

Discourse

Who We Are Makes A Difference The True Ethics Of Teaching*

Sandeep Shastri

Director, International Academy for Creative Teaching

Approaching the Theme

Discussions on the ethics of teaching take a variety of routes. More often than not, they take a stern 'prescriptive' tenor with an exhaustive listing out of the 'do's and 'don'ts' for those in the teaching community. Alternatively, some traverse the winding path of history and lament the decline of ethical standards and moral values in society in general and the education system/ teaching profession in particular. This 'our times were better' approach takes many on the nostalgic trip into the glorious past and often derides whatever goes in the name of modern reflecting the trends associated with the 21st century. On reflection one would notice that all such routes take us nowhere but on the path of cynicism and an intensification of the blame game. In this essay, I wish to experiment with journeying on an alternative route which hopefully would offer a pragmatic perspective rather than a catalogue of 'what ought to be'.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, the ethical core of teaching is a judgment which each one of us as teachers needs to individually make and internalize in our practices and professional life. 'Who I am' rather than 'What I say' truly makes a world of difference. If each of us reflect on the teachers who have taught us from our 'KG' to our 'PG', the ones who are etched in our memory (in positive

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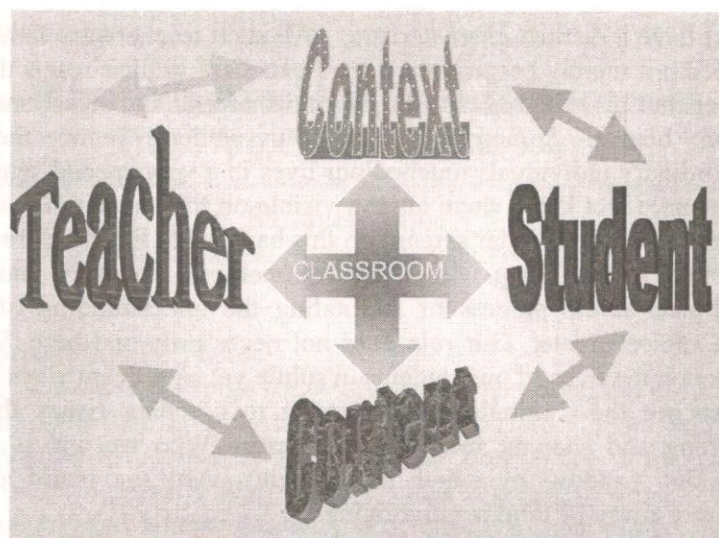
terms) have a distinct characteristic. All such teachers are fondly recalled not merely because they were excellent in their respective subjects but more so because they were wonderful and affectionate human beings. Sometime during our student years, these extraordinary individuals touched our lives in a very special sense. This simple fact keeps them always visible on the 'memorable and influential teachers' radar screen. In this basic truth lies the core of the ethics of teaching. As a faculty member, we very much participate in the process of facilitating the understanding of a given subject matter. Our role does not necessarily end here. We also touch the lives of our students in subtle yet significant ways by influencing their attitude and approach to complex issues thus moulding and shaping their value systems. 'Who we are' is an important 'window' by which our students, view the world and construct a way of thinking and living.

Our Classrooms and the Ethical Question

Let us briefly visualize out typical college classroom. What all goes to make up this normal classroom? Any list we create could invariably be collapsed into four slots as shown in the representation below.

A crucial element of the classroom is the student learner. While accepting the students as an integral part of the classroom, a basic ethical question that surfaces is: 'What is the role of the student learner in the classroom'? A few supplementary questions emerge as we seek answers to the first question: 'Within the classroom, are the student learners silent recipients or active participants'?

As a teacher-facilitator how ~~do~~ ^{does one} energize the 'active participant' spirit or channelize the 'silent recipient' attitude? The core ethical questions do not end here. Before we begin any course or enter a class, we are often confronted with the question, 'What are the expectations of my student-learners'? Does my classroom engagement cater to that felt need? The manner in which we negotiate this complex web of questions underscores how we perceive the ethics of teaching.



A linked element in the classroom situation is the teacher. The attention of each one who enters the academy I work in, is drawn to an important statement etched at the entrance - 'Anyone who refuses to be a student, refuses to be a teacher'. (As a teacher training academy, we have the privilege of welcoming several prospective and practicing teachers.) More often than not, the first dialogue with any new visitor (on their initiative) is about the deeper implications of this statement to our professional life as teacher-facilitators. The learning that happens for us teacher-facilitators in the classroom is linked critically to the nature of transactions that occur in any classroom. In today's world of information explosion it may well happen that there are insights and perspectives that emerge in a classroom discussion which the teacher-facilitator could richly benefit from. The ethical question continues to remain – do I as a teacher create that atmosphere in the classroom that encourages such a meaningful dialogue and learning?

The manner in which we negotiate a given content in our classrooms also leaves a lasting impression on the young learners. I have often been asked this question – 'Should a teacher/ facilitator

be syllabus-centered or learner-centered'? My immediate counter question invariably is : Are they truly dichotomous ? Can a teacher aspire to be both? Can I as a teacher define and determine the way in which there can be 'seamless transitioning' between the two? There are dimensions of subjects studied in my school and college days which are still fresh in my memory. While it has something to do with my interest in that theme, it has much more to do with how a few teachers discussed the theme in the classroom. More often than not, our views were at sharp variance, but they dared us to differ. The class often took a sharp deviation from the theme we were expected to discuss. We often saw it as a welcome deviation as more often than not the footnote is of greater value than the main text! The 'how' and 'why' of the content needs to be privileged over the 'what' of the content.

This brings us to the fourth element – the context of the classroom. The teacher-facilitator plays a pivotal role in shaping the classroom environment. A key element in the design of this environment is the 'ethical world view' of a teacher. Any flashback to our students days would remind us that our comfort levels in a classroom were a corollary of what was 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' to the teacher in the class. What was 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' was not as important as whether we knew or not as to what came in which zone. At the end of the day, it remained an essentially ethical question.

'Reaching Out'

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on the different terms in the chart below which define the multi-track roles of a teacher-facilitator. Each role has a specific domain and evokes a specific response, image and imagination. As teachers we would feel emotionally close to some of the roles and consciously detached from some others. What do each of these roles mean? Let's attempt a role definition.



Conscience Keeper – As a teacher-facilitator I am often a conscience keeper. Remember those many moments when students wished to share their inner-most feelings, serious personal doubts, emotional-challenges, apparent contradictions and sought from us nothing more than a patient hearing. We truly played the role of a conscience keeper. When they were at a cross-road and were not sure of the path to take, they sought our advice, our support and encouragement. We were 'there' for them and that gave them immense confidence.

Planner - A good facilitator must necessarily be a good planner. We plan what we are to teach, we plan how much to teach, we also plan how to teach it. We plan our response to the learners in such a way that we boost their confidence and help them develop their self-esteem even as they realize and understand the 'zones for improvement'. Each response that we make needs to be planned. The lack of planning converts a response often into a reaction which is counter productive.

Problem Solver : As teachers, I invite you to undertake a voyage into the past and remember on how many countless occasions have students turned up at our desk and hesitantly stated: Sir/Madam I have a problem. You become the solution provider or at least the safety valve of the pressure cooker - a channel for excess steam to be released!

Negotiator : As teachers we negotiate with multiple agencies and actors. This skill is often on test, sometimes in front of our students and often in their absence. The subtle nuances of this negotiation often involves deep rooted ethical concerns and reflects our prioritization of the moral code that each of us adhere to.

Role Model : This is often the most challenging and demanding role and tests our ethical commitment at the most critical of times. It is almost clichéd to say that values are not taught but demonstrated. The fact that teaching is today a 24x7 job, exemplifies the fact that teachers are role models and on 'probation' at all times. During conversations on ethics in teaching, I have heard the comment being made that there is a need to demarcate the 'public' and 'private' space. I have even heard teachers passionately argue that their role is limited to teaching in the classroom and what they do beyond the classroom and outside the institution/campus cannot and should not be a concern of anyone, least of all the students. They are entitled to their opinions and we need to respect an alternative perspective.. Research and experience has shown that students do not seem to accept/follow the 'private-public' distinction. A teacher is a teacher in the classroom and beyond. A good teacher is a teacher not just beyond the classroom but beyond the time that he/she ceases to be the formal teacher of a student.

Coordinator : Some teachers excel in 'backroom' management and are averse to come formally on 'stage'. They are excellent coordinators. There is an important value premise that defines their approach/attitude. Their argument often is that there is a need for people who ensure synchronization of tasks without being in the spotlight. They are the backbone of any successful educational mission/ project/ undertaking.

Strategist : Some teachers are 'master strategists'. Let me add an immediate rider before our thoughts take off. This term is being used here in an intensely positive frame. We need to

strategize on how best to get a complicated concept across to our learners. We often strategize on how to energize and motivate our learners. The list can go on. At the core of strategizing is the desire for creating a 'space' for the learner to grow and excel.

Experimenter: Teachers are often experimenters – they experiment with new ideas, experiment with new teaching methods, experiment with new ways of motivating and inspiring learners to action, experiment with new ways of doing what they do every year and still remain excited! Innovation is at the heart of any process of experimentation and the desire to innovate reflects a strong sense of commitment, idealism and acceptance of change.

Trend Setter: It is fashionable today to be a trendsetter! As teachers we are trendsetters often without our permission and sometimes without our knowledge. Our role as trend setters is evident in the field of innovation in teaching methods and as agents and catalysts of change.

Traffic Cop : The Traffic Cop's role of a teacher-facilitator merits elaboration. While the image of a traffic cop is one of a stern policeman, there are pleasant and honourable exceptions. The role and work ethic of a traffic cop is very similar to that of a teacher-facilitator. People playing both roles get very little praise, find that their clientele are often irritated or impatient with them, have unenviable work conditions and need to have loads of patience. Both need to regulate the flow of traffic that passes their way and direct them in the right direction. Both are expected to be ever helpful and ready with answers to a wide range of questions. The personality, cheerfulness, motivation, inner drive of some (in both fields) makes them special and memorable.

Devil's Advocate : This is an often misunderstood term. More often than not people assume that the 'devil' here refers to some insufferable character who symbolizes all that is evil and despicable in the world! When a teacher-facilitator dons the cap of a Devil's Advocate it basically implies viewing things from the

perspective of the student-learner. Empathizing with the learner, understanding his/her aspirations, appreciating their viewpoint and world view is all part of a facilitator's brief as a Devil's Advocate.

Idea's Person : The classroom transactions are all about an exchange of ideas and the teacher is very much someone who facilitates this process. Often the seed of a new idea or alternate way of thinking is sown by the facilitator in the minds of the young learners. This has the potential to ultimately germinate into a new concept or theoretical construct. A creative facilitator is ever restless in search of new ideas. A young learner often uses a teacher-facilitator as the 'sounding board' for an innovation. The learner would be inspired to approach a facilitator if he/she has given proof in earlier interactions of being someone who can meaningfully engage with innovative ideas.

Monitor : The word monitor conjures up a variety of images, not necessarily always pleasant. This is largely because a monitor is often exclusively seen as someone who 'controls', 'commands strict adherence to rules', and 'supervises the performance of specified tasks'. The term today requires an image make over! It needs to be bestowed with a positive and constructive image. A facilitator as a monitor could be someone who oversees positive accountability. Her/his responsibilities could include facilitating the achievement of pre-determined and mutually accepted goals and objectives. Whether facilitators can provide a 'positive face' to this role of a monitor depends entirely on the 'work ethic' that they bring to their jobs.

Researcher: A facilitator's role involve continuous research, research about the developments in the discipline, research about what to teach, research about how to teach, research on tasks to be assigned to the learners and the like. The passion for research in a facilitator is something that often rubs off on the student-learner. The yen for research again reflects a 'value preference' and an 'ethical concern'.

Guide : The facilitator dons the hat of a guide ever so frequently. A guide has been best described as someone who is 'always there' to support and help. As a guide, a facilitator does not impose herself/himself on the learner. It is the learners' call whether they need the support and assistance of the guide-facilitator. The 'ethical core' defines and determines the quality of guidance – does the facilitator merely suggest, infer, point to a direction or instruct, direct and command. The manner in which the facilitator – guide uses the authority at his command underscores the 'value base' and 'ethical norm' that influences such decision.

Mentor : The facilitator's role as a mentor is at the core of the ethics of teaching. Mentoring is about shaping lives, it is about influencing value preferences and it is about empowering learners to make the right ethical choices. As a mentor, the facilitator takes responsibility for helping shape the personality of a learner and the 'ethical window' by which he views the complexities and intricacies of global developments and social and value preferences.

Summing it all Up

At the end of the day one would notice that all the above roles are different ways by which a teacher - facilitator reaches out to student-learners. Each one has a different comfort zone in terms of 'how to reach out'. Reach out one must and it is in the manner we reach out that we make a difference. The ethics of teaching is about making this quality difference to the lives and learning of our students.

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