

MEMORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

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I will share with you some reflections, some memories from my days as a student and my experiences as a teacher. Beneath these brief anecdotes are layers of meaning that I leave you to unravel.

Syed Wazir-ul-Hassan Abidi was my teacher at the Punjab University when I was doing my Masters in Persian. He would not allow any student to enter the class unless the student had a question, because, he would say, knowledge starts with a question. If you collect the answers to your questions about a plant, for example, you get the science of Botany.

Chaudhry Fazal Hussain was my teacher at Gujrat Zamindar College. This was how he described a good teacher: A good teacher is one whose new batch of students is the new edition of his book of research, meaning thereby that a teacher is constantly renewing his/her knowledge. It was Chaudhry Fazal Hussain who encouraged me to 'step out of the quagmire of science' and to take up humanities, as I was then enrolled in the FSc. Pre-Medical programme. I had written a couple of poems then. One was on childhood as I used to moan the loss of my childhood, standing on the threshold of adolescence.

Conciseness is also an important quality for a teacher to have. I went to Iran with a group of 40 other teachers. There I met a teacher who, when he spoke, seemed to enfold 5 or 6 books within the capsule of one sentence. For example about Allama Iqbal he said, 'He came too early.' What he meant to say was that the entire future will be his.

I have felt the greatest joy when I was a teacher in a classroom. A teacher, as I see it, should give his students the permission to question and secondly he should have a strong command over his subject. In class 8th as I was teaching the three states of matter, a student said, “Give us an example of all three states co-existing.” I gave him the example of a hukkah. It is made of solid wood, it emits smoke and it contains water! That’s all your three states, solid, liquid and gas.

I was once a teacher at a school in Kunjah, near Gujrat. My poem ‘Ambri’ is based on an experience I had while teaching there. It is about a student Bashir who comes late to class because he was stalled by his class-fellow Akram’s mother. She made a special lunch for Akram and sent it with Bashir. And why did Akram not take his lunch with him? Why did he leave home in a rush without eating anything? Akram quarreled with his mother and left home angry that morning; he struck her, his own mother, with a rolling-pin that broke from the force of the violent blow. Still the mother, bruised and hurt by her own son, is anxious to send the choicest of food for her errant son.

It took me 10 years to write this poem. Such is the rich nature of human experience and the imperfection of the eye that sees it, that you can never quite encompass the true essence of an event through words. A teacher’s experience in the classroom is no less complex than any other, as each child brings his own universe to class; it is then up to the teacher to make sense out of it, to respond to it and to some extent, reshape it.

The author is a celebrated intellectual and a popular poet. His poems in Urdu and Punjabi are widely read.