

## Educashshion

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The word 'educate' is Latin in origin and means to 'lead out'. It is a transitive verb and refers to the action of taking somebody from the darkness of ignorance to or towards the light of reason and understanding. This idea is at the bottom of the concept of 'teaching'. And since many of you are going to be exposed to people intending to do just that to you for another few years, it may be worth taking a step back to reflect.

The teacher is in possession of a good – knowledge – that she or he is paid to hand down to others. A teacher worth her or his salary will manage to stuff a lot of that knowledge into the students' heads, a bad one will fail to do so and may at worst hinder students' autodidactic (self-teaching) efforts.

Even if it works: Is that a healthy process for any of the involved?

Students sit in class after class, mostly silent. And if they are good receptacles, they will accumulate more and more of what is deemed worthy knowledge over the years of their schooling. Who deems? Syllabus inventors, education ministries, all sorts of pedagogic specialists. Can they be trusted to know what ought to be put into our heads?

Let us not forget that there is another facet to teaching. Sort of under-the-counter you are being disciplined. Like in a monastery or in a prison or in the army (see Foucault). If you think about what you do in academics: you sit in your economics class and listen, then you maybe go and sit in your physics class, then in your maths class, etcetera. For about 20 hours a week at our school. It is surprising that most people do not notice that what they actually learn best in their school years is sitting. Did you, however, notice how some got upset when our artists – always on the lookout for something as offensive as possible – robbed all classrooms of their chairs?

Teachers are in no such strait-jackets. They can walk up and down, stand, sit on chairs or tables, they have a range of choice. But I am not sure that their job does them much good. David likes to quote Churchill (I think) on how headmasters have powers that prime ministers can only dream of. Inside the classroom teachers have in some ways absolute power. Now how does the saying go? What does absolute power do to him or her that holds it?

But beyond such rather lofty considerations, the handing down of the same kind of knowledge year after year after year gets monotonous. Of course teachers can change content and style of their lessons, but there will always be the constraints of a syllabus and the threat of finals that students one more or less far-off day are to pass.

I believe that an exchange is or would be much more worthwhile. Teachers and students could bring their different life-experiences into the classroom. Together they could explore and work on their understanding (Freire calls it the 'reading') of the word and the world.

Nice ideal. But is there room for it inside the IB diploma programme? Hardly.

In economics and the humanities and in life in general I have found that the biggest challenge – for me as much as for students – is to keep on doubting, to continuously keep oneself from only following the laid-out rails of the academic subject, from just repeating handed-down wisdom of old. It is easier and so tempting to follow the mainstream: do it and not only will hardly anyone question what you say, they will admire you for your 'wisdom'. Swimming against the current requires more effort and reactions are often very negative (people tend to feel threatened).

To go against the mainstream, unlearning may be the most important part and prerequisite of any quest for truth (even if some of us know that there is no absolute truth). bell hooks, professor of English at some US university and authress of many unusually understandable books on complex issues, sees her own teaching's main aim as transgression. Her kind of education – a 'practice of freedom' – is, however, rarely found in classrooms or lecture halls.

Knowledge that is unmovable does harm. It only tolerates submission. Contributions to that kind of a body of knowledge can only be made by a genius or from the university professor upwards.

When I look around the IB hexagon subjects, I see one exception. Art. Of course submission is required here as well. But for long stretches of the way, a participatory ‘being-in-class’ is possible here. If there is one job on campus I would like to have: it is not David’s, it is Nandu’s (what a pity that I have none of the technical knowhow nor talent for it whatsoever). I have been thrilled time and again by what powerful creativity our students develop, despite this being a school subject of theirs.

It is generally considered the most important aim for the teacher to get her or his students through exams. Classes are thus first and foremost preparation for the finals. Myself, I have learnt very well how to pass exams. I am so good at it that I have only ever failed one exam in my life (a group exam for the British Surf Life Saving Association that we needed for Beach Rescue at Atlantic College – I/we passed the second time round). From exams I gained grades, degrees, even a distinction. What I consider first traces of knowledge let alone wisdom I have come upon elsewhere.

Instead of engaging students and themselves in transgression, teachers mostly focus on their students’ grades. To improve these, they try and appropriate as much of student time for their subject as possible. This makes sense in the smaller scheme of things – teachers are, after all, measured by the results, i.e. grades that they make their students achieve. Thus the more a teacher forces the students to work for himself or herself, the better the teacher’s personal professional standing. After a certain point (if students have a lot or too much to do anyhow) this becomes a zero sum game, of course. Some sort of systemic control may be required here.

Myself, I am a fervent believer in the light load approach. Almost all students of mine over the last three years could have passed their IB finals without me. The way I have chosen to understand my duty as a teacher is that I get my salary to make things easier for the students, to put on offer what is needed for everyone to do well if she or he chooses to, but to generally reduce the time students have to spend on ‘my’ subject as much as possible, and to thus free them for things they really want to do. Should one or two want to spend extra-time on economics, so be it. But it is for each student and not for me to decide what is worth her or his while.

Great temptation lies in teaching. The teacher’s role confers great power – most fundamentally because it is the teacher who in class has the right to speak and, through this, the right of definition and the right of determination of content and form of the discourse that takes place. Such power can fairly easily be translated into students’ respect and often even love. This – power, respect, and love – is a strong drug and it is easy to succumb to it.

Such an addict may not be the optimal person to entrust with classroom power (the rather simple concept of power used here sees power in itself as neither positive nor negative – it is the use to which it is put which makes all the difference). A responsible teacher should be well selected – something that many schools and in fact many school systems cannot afford to do for lack of choice. And self-selection may not work well: research has shown that many teachers had been unhappy pupils and students themselves who came back to school – now in much securer positions – to compensate past failures. Looking at standard teaching careers, I am also not sure that people who have spent their whole life in school (university is after all not much more than a school equipped with more prestige) are the best in terms of life experience to give power over kids and teenagers and even university students.

This is not meant to denigrate anyone. But it is the questioning of authority, including mine, and the going beyond and against the handed-down corpus of knowledge that I feel most respect for.

To bring school and education back into perspective, I’ll end on a quote by Hafiz:

Only the bird understands the textbook of the rose:  
For not every reader knows the inner meaning of the page.  
O you who would learn the section on love from the book of knowledge –  
I fear that you do not know how to fathom it by research.