

LIVING HISTORY

Ismat Riaz

Where do I start to tell my story? I have been a teacher for nearly 30 years. As a fresh graduate out of College, I was asked to join my alma mater as a teacher in their senior school. Everyday, I faced a class of nearly 45 students barely 4 to 6 years younger to me. But, I had always been passionate about teaching and here I was enthusiastically being a teacher and becoming more and more committed to the profession. I discovered that I loved to talk. That dialogue with my students has continued in diverse ways and has never ceased. The respect and care I gave in class has been reciprocated over and over again by my students, their parents and by society at large.

I taught English Language, History and later on, Pakistan Studies to my secondary school students. History is my favourite subject and I went to great lengths to make it interesting and informatively alive for students. I refused to be bound to the idea of giving notes and doing all the talking in class. It was always a challenge to find ways and means to make each lesson different and productive to fire the imagination of the young people who looked up to me for guidance and help. One day I would bring a big map of the pre-1947 world with no Pakistan on it. Then, with a flourish I would ask them to close their eyes and *voila*, a map with the outline of Pakistan in all its green emerged on another world map. And so would start our quest to find the causes, modalities and pioneers that went into the making of Pakistan.

But there is more to the teaching of History than that. I believe that it is not scientists who will change the fate of our nation, but the historians, economists, philosophers, psychologists. In short, I believe in the humanities and social sciences as

powerful funnels for making change enter into our society. The Pakistan Studies paper is not just an examination, an unnecessary add-on. It is an opportunity to engage children with their own past and heritage.

How did I make use of this opportunity? I contextualized the teaching of history with the mention of current events. I used to bring in caricatures from current newspapers to class and use them as refreshers in the class or as starting points for discussion. I hadn't heard of the theory of multiple intelligences then, but I knew that some of my children would learn better if I offered them some visual impetus. And they did.

I still have drawers full of material that I have collected over the years for use in class: newspaper articles, old maps, audio tapes. One of my most prized possessions is a copy of the Times of England dating back to August 15th, 1947. The yellowing pages announce the birth of our nation, show the congratulatory messages of other heads of states on the creation of Pakistan. No amount of lecturing on 'value your country' can have the effect on a teenager that just holding this newspaper and reading it can. History is real. It is my job to make it alive for my students.

Our culture offers immense veneration to an *ustad*, a teacher. That veneration was lost with the acceptance of the 'Tuition culture.' Teachers started to treat learning of young minds as a 'business.' Students will and do need help outside the classroom; understanding that, I have always welcomed my students to come over to my home and get the guidance that they need. Even today when I am not formally teaching at any institution, children come to me for help, siblings of ex-students, others who have heard of me. The gift of knowledge is given to them for an exorbitant price at tuition centres:

with me, they pay their dues by making a commitment to their own learning. Thus have I taught and this is what adds weight to my word and impact to my teaching.

That impact is re-enforced by small encounters with my ex-students. Sometime back, on my way out from a farewell dinner for an outgoing principal at a college in Lahore, a young lady accosted me as I walked to my car. It was an ex-student who greeted me and proudly told me that she was working for a newspaper. And, “Remember that passage from Thwastri,” she continued, “that you made us do in class – now I see the utility of it in my work as a journalist.”

Today’s fledgling media lacks the tool of an in-depth view of our condition as a nation because the roots go back to our history classrooms where our future journalists are not steeped properly in their own heritage and ideology, where they are not taught to critically engage with the information that is thrown at them. I was happy to hear that she was doing important work. I was also confident that she would be a journalist with some integrity.

Time and again it is just encouragement, a kind word and appreciation of students’ work which has worked wonders. The best reward for teaching is when you can walk away satisfied with a job well done.

That reward is intensified when you find a message on Facebook that says it all:

Dear Mrs Riaz

If that’s you, just wanted to say hi. You were such a great teacher. CJM (The name of the school) was cooler because of you. Please accept my regards.

Best

Nazia Hussain

I hope my ex-students will become leaders in a culture of innovation, creativity and meta-learning with the courage to initiate change for an equitable society in Pakistan.

The author is currently working on her PhD from the Institute of Education, University of London. She conducts workshops for teachers. She contributes newspaper articles on the subject of education and has recently written History textbooks with accompanying Teacher's Guides for the National Curriculum for Classes 7 and 8. At the moment she is involved with curriculum development for the Institute for Professional Learning, and is an active participant in the Pakistan Coalition for Education and Alif Laila Book Bus Society.