

The Importance of Questioning

Kencho Pelzom

As educators we want motivated students who aspire to learn, not just in schools, but throughout their lives. If we want our students to be motivated to learn and perform well, wherever they go and whatever they do, it is high time we assess why we send our children to school. How can we make their learning better so that they graduate with the right values and attitude for future endeavors? I am not going to prescribe a set of values here but it seems that our expectations from our children to compete for good grades is not enough. We end up with graduates but not necessarily with educated future citizens. Thus we must think beyond grades and jobs for the sake of our future generation. In this article, based on my decade-long teaching experience, I will argue for the need to revise our current tertiary education system to produce informed, productive, citizens.

Motivated Learning Vs Assessment-Based Learning

Some eight years ago, one of my students asked me why they should study Aristotle when he is long dead and his ideas and philosophy are not relevant to the current Bhutanese generation? I wasn't surprised by the question. I had realised by then that many of our students in Political Science or other related programmes may have the same doubt. My answer to this student, and others who feel the same way, is that we study philosophy because it makes you examine your life and your surrounding in way that you have never thought of before. In doing so, you ask questions and learn to critically analyse various aspects of the answer.

This question was a reflection of a typical attitude towards learning among my students: why study something that may broaden my horizon but won't help me secure good grades and a job? I believe that examinations or a future job possibility is never a right motivation for students to learn. On the contrary, motivation to learn for the sake of learning is more effective if we want our students to perform better in school and after school. The rational is, if you invest in learning something well then you know it well enough to use it in the future in any form. Yet, the sad reality is that Bhutanese students learn for grades and employment prospects.

This is evident in our attachment to examination-based assessments. There is no exception, whether it's the teacher's love for having as many tests or the students wanting a course with more weightage in final examinations or midterm or unit tests.

I remember that, one time, after we had revised our curriculum in 2014, we had revised our coursework and examination weightage. It was made to make students have more coursework as they gradually progress. The reason was that, as students progress into the undergraduate level, they should be capable of independent learning, making the course more student-centered than lecturer-centered. The batch that had to do the most coursework in their fourth semester that year came to my office in a group to complain that this was not in their best interests. They had requested to go back to 50 examination and 50 coursework like the last batch. They expressed the view that coursework was much more difficult than examinations. Reflecting on it now, I think my students thought it was easier to sit for examinations because it did not require reading many pages of articles or books to do a small assessment. Yet the reality was that most did not do well in examination either because they would study for just a week before their final semester examination. According to the World Bank's report on "Learning To Realise Education's Promise (2018)", the average years spent in school has drastically increased, especially in the developing world, from 2.0 years in 1950 to 7.2 years in 2010, but the learning gap exists between developing and developed countries. Students who would be considered high performers in middle income countries would be ranked equal to average students in developed countries. The World Bank calls this the "learning crisis".

As a teacher I found this mentality of wanting to study only for examinations exhausting and frustrating. However, I can't blame the students alone because the current economic and social paradigm is such that better grades are seen to lead to better jobs and being a better person. This belief is reinforced by many practices such as in the labour market when your grades carry a higher weightage than your personality or emotional intelligence. For example, most jobs require higher grades in the first selection process, validating the current perception that grades are all that matters. Even more strange is the fact that graduates have to submit their class 12 mark sheets while applying for jobs. For me, the student I taught in the first year and the one who graduates are different. Change is constant, more true for

students that come to college as high school graduates and graduate from college as adults. The inability of our current practices to account for such intangible changes and growth in a student defeats the whole purpose of tertiary education. As a result, students end up underestimating the power of education to help realise their full potential. I wonder if that is also why we fail to build the confidence of students in their learning. A telling case of this lack of confidence is the rush to sit for the Bhutan Civil Service Examinations (BCSE) after graduation, knowing that their chances are slim. I am never surprised when most of my final year students want to sit for the BCSE.

My first question to them is, “Why”? Often their answer is that they want to do it just because everyone else is doing it or telling them to do so. Yet, most would confide that their chances of doing well was very low. There is a theory in psychology called the self-fulfilling prophecy which states that after predicting/expecting what you believe to be true, individuals usually try everything to make the prediction come true, knowing or unknowingly, fulfilling the self prediction. This was very true for most students who believed that they would not do well in the examinations. I often wondered if it was also because their initial motivation for taking the examinations were wrong.

Notwithstanding the above, I wouldn’t group all my students into the same category. While it was rare to find students who studied for the sake of learning, when such students did come along, I observed that they always out-performed students who wanted to study only for marks or examinations. No matter how hard the latter worked, the former did better in exams and after graduation. Such students have gone on to do very well in life and are always a source of joy and motivation for their teachers. Yet such students were more the exception than the norm.

The Need of the Hour - Space for Reasoning and Questioning

It is a sad reality that most first year students struggle with skills beyond reparative knowledge. For most of my students, it would be their first time learning or critically analysing in their first year as an undergraduate. Most of my students would dread open, book tests and the exam section that required them to critically examine what they have studied.

Motivating students to learn beyond the test is challenging but rewarding when they finally learn how to do so. Then students realise that their informed opinion matters and that they don't always have to agree with what is written in the text. This also inoculates students from believing that what they read is not always the truth, encouraging them to investigate and validate the information they receive. This requires students to not only be rigorous readers but also question whatever they learn. Thus, I don't necessarily subscribe to the common belief that Bhutanese students lack skills for critical analysis and reasoning. While it is challenging, the three or four years of tertiary education gives us ample time to instill such skills in our students. I have seen students develop these skills in the course of their tertiary education.

However, I believe the key obstacle is that such reasoning and the resulting outcome of questioning everything is not always encouraged in our school system and our society in general. Our deeply hierarchical system sometimes misunderstand questions as a challenge to established authority. For instance, the first batch of Political Science students was once branded as “revolutionary” by a colleague because they would ask and critique whenever they did not agree with what was being said or taught. There were times when my students have asked the right questions but got into trouble because they dared to ask. I always felt guilty that they got into trouble because we encouraged reasoning as opposed to accepting things at face value.

I believe that, as a society, we need to create a safe space for young minds to explore and question established norms. We are all victims of this hierarchical school set-up. We rarely asked questions beyond what is there in the book or what is being taught. How many of us actually raised our hands when our teacher would ask at the end of the lesson if anyone had any doubts? Even more serious is how many teachers ask this question every day in their classes with genuine intentions to help students improve? I remember once a student narrated a story about one of his professor (expatriate) who would be furious if they asked questions in class. The student said that the tutor took it as a challenge for testing his capability as a teacher - it rubbed the tutor's ego in the wrong way. Why would anyone ask questions if it leads to his/her failing the course? I would be too scared to do it as well.

On the other hand, as a teacher myself, I always felt the pressure to know everything, whether one has just started or one has been teaching for while. This expectation of a teacher to know everything can sometimes lead us to be defensive and authoritarian in the way we conduct our lessons. I found that as I grew more experienced in this profession, the need to control my students learning/classroom norms were more fluid and less structured. After all there are some 50 minds in one class at a given time and no two persons think or act alike to any given topic or situation. To accept that there will be days when a teacher might not have the right answer and graciously accepting that in front of the students is a lesson I would share with people who want to be future teachers. It humanises the teacher and teaches students that it is not necessary to know everything. Accepting and wanting to learn is more important. After all teaching is a profession that requires more learning than actual teaching.

The Design of Tertiary Education

This lack of space is evident in the way we design curricula that are foundational to tertiary education. The current tertiary curriculum guidelines do not always give the tutor the freedom to bring out the best in both the tutor and student. I always felt that the Royal University of Bhutan's process of curriculum design was for tutors with less experience and for someone who could follow the curriculum structure like an operational guide. I am also to be blamed for this as I was involved in creating the Political Science curriculum offered at Sherubste College.

Looking back, I feel that a curriculum should provide maximum room to bring out the best in teachers and students. For example, why should the curriculum guide a teacher on what kind of test should he/she be conducting for the students? Tests can be of any nature, essay/quiz/multiple choice questions (MCQ). I remember few years ago we were strictly asked to not make MCQ more than 10 percent of the final examination. The reasons were many: students leave early before the intended time so they disturb the other students; MCQs made by teachers did not test the deeper level learning for students; and so on. The conclusion was that no one, even if you knew how to make MCQs that would test student's deeper learning skills, was allowed to make more than the required 10 percent. This made me realise how we love uniformity and conformity and also the oddities of these values when applied in an academic setting.

Further, the huge pressure on tertiary education to create programmes that would make graduates employable is such that we invest half our resources in doing needs assessment studies on where our future graduates would be employed. Thus we make curricula on the basis of needs, almost like a commodity with a user warranty. This process has led us to focus more on skills as opposed to improving learning quality. Skills are by-products of learning and this is especially true for subjects like humanities and social sciences. If we look at the current tertiary education trends in South Asia, humanities and social science have taken a back stage.

Courses like MBA, BBA, Hospitality Management have completely taken over. I am glad that this trend has not reached Bhutan but it may not be long before it catches up. I was often confused when there was national debate a few years ago on the quality of graduates and many said it was declining. Was it declining compared with the past when we had a handful of graduates who all got jobs with the RCSC? Was it declining because we now have more graduates than jobs so they have to compete and then some got left out? Isn't competition good?

I remember everyone prescribed that we should evaluate the tertiary education system but what do you do when the diagnosis is wrong? Many mentioned that our graduates need to learn skills in schools, such as application writing, presentation, and communication. I had long discussion with my non-teacher friends on many occasions on the definition of quality and what was required for it. When the system is emphasising examination and grades, why would students learn these skills? And should we teach these skills as a subject rather than as a by-product of education? At present we are pressured into teaching skills more than the subject.

I do not have answers for these issues but I feel that we need to address them before it is too late. Most importantly, we need to ask what kind of learning culture are we teaching our future citizens? Will they have the necessary skills and the knowledge to take our country forward?

Reference

Asian Development Bank. (2011, November 16). Higher Education Across Asia: An Overview of Issues and Strategies. Retrieved April 19th, 2019, from Asian Development Bank: <https://www.adb.org>

Matthew J. Mayhew, Wolniak, G. C., & Pascarella, E. T. (2007). How Educational Practices Affect the Development of Life-long Learning Orientations in Traditionally-aged Undergraduate Students. *Res High Educ* (2008) , 49 (DOI10.1007/s), 337-356.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2014). Higher Education in Asia: Expanding Out, Expanding Up. Retrieved April 22nd, 2019, from UNESCO Digital Library: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>

World Bank. (2018). Learning To Realise Education's Promise. World Bank. Washington,DC: World Bank.