

Teaching and Transformation

Shafique N. Virani

In June, I received an email from Hussein, a student in the first class I ever taught in Religion. He struggled a great deal with writing back then. Today, he is a physician. When he received his medical school acceptance letter I was the first person he read it to because, he told me, “you changed my life.” He invited me to his medical school graduation, though he only had two tickets for guests. He later asked me to be the best man at his wedding. His reason for emailing in June was to send me a copy of a beautifully written, award-winning article he had recently published in the *Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine*. “The fact that I can simply put words into a sentence is entirely due to your tireless efforts!” he wrote. I swelled with pride as I read his article, which reflected the content, critical thinking and writing skills, creativity, imagination, and ethical values that framed our course, so long ago. These are the moments teachers live for. We know we are effective teachers when we change students’ lives for the better...and they change ours.

I do not teach because it is what I do. I teach because it is who I am. I simply love teaching. My students become part of my life, and after close to two decades as a professional educator, I remain in regular contact with literally hundreds of my former students. I’m convinced that we don’t merely teach subjects and topics. We teach human beings - in all their complexity.

A few years ago, *The Age*, an Australian newspaper, carried an article with the derisive charge, “Teaching is not rocket science.” Professor Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education responded with wisdom and wit: “Teaching is not rocket science. It is, in fact, far more complex and demanding work than rocket science.”¹ As a professor of Islamic Studies in a post-9/11 world, I can relate. It is a delicate and intricate task to teach about a pluralistic faith spanning over a thousand years of history, countless geographies, cultures, languages, and interpretations, with over a billion diverse adherents, which is so often caricatured beyond recognition in popular discourse.

In an address to the House of Commons in 1925, Winston Churchill said, “To improve is to change, so to be perfect is to change often.”² To me, developing as a teacher means constant change in an effort to improve our own knowledge and our ability to help students flourish. As a department chair, this is something I’ve often recommended to new teachers. I’m a voracious reader of both pedagogical and specialist literature, and have enjoyed experimenting with wikis and podcasts, Facebook and clickers, online education and the “inverted” classroom. My various leadership roles, both in Toronto and around the world, have allowed me to be involved with teaching not only at the micro level through direct mentorship of students, but at the meso and macro levels as well. Throughout, my overarching goal has been to create an enabling environment in which transformative teaching and learning thrive. This means that in educating students we cannot forget that they are whole human beings, and therefore must cater to their humanity, in addition to their instruction.

It was a sense of wonder that drew me to the study of religion in the first place, a feeling of overwhelming curiosity - particularly about questions posed by the great religions since the dawn of time - questions about justice, ethics, truth, history, and the purpose of human existence. It is that very sense of wonder that I seek to instil in my students. “Statements inform us,” I tell them, “questions challenge us.” However, you cannot teach students how to ask questions if you have not interested them in finding the answers. My purpose is not simply to fill them up with facts. Rather, it is to create in them a sense of searching curiosity, to give them the right tools with which they can address it, and to lead them in a direction that will help them to satisfy it.

Every year, immediately before the final exam, I share with my students the remarks made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the opening of a school in Kyrgyzstan, which have influenced me and reflect my own teaching philosophy:

What students know is no longer the most important measure of the quality of education. The true test is the ability to engage with what they do not know, and to work out a solution. The second dimension involves the ability to reach conclusions that constitute the basis for informed judgments. The ability to make judgments that are grounded in solid information, and employ careful analysis, should be one of the most important goals for any educational endeavor. As students develop this capacity, they can begin to grapple with the most important and difficult step: to learn to place such judgments in an ethical framework. Therein lies the formation of the kind of social consciousness that our world so desperately needs.³

It is this last stage, so often celebrated in the lofty mission statements of universities, which is most commonly ignored and lost. In order to move students to help change our world for the better, we need to motivate them beyond simply clicking the “like” button on Facebook. Sound reasoning, cogent evidence and logic are, of course, essential; but they are not enough. In her 2012 *Commonwealth Lecture*, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells us, “Logic can convince but it is in fact emotion that leads us to act. Realist literature reminds us of this, that we are not a collection of logical bones and flesh. That we are emotional beings. That dignity and love matter as much as bread and water.”⁴ Inspiring students to greatness means touching both their heads and their hearts. Columbia University’s celebrated educationist Jack Mezirow posits that all learning is change, but not all change is transformation.⁵ I would add, all teaching is change, but not all change is transformative. My goal in teaching religion is to create a transformative experience that will stay with students for the rest of their lives.

¹ Richard Elmore, “Teaching is not Rocket Science,” *The Age*, August 27, 2007, 14.

² Cited at http://www.winstonchurchill.org/images/pdfs/for_educators/Argumentation_Prompts_4.pdf, accessed September 15, 2013.

³ His Highness the Aga Khan IV, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Aga Khan School” (Osh, Kyrgyz Republic, October 30, 2002), <http://www.akdn.org/Content/589>, accessed September 15, 2013.

⁴ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “To Instruct and Delight: A Case for Realist Literature,” *Fifteenth Annual Commonwealth Lecture* (London, UK, March 15, 2012), <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/commonwealth-lecture-2012>, accessed September 15, 2013.

⁵ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), xvii et passim.