and its use encouraged. In such cases, the challenge for teachers is managing IT, time-wise and technically, and using it effectively. Teaching time can be wasted when inappropriate resources are used in a lesson. Sometimes, though, especially with activities outside of the “chalk-and-talk” and traditional textbook use, teachers

weigh the motivational component of the activity against the subject content component, depending on the chosen objective.

There are other contrasts between the teacher “then” and “now.” The traditional teacher relied on the staff room and departmental meetings for professional discussion. Technology has made it possible for teachers to engage in discussion with others regionally and internationally via blogs. Blogging provides a forum whereby teachers can ask questions and share ideas with colleagues at their own professional level. It may be a good idea for department heads to initiate this type of activity for the professional growth of their peers. Outcomes from blogs can be brought to department meetings for further discussion.

The contemporary dynamic educational context highlights yet another contrast. The “textbook-as-Bible” approach of the past valued an approach where teachers felt a sense of control over content and freed themselves of the responsibility for more creative and effective planning. However, with written curricula becoming more integrative and constantly renewed, and with more attention being paid to holistic learning, teachers have had to adapt this traditional approach to a more thematic approach that requires more planning, more teamwork, and more creativity. This challenge includes the judicious selection of teaching materials since there is now a wider variety to choose from.

Because there are many more policies and systems in place for monitoring, teachers may no longer experience a great sense of autonomy in their classrooms. Accountability and teamwork take precedence. However, from my perspective, teaching now has the potential to be more exciting than before.

Having been an educator for approximately three decades, do I teach as I was taught? I think not.

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