

STAND UP AND BE COUNTED

Noor Amna Malik

I was now a teacher. Celebrated by some of my teachers in my own student days and brutally put down by others. Silenced by all. At least temporarily! I entered the classroom and the teaching profession with a different zeal: my students were not going to be silenced. In fact their silences were to be chased out of the classroom, chased out by my encouragement and nurturance of their curiosity and their spirit of inquiry.

These were all fine words. They didn't mean much to most of my colleagues at the private management institution where I was teaching BBA final semester and MBA.

The BBA Final semester was a batch of wonderful students who had succumbed to the pressure of constant discouragement from their teachers' their grades were now reflecting their low morale. Their teachers believed they could do no better, so what else could they do but to prove their teachers right?

Actually they could do plenty. They had to be trusted. I understood that much. What I wasn't expecting was that I, as a teacher who trusted them to work intelligently on projects, would not be trusted by my colleagues and the management.

Here's what happened. I was teaching Marketing to both the BBA and MBA classes. I decided to give 40% of the grade for a launch campaign for a product. Working in groups, they would develop a feasibility report, marketing strategy, launch campaign and an electronic media commercial. We had practiced similar work throughout the semester. My students were revving to go. Excited and abuzz.

The faculty lounge was equally excited and abuzz, but for totally different reasons.

“What kind of an assessment is this! Our students don't know how to do this”

“ What! How can BBA and MBA students do the same project!”

“ This BBA batch! They can’t even cope with routine assessment methods, how will they perform on such a bohemian task!’

And then the management:

“ Ms. Noor Amina, just what do you think you are doing?”

I insisted this was the only way to test students. This way they will not be in each others shadow, each group will have their own unique project to work on. Life demands of us to work in cooperative ways, why do we want to teach our children to always compete?

I decided to give some ground in order to survive.

“Fine. I will test the MBAs in some other way. But the BBA batch can and will do this product launch campaign.”

More uproar. Followed by a lull.

I went ahead with my original plan.

Both my batches did their projects in ways even I, with all my trust in them, could not have imagined. They surpassed everyone’s expectations. Some groups were approached by corporate giants for whose products they had made their mock-campaigns. These corporate moguls wanted to negotiate to buy the advertisements that some of these youngsters had made. These kids had always been good, but now they knew how good they were. Their grades in other courses also reflected the rise in their level of confidence.

It took a creative course design and a little bit of counseling to attain this.

Students shared their personal problems with me, seeking support and a sympathetic ear.

Specially my male students. Expected to be ‘strong’ from the day they are born, many of these boys were emotionally overwrought and in need of some support. Once they got that, they were on their way to success.

Years passed and I left the teaching profession. One evening I went to watch a play at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts. When it was time for the curtain call, I heard the name of one of my students from that same BBA Final batch. She had written the play. I was impressed with the theme and the sensitive treatment given to it by these youngsters. My old student had done a great job.

She came on stage, spoke her bit and then she said it. She had seen me sitting somewhere in the audience. She took my name and thanked me for supporting her to be able to do what she was doing today. Then she called me on stage to acknowledge me in front of the entire audience. Overwhelmed and humbled, I went up and presented myself to the audience: a student who was once silenced, a teacher who was rebuked by colleagues for a creative course design, now acknowledged and celebrated by her student. Life had come full circle. Once led to a project by me, my student had now found her own project. And what a project it was!

Was I a great teacher? I am not so sure. I may have known only four out of ten facts well. But I taught those four in ways that would help my students internalize the information. Case studies, simulations, examples from the indigenous context. All students even the ‘weak’ ones do well when exposed to such strategies, not because the strategies are great but because they are. There is no such thing as a weak student. There are only students who are silenced and students who are allowed to blossom.

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