

Teaching is Overrated. Good Teachers Don't Teach.

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The title of this essay may offend some people. Of course, that is not my intention. I do respect people in a variety of teaching professions; I was a teacher myself. In addition, I don't think that teachers are overrated or overcompensated. Nevertheless, I wanted to use the provocative title so that people involved in teacher-student contexts would re-examine the essence of learning and "teaching." Now, the main point of this essay is that true learning occurs *not* because of teaching as we normally understand. Another point is that the conventional way of "teaching" (i.e., the teacher tries to instill her agenda into the students) can even impair learning. In my view, this is happening virtually at all levels across a diverse learning opportunities, including traditional education from preschool to college, professional training, personal development, etc. This point will be explored below more in detail.

Let us first imagine a situation where we think we learned a great deal. How did we do it? Many of us would agree that we learned various things not necessarily from a teacher in a conventional context, but basically on our own guided by strong self-motivation. In fact, I believe that we can learn a lot of things on our own and that a lot of so-called "expert advice," e.g., financial and parenting advice, can even be harmful. Let us now consider the case of learning how to use a smart phone. In most cases, we are strongly self-motivated and would use a variety of resources to get the most out of the phone. Would we consider taking a course on how to use a smart phone? We probably can't stand it especially if the teacher goes over all the aspects of using a smart phone according to her agenda. However, we might think that there are cases where a conventional teaching environment might work. For example, let us consider the case of learning how to ride a bike. We can imagine that both a child and her parent (as a teacher) have the same goal and are both motivated. Nevertheless, as some of us may have experienced, the way the parent expects the child to learn and the way the child wants to learn can be quite different. The difference may be about the timing of practice, the level of involvement/expectation of the parent, exact method of learning, etc. Then, the learning experience can end up with a disastrous one. So, we really need to examine the essence of learning more closely.

When we have a problem of some sort, we want to solve it. If we don't know how to solve it, we will need to find it out. At that point, we must be self-motivated. This is the essential starting point for learning. However, in a school environment, for example, we rarely start with a problem. Often, we start with a topic, e.g., arithmetic and reading (i.e., reading technique, not the joy of reading). It is not surprising if very few students are self-motivated in such an

environment. Then, except for the few who are extremely patient, the students will most likely suffer a great deal while being forced to do something they are not motivated to do. We can observe a similar situation in adult education as well. Let us consider learning computer skills at a library. People may take a course on Introductory Microsoft Word. Even though they may really want to learn how to use the software to do some writing, such a course may not really help the students. This is because the teacher normally has her own agenda, which may not suit the students.

Next, even when we are self-motivated, we often have difficulty solving the problem on our own. We need some help. The help may come in various forms: other people (including teachers, family members, and friends), books, on-line resources, etc. As long as we are working based on our self-motivation and these resources are helpful, there is a good chance that we will solve our problem. In many cases, however, we may never solve the problem (the most important real-world problems do not have simplistic “solutions”). The important point here is that regardless of the outcome, if we work in this manner, there will be learning. I think that is the essence of learning.

Now returning to the case where the student’s problem happens to be the same as the teacher’s agenda (e.g., the case of bike riding). Even in such a case, it is still uncertain whether the student would learn much. This is because, even if the teacher recognizes the student’s problem, she may not be able to help the student actually go through the process of solving a problem *on her own*. For example, if the teacher gives out an answer, the student will not learn. If the teacher spoon-feeds the student, the student will not learn. If the teacher provides specific how to’s, the student will not learn. On the other hand, if the teacher ignores the student, the student who need help will not learn either. Only if the teacher truly understands where the student is and is able to guide the student exactly as needed, the student will be able to learn sufficiently. Whether the student actually solves the problem is often irrelevant. The essence is, I believe, how the student engages with the problem, i.e., the *process* of problem solving but not the *solution* derived from problem solving.

So, the most troublesome aspect of the conventional teaching model is teaching with agenda, which is most commonly associated with the knowledge transfer model. In addition, another point is that unless the teacher is interested in the student’s life as a whole as the basis of her learning context, it would be difficult for the teacher to actually be able to guide the student. Good teachers would see their students as they are, without judgment or comparing them. Good teachers would let their students work following the students’ own interests, without coercing them. Good teachers would be responsive and flexible, without being stuck to the teachers’ own expectations. And, good teachers would let their students be free from anxiety and fear and would not employ punishments, rewards, or competitions. Relevant points have been discussed by many progressive educators and thinkers (e.g., Harrison, 2002; Holt, 1976; Kohn, 1993; Krishnamurti, 1953; Neill, 1960; Rogers, 1961). And, I thought that some of the best examples of learning and guidance in this way are in the books by George Dennison (1969)

and John Hunter (2013). When a person learns in this manner, there is virtually no “teaching” in the conventional sense. What the facilitator would do is not “teaching” but would be more like understanding and guiding.

When I was teaching at a college, I was involved in a truly interdisciplinary project called SENCER (<http://www.sencer.net/>). It “applies the science of learning to the learning of science, all to expand civic capacity.” It was when I was being fed up with the departmentalized academic environment and interested in the idea of complex systems. So, I was really excited. The workshop which I participated in was amazing and I met truly exceptional teachers there; they were really inspiring. However, in the end, I was still not entirely satisfied. I thought that SENCER is still “selling” STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education. Instead, my view point was shifting toward the “buying” analogy of teaching (or learning). That is, the facilitator (who doesn’t “teach” in the conventional sense) would rather “buy” the learner’s self-motivation and her learning process (this point has been explored in my other essay: <http://nobo.komagata.net/pub/Komagata14-EducationAsBuying.html>). During SENCER meetings, we often discussed the findings in *How People Learn* compiled by the National Research Council (2000). The book points out interesting and useful findings. However, it includes only a few sections concerning motivation (e.g., pp. 60-61, p. 102) and does not really discuss intrinsic motivation. I think that true learning is all about intrinsic motivation. Without addressing it, what we talk about cannot really be learning.

Even in the context of personal development, many people assume that we need to go to a class, need a teacher, and thus need to pay (often a lot). Especially through our conventional educational experience, most of us are ingrained with that kind of mindset. Then, it would be very difficult to learn anything. Why can’t we suspend our flawed presuppositions and open up our minds to real freedom of learning?

In a sense, learning is spiritual. It won’t come from outside; it can only come from inside.

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