Teaching Outside the Textbook

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With the reopening of schools for the 2002-2003 academic year, considerable concern has been expressed by parents, teachers, students, and the media about the fact that many secondary school students have not yet received their book grants and that primary school students have not yet received their free textbooks. This concern is no doubt fuelled by images of school and schooling that are based on the experiences of the present generation of parents and commentators. They were probably exposed to "reading the text" as the predominant teaching/learning strategy within the formal classroom environment. In this scenario, the teacher reads from the textbook and the students follow silently or take turns reading paragraphs.

Much has changed in educational circles, but many of the contemporary views of teaching and learning have had little impact on the views of the general public and on their attitudes to learning, texts, and teaching. The situation becomes even more complex when there is active rejection of anything new. Therefore, while new ideas are proposed by educational researchers, the old views continue to be propagated, sometimes inadvertently, by stakeholders' perceptions and by uninformed media reporting. The current situation provides an opportunity to examine some of the views about knowledge that the general public may hold dear, and the beliefs that underpin these views.

Many people think that all knowledge is located within the pages of the text, and that teaching is a process of transmitting this knowledge to the students. Implicit in this view is the assumption that students are empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, and that the learner does not play a role in the construction of knowledge. The learner is viewed as passive--a sponge absorbing the knowledge. Alternatively, the knowledge is transmitted by diffusion or osmosis. There is no room for critical analysis of the knowledge. When this view of students, knowledge, and teaching/learning is dominant, students are expected to read the textbook, and it is posited that the transmission of meanings is non-problematic. The language of the text is assumed to be accessible to all who are not inherently lazy. But there are other views about knowledge, the nature of learning, and the role of the teacher in the classroom.

Most contemporary theories of learning, often described as cognitive theories or constructivist theories, are premised upon very different tenets. These theories describe and explain learning as an active process in which students construct their understandings based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Proponents of these theories believe that the student is not an empty vessel but one who enters the classroom with ideas, beliefs, and views about many of the topics that are addressed in the classroom, and that the student should be given the opportunity to express these views in a supportive environment. The teacher is viewed as a "facilitator" or "mediator," who plans learning experiences with the students' prior knowledge in mind. The classroom is activity-centred: there are discussions, practical work, projects, drama, and role play.

If contemporary views are to find a place in the classroom, then the absence of textbooks may be a blessing in disguise. Teachers can use the opportunity to use their hitherto suppressed creative talents to make learning more interesting, as exemplified in the following.

The nation has just celebrated its 40th anniversary of Independence. I am fairly certain that none of the texts, at the primary or secondary levels, will have included this topic as a first chapter, and teachers are likely to begin at Chapter 1. However, if we subscribe to the principle that learning is most effective when we start from what is known and move to the unknown, then this Independence period provides source material for the teaching of science, mathematics, English, and social studies to primary school students, and all the academic subjects to secondary school students. Here are some suggestions.

Primary level

Even the youngest child has some idea of the concept of a birthday. Imagine beginning an Infants 1 class--4- or 5-year-olds--with the following questions: When is your birthday? What does it mean? I am sure that most students can answer these questions, or some related ones, from their experience. After a discussion about birthdays (numbers and counting) and the celebration of birthdays (social customs), these youngsters can be introduced to the idea that nations also celebrate birthdays. Students can then be exposed to one of the national symbols--the flag. They can learn: 1) the colours--red, white, and black (science); 2) the shape--square or rectangle (mathematics); and 3) direction--left to right; the diagonal (mathematics). They can be provided with the outline of the flag and asked to colour it, or they can be supplied with red, white, and black beans and glue to create a 3D model (manipulative skills, art, and social studies). Students can learn to recognize the word “flag” or, alternatively, the letters f-l-a-g and the associated phonics to spell and pronounce the word (language). With a little thought, we can see that there are many activities that can follow these.

Students at the other levels within the primary system can be engaged in similar but more sophisticated activities, including research projects on the flags of other nations, the independence movements of colonized states, and the relationship of islands like Martinique and Guadeloupe to France and to the English-speaking Caribbean. Additionally, they can be engaged in essay writing on independence, drawing maps of Trinidad and Tobago using assigned or provided scales, and in locating the capital cities and other towns and villages.

Secondary level

The relevance of independence to history, social studies, and general paper may be obvious and probably needs no explanation. I propose that the Independence theme can also be used as an organizing framework for the teaching of science, mathematics, and economics at the upper secondary level--disciplines that may seem far removed from Independence. For example, who are our local scientists, chemists, physicists, engineers, biologists, and mathematicians? What have been their areas of interest prior to and since

Independence? What are the scientific/mathematical principles that underpin their work? What does Independence mean in the context of globalization? Is globalization really a new phenomenon?

Let's come out of the box. The textbook is an important resource, but the teachers, students, and the context are even more important.

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