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Three Decades of A University Classroom

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ABSTRACT:
This article is a reflection piece on a thirty year career in the university. It looks at learnings from that experience and then places the university into its historical context. It ends with a look into the future.

As someone for whom being at a university has been a career of choice and who has spent almost all of my working time since 1989 with universities, what it is that I can tell younger colleagues about teaching as a career. I think there are things to say even as I am aware that each young academic will have their own professional and intellectual journey which will be bounded among other things, by the matrix of the university setting where they will operate and a few other variables some discipline centred, others administrative and some even personal.

So, what it is that I would share as my learning from my journey in higher education. Some of the things I talk about came to me through observation of people who inspired me, other things I may have got from colleagues –but any conclusions I have come to, are a result of putting things to test.

The first thing, that has worked best for me and which seems like a given – is to always prepare for every class**.** At no point should we forget that teaching is the primary task of faculty and that task must be enacted on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis –day in and day out. There is no getting away from that. And one has to be prepared for each class. This is not because you are only as good as your last lecture, which by the way is true too. It is because, daily teaching is about bringing discipline into an academic life that could otherwise be scattered in many directions. The lecture ensures that we are forced to touch base with our discipline on a daily basis – no matter what else is happening in our lives.

It ensures also most importantly that one accomplishes an academic task every day just as writers often write 250 to 500 words everyday no matter what. This brings to academic life a sense of achievement because regardless of how brilliant or how prolific one may be, we cannot publish a research paper or a book on a daily or weekly basis. In teaching a class following preparation, engagement with the discipline and ideas is ensured and the benefits of this exercise may become apparent only after a few years.

When I used to argue as a young scholar with my mentor Professor Béteille, about class being a waste of time and taking time away from my research work he had pointed out many of the benefits of teaching. These included, apart from those listed above, learning to be articulate, to think on your feet, to explain the same idea in multiple ways so as to get the message across. He was also living proof of the fact that the research and publishing output of people who taught was higher than that of people who worked either as full time writers or were affiliated at research institutions with no teaching duties.

Once you achieve this mix of preparation and articulation, there is something very fulfilling about teaching a good class or delivering a good lecture. Being prepared for class and being on time are ways in which those of us on the faculty side of the divide show that we respect our students and their time as well as help to build or develop interest in our disciplines while also contributing to our institutions.

However, over the last 25 years, the classroom as a space and the whole teaching learning process has undergone major changes. Chalk and talk has been replaced with technology and the simple class room is being increasingly replaced with the smart classrooms, flip classrooms, blended learning and even the virtual classroom. This means that sooner or later all of us, and surely all of the younger faculty, will have to engage with more than one mode of teaching which will call on skills other than just subject expertise and good

communication skills. Covid was living proof of overnight use of technology in the classroom and both students and faculty had to make the switch.

Once again, success depends on having control on the substance of what we are trying to teach. Change is inevitable and we can do nothing about that other than adapt to it and see what new possibilities it opens up. Remember however, that the power point presentation cannot substitute for classroom teaching or discussion and the lecture, it is at best an aid to the process.

When we talk about preparation for class, the content of the lecture stems from the course outline or the syllabus. When I started out with teaching, there was a set syllabus for the whole of the university, over which we had no control and it was taught for almost 15 years without change. While we still don't have control over a syllabus at most Central or even State universities in India once it is approved, however, frequent course revisions, in recent years, have meant that all levels of faculty can participate in and contribute to the process of setting the syllabus.

Changes in the requirements for a degree and the move for instance from teaching in annual mode over two or three terms to teaching in semester mode also resulted in a change in course length, the material that can be included in a course, evaluation criteria and also in the amount of time that a teacher may have at their disposal. These changes are also things we can do nothing about specially if there is a policy decision and so it is probably advisable to innovate and make the best of the situation.

Coming back to the basic task of teaching class – this act always comprised many different components but each of these tasks are now becoming increasingly more specific and quantifiable and being brought under all kinds of supervision. We are moving, in India too, to the western academic notion that each course is a contract between the students and the instructor where both parties have certain obligations. Many international universities now have formal faculty/student learning contracts which emerged more as a means to safeguard the policies and procedures of each particular course and to ensure that arbitrary changes in the syllabus or submission deadlines or attendance rules etc. are not undertaken. This is a direct outcome of the litigious world we now live in. Whether this metaphor of a business or legally inspired contract adds to or takes away from the real business of what the syllabus and the structured learning process are meant to do, is another matter altogether. The fact remains that a well set out syllabus does eliminate misunderstandings and clearly sets out policies and expectations for the course.

While these may not be very different from what we have all experienced in our classes, they are now set out in more formal and enforceable terms. On the faculty side this includes first of all letting the students know what is the course content, what are the learning objectives of the course and the manner in which student learning will be tested. This means that on the teacher's part, duties include being prepared with the lecture (as said earlier) and ensuring that the class takes place at the times specified, as per plan and that students will have the right to discuss and question the material and also give feedback.

The students in turn, have the obligation to arrive at class on time, stay awake and alert and engaged, and to hand in assignments on time and of course to follow a policy of academic integrity.

There are also mutual expectations – such as listening to each other respectfully, avoiding comments that could cause hurt to the feelings of anyone and so forth. The coming in of technology has also meant that electronic submissions of papers need to be carefully monitored most specifically with regard to submission times apart from checking for academic integrity.

Students of course are the other half of the teaching-learning equation and I think it is important to recognise that a bright set of students can really push the instructor to work hard and also help make one into a better teacher and scholar. Gone are the days when classes were a one way communication with the teacher doing all the talking. At all the institutions I have been at, and I am lucky to have been at some of the best, a good class is inter-active and the students free to raise questions.

The one rule of thumb that has enabled me to be comfortable in class has been a statement of one of my own Professors at the Delhi School of Economics made in response to a question. Instead of giving an answer he said, much to the astonishment of the class: "I don't know". He went on to explain that the only difference between him the Professor, viewed by the students as someone who had all the answers, and the students, was, that unlike the students he knew where to find the answer. That is also the hallmark of someone who is confident of their academic standing and are not afraid to say that professors are not meant to be walking talking

encyclopaedias. That is one lesson that has stood me in good stead because it encompasses both honesty and humility that are integral to becoming a good academic.

For young academics teaching courses on areas that have been assigned to them irrespective of their areas of expertise, the phrase "don't know" is a life saver. For one, it breaks down some of the stiff hierarchy of the class room which suggests that knowledge transmission is a one way street from the teacher to the student with no exchange in the reverse order. It also makes faculty appear more human and approachable and takes away some of the pressure that we as academics may put on ourselves as needing to have all of the answers all of the time. But we need to ensure that "I don't know" does not become a default response to all questions in class or to all issues. The phrase "I don't know" is a much needed reminder to all of us engaged in intellectual pursuit of the fact that what we do know amounts to little and that we need and want to continue to learn about new works, things, ideas, people, places and much else.

In the current age it is impossible for any one individual to have in their grasp all the knowledge in any field leave alone all the knowledge from all disciplines, which was possible a couple of centuries ago. In fact, the explosion in knowledge and specialisation has also impacted the very structure of the university as we see it today. This change is part of a continuous series of changes in university structure and purpose over the ages.

We must not lose sight of the fact that when Universities as formal structures were first established, beginning in 972 CE with Al Azhar in Cairo, and followed by Bologna, the first university in the western world in 1086 CE and Oxford (1187 CE), they represented a new type of institution which also marked a significant departure in the life of society, as significant as the emergence of a new branch of learning. Universities can and did unleash a new kind of social imagination and experience which had transformative effects on many aspects of the social life and in the world of learning. Beginning as traditional keepers of essentially religious knowledge in the middle ages, universities have subsequently undergone a series of alterations at various points in time before they came to acquire their current form.

The first real change in the structure of the university was at the turn of the eighteenth century and it took different directions in France and Germany and led to the formation of distinct kinds of universities. The French innovation saw the establishment of a new kind of institution, the *grandes ecoles* or the great schools, rather than attempting a restructuring of the already existing institutions. These were meritocratic institutions, outside the framework of the university system, with very high academic standards which gave life to Napolean's idea of "careers open to talent" (Béteille 2010:120) and focused on training people for particular positions in both the public and private sectors. The French idea linking education to careers and subsequently employment, thus did away with patronage and birth as being the sole determinants for seeking and gaining an education. This pioneered new institutional structures and the idea of open and secular institutions. These were very prestigious institutions with severe discipline and control over the curriculum and competitive entrance based on a national exam.

The German model, which emerged with the founding of the university of Berlin in 1810, and now referred to after its main architect Wilhelm von Humboldt, as the Humboldt university, pioneered the blueprint for a new type of university based on the principle of the unity of research and teaching. This Humboldtian university ensured that universities no longer only transmitted existing knowledge but became instead creators of knowledge. Humboldt argued for a holistic education that prepared world citizens in institutions which had unconditional academic freedom to do research based on logic, reason and empiricism. Humboldt influenced the creation of universities in the United States where John Hopkins established in 1875 and the University of Chicago became the first research university to be established. The United States subsequently became the home of the great research universities such as Harvard, Stanford, MIT and so forth.

Until this time much of the productive research work had been done outside the formal university which was regarded as an unexciting place closed to innovation. In fact, "major intellectual disciplines as sociology, anthropology, demography, social statistics and even economics and political science as we know them today had their origins outside the universities which then came to adopt them in the course of time" (Béteille: 2010:118).

In England, the pace of change was slower. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both had religious foundations, with admission open to only those who subscribed to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. The separation of the universities from the church was long drawn out and the idea was considered radical even in nineteenth century Europe. The Trevelyan-Northcote reforms in 1854 which laid the foundation of a permanent, neutral administrative body working for the elected government of the day, led to a

change in English universities and also the creation of a new class of civil servant namely the Indian Civil Service (Ibid. 23). They specified that recruitment to a unified civil service should be entirely on the basis of merit by open, competitive examinations and entrants should have a good 'generalist' education such as that provided by Oxford and Cambridge. They further stated that all promotions would be on merit alone. They thus moved away from the corrupt and inefficient patronage system that hitherto prevailed in England.

The policy to establish a common culture of officialdom - a homogeneous class of experts with a common ruling identity was much favoured by the 1854 Macaulay Committee, that set down that I.C.S. men should undergo a thorough training in classical studies at the English universities before departing for India. The Indian Civil servant of the future was to be 'the gentleman graduate, the distinguished product of a liberal education, mature of judgement and with established roots in English society' with a clear bias towards those who had completed the reformed 'Greats' course at Oxford (Ellis 2013:36).

The last major change in the structure of the university was the emergence of what has come to be called the 'mass research university', a term coined by Shils to refer to the American university post World War II - universities which had a population of 20,000 students.

In the Indian context, historically, the story of the university after the destruction of Nalanda and after the end of similar ancient institutions, really takes off only in 1857 when the three "presidency" universities in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay came into being. India thus while inheriting the legacy of having had centres of learning in ancient times, went through a long period of dormancy until the modern university was introduced under colonialism. The colonial universities in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were lucky in that they were devoid of much of the baggage that their counterparts in Europe carried at the same time. Benefitting from the reforms in university organisation in the West, Indian universities from their inception were open and secular institutions. More importantly, while universities in England, Germany and France were forced to bring in change to counter so to say 'cultural lag', in the face of similar change having already occurred in wider society, in India the University was the precursor of change which then filtered into wider society. The Indian university thus became the agent of change and not an institution that was playing catch up.

The encounter with the modern university in India albeit through a new language, was also marked by the encounter with western thought and ideas and an exposure to new subjects and approaches. It also had other consequences in terms of social significance. The University in India has done more for the emancipation of women than any other institution. They not only prepared women for entry into the work sphere as equals with men but also allowed more than any other institution, men and women unrelated by kinship, to interact freely. The university also allowed similar interaction between people of different castes and communities which was unprecedented. However, the expansion of universities in India was a slow process and in 1947, India had only 20 universities with a total enrolment of 200,000.

The opening of education not only to both genders but also to all classes and communities, and the establishing of the open and secular university in contrast to one that was small and socially exclusive, was not something that happened globally with ease and without resistance. It was a slow and halting process with many turns and   counterturns and makes a fascinating history which we do not have time to look at today.

Coming back to the point I was making about the expansion in knowledge fields. This has led to the emergence of new branches of science and scholarship – a process that demonstrates that there are and will continue to be new areas of research and study that can expand into becoming stand alone disciplines. While the university could until a few decades ago, include within the ambit of its disciplines (that constitute university curricula) all the new branches of learning and at the same time retain the hallmark of the university which was a community of scholars and scientists with specialised skills, no university in the world can now teach every discipline from A-Z.

The consequence of the progress in the branching off of new specialisms and the increase in disciplines has led to the development of new kinds of universities. The newest model has been the emergence of the specialist university concentrating on law, or agriculture or education or even defence studies and as we read in the papers in India this week a Railways university - a far cry from the original idea of a university being a coherent unit covering the full range of academic engagement from philosophy to medicine. Universities that imparted a holistic education largely focussed on creating possibly citizens, and, hopefully, leaders of their respective communities, countries and continents. In contrast, the new, single discipline model of universities instead claim the edge with their focused attention and limited scope as being ideally suited to create a set of

employees who can be the perfect fit for the prospective employers in their chosen field, once again bringing us face to face with the difference between the Humboldt university as opposed to the French model.

The Universities are increasingly being pressurised into a discourse which seeks to rate the credibility of an institution on the readiness for the job market of its students. This discourse is complicated and could seriously impact the freedom and autonomy of the university and its faculty for determining syllabus content and will make the university dependent upon the whims and fancies of industry and the market. This is hardly a stable way in which to impart meaningful education specially in a world with a constantly shifting work environment where "skills" are hard to fix.

Is it possible to reconcile the two views namely the narrow relevance of university education for employment versus the employability of university graduates schooled in the Humboldtian vision. I think it is and minds much better than mine have seemed to suggest as much. The key lies in providing an education to students that equips them with certain broad based skills that have universal applications which are needed in every work space. Adaptability is the most important skill for anyone entering the work space because it is adaptability to the work environment that will largely ensure success and that holds true for academics too.

The fact that education does not equal training has been proven by the lack of employability of students from the so called technical fields and the seemingly skill based certificate courses into the workplace e.g. B.Com, Library Science and engineering. I have had opportunity to sit through many presentations on this issue in the last few years and the feedback from leaders in industry who hired graduates from skill based courses was that the students lacked language skills to write even a simple paragraph of correct English and that their knowledge skills were also too theoretical and not application based. The major qualities for success in the workspace seem to be adaptability, knowledge skills, language skills and team work.

Universities and curricula that prepare students to be globally competitive are those that will ensure that students develop good communication skills – both written and oral, critical thinking and analytical reasoning. The application of knowledge and skills in real world settings, complex problem solving and analysis skills and also ethical decision making, teamwork and leadership skills along with exposure to technology and basic mathematics are essential too.

It is important that young scholars should be aware and alert of changes in the higher education scenario and the trends therein – for populist public opinion fed by interest groups and decisions taken by outside interests may change forever the nature of the university and impact the existence of certain disciplines which may be rendered redundant because they have no direct link with jobs and industry as such. Universities and most importantly social science and humanities departments are best equipped to teach each of the skills listed above, but they now increasingly have to justify their existence and space in the academy and it will be the younger faculty that needs to be aware of this challenge and be ready to face it. Moreover, the universities need to send out the message that they are capable of both producing graduates well suited for the workspace and also undertaking high end research in all subjects that may feed innovation and economic growth and the general advancement of knowledge.

One of the most eye opening encounters I had in the last few years was with a group of Japanese Vice chancellors and University Presidents at a conference in Tokyo. This was soon after the big Japanese earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. Speaking at the panel on the idea of the new Nalanda university for the 21st century, I was the only speaker who represented a university with a social science thrust and the belief that this was the necessary core for a university of the future. I was very surprised at the end of the session when we opened the session for discussion, that the senior most professor stood up and said that as a culture and a nation, Japan had put their faith in science and the belief that science had the power to solve all their problems. This faith in science was at the cost of the social sciences and the humanities. However, time and again, and most recently post the tsunami they were discovering that minds trained in science lacked the skills needed to cope with life and the things that life throws up such as tragedies like this. This is also a reason that both inter-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity needs to be encouraged in the university – something which has increasingly become difficult given the arrangement of university departments in isolated silos with no communication with each other. And the emergence of specialist universities will hamper rather than enhance this cause.

The other change in the university landscape in the country that I will mention briefly is the emergence of a whole range of universities with regard to their status –i.e. Central universities, State universities, Deemed universities, Open universities, Institutions of national importance and now Private universities, Private unaided

universities etc. Each of these universities has a different governance and regulatory structure which has an impact on the functioning of the university, its autonomy, its curriculum and other related factors. We know that the Indian university while it may be a model for social inclusion and other factors, has had to deal with problems of regulation, centralization and prescription.

The colonial universities in India were free from the control and regulation of religious bodies but under government control. This control and regulation has increased manifold post independence where universities are not only regulated increasingly by more than one regulator, but changes are ushered into teaching practices and revisions of syllabi ordered by regulation tied to financial grants. While some of this regulation is necessitated by bad practices in universities that may not revise their syllabi for many years, or where the tutorial and examination system is in disarray, it robs some of the more innovative and efficient institutions of autonomy to improvise and innovate.

Not everyone agrees with this extreme regulation and my own university has seen much disruption over the arbitrary decision to split the academic year into two semesters as opposed to three terms, and also simultaneously to split all existent courses into two units of equal half and reduce the number of courses that a student takes for an honours degree by allowing them to pick a selection of other course from other departments. This kind of imposition without a consultative process only results in undermining the university as a place of teaching and research. The term regulator implies, a low trust scenario where an outside body is given the power to set the rules.

Lest I be misunderstood, or give the impression that the governmental regulatory agencies cannot allow freedom of functioning, allow me to clarify that the regulations and control which have only grown over the years, are partly in response to a scenario where self-regulation of colleges and universities meant in many instances that there was no teaching, exams were a sham, classes were not conducted, corruption abounded at various levels etc. The flip side of governmental regulations of course is that once you cede a power to government it is very unlikely that it will be reversed. It must also not be forgotten that in India it is the state rather than private capital that has taken the initiative to open universities. The state's role can best be summed up by a quotation from Prof. André Béteille, who writing on universities said: "in independent India the government can still make or mar the universities, although, unlike its predecessor, it never tires of expressing its solicitude for academic autonomy" (Béteille 2010:6). The phrase "too many regulators but poor governance" has been used extensively to describe the Indian scenario.

The Government has consistently held that there is still place for institutions of excellence which can be self-regulatory and autonomous, though there have been complaints about the definition and interpretation of the word autonomy on both sides. Institutions like the Indian Institute of Technologies and the Indian Institute of Managements have functioned with varying levels of governmental interference.

I will end with a question that is occupying the heart of the university question: where the university as such is headed? Are universities viable in their current form or do they need innovation or worse still disbanding? Given that India with large numbers and huge unmet needs for higher education may not be touched by the answer to this question for another few generations, it is worth discussing nonetheless since it is essential to all of our lives. Even in India universities are all being asked to become money generating institutions rather than those fulfilling a public good and hence need to be supported by Government funding.

Like the issue with regulators this question too is complex and has many dimensions with the extremes being that we need to disband the brick and mortar university and replace it with the virtual university – a view that has fewer takers after the initial euphoria with *Coursera* and other such initiatives. The other extreme view would like market forces to determine what survives in the university. The attack on universities as ivory towers is not new and returns in different societies in various forms at different times depending upon which group is doing the talking. The basic issue that gets highlighted is the presumed connection or lack of connection between what the university does and its relevance or lack of it to society or societal needs.

Contrary to popular belief many of the areas of research at universities have emerged from societal needs and also the results of research have impacted not just industry but also law, policy and even demography and many other fields. Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas in a publication titled "What are Universities for" also flagged the fact that in the last few decades specially with the emergence of University rankings – governments have come to regard universities as national assets. This has led to more funding but as already mentioned earlier with regard to regulation, more demands on universities with regard to all kinds of objectives. Coupled with the use of the terms 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge society' governments now seek to exploit the potential of

universities in the global knowledge economy and we have seen in India the pressure on universities to make it into international rankings to add prestige to the image of the nation as a global leader in other fields.

The message is thus getting mixed up – are universities meant to ask questions that extend human understanding irrespective of their narrow practical utility or are they meant to further social prosperity or focus on scientific innovation at the expense of all other tasks? The perils of over emphasis on science is being fuelled globally by linking scientific advance to the nation's interest and the agenda is being set from without and not within the university. Universities need to remember that their main task was to produce knowledge and to also define what is knowledge and that requires a culture that values creativity and freedom.

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