

"I Teach To Learn": Compassion In Education by Nipun Mehta

When Ward Mailliard's students had a chance to visit Desmond Tutu in South Africa, one of them asked, "Bishop Tutu, what was it like to hold Nelson Mandela's hand as he was introduced as the first president of post-Apartheid South Africa?" "Oooo, that's something you can't describe," Desmond Tutu spontaneously remarked. And then quietly added, "I had a conversation with God and said, 'This is enough. Thank you.'"

How can we engage with that which can't be described? In our incredibly rich circle of 40 educators, we probed into the question of "Cultivating Compassion Quotient." The challenge with a question around compassion, or any such virtue in our inner ecology, is that you can't answer it. It's not that it's too complex for comprehension, but rather that our understanding is uniquely dependent on our level of awareness. That is, there are a million correct answers. And hence, it requires a very different mental framework to hold such inquiries.

Learning, today, is heavily rooted in the material realm. It's almost an assembly line to get a job, to get money, to survive, and for the few who get past that -- to conquer. Material world is predictable, quantifiable and scalable. Subsequently, our focus shifts towards uniformity, our processes are prone to commercialization, and our innovations look like MOOCs. Materialistic endeavors are, of course, very useful to operate in the world, but it requires a very different skill-set to engage with our inner values. Prasad described quite well:

Conventional learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills to function efficiently in known and recurring situations. It is the learning that allows us to add to what we knew before, develop a new skill without having to change our perspective and helps us to solve problems that have been recognized as problems. Conventional learning does not demand that we shift who we are in terms of perspective, assumptions, beliefs and values and it attempts to maintain the systems that we live in.

Our internal values, like compassion, grow in a very different way. Instead of an assembly line, it's more like gardening. You plant seeds and through the myriad different inter-connections underneath the ground, the shrub sprouts when the time ripens. It requires a kind of trust in the process, to water the ground even when there is no sign of growth. When Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire", he was referring to this quality. Content is important, but context is its essence.

Today's unilateral focus on content is adept at material conquest, but not at cultivating our inner field of Compassion Quotient (CQ).

"I boarded a plane one time, and a small shiny thing wrapped in golden foil somehow fell on my lap. Initially, I was startled. Perhaps subconsciously programmed by all those 'please report all suspicious packages' warnings, I called the stewardess to warn her about it. But she smilingly said, 'No, Ma'am, we didn't clean that up, because there was a child with Cerebral Palsy in that seat, right before you came, and he wanted to leave that chocolate for the person that came after him.' I was so moved. It became the turning point in my life, when I decided to dedicate my life to teaching special needs children," Vinya shared in our CQ circle.

Every teacher has such pivotal moments. And yet, as Vinya herself described, "But you forget. It's one thing on the todo list after another, and instead of reconnecting with that spirit, each meeting becomes a means to reach some quantifiable metric. Not only do you feel like a cog in a wheel, but you encourage others to become cogs too. It's dehumanizing."

Clearly, such a culture is going to lead to burnout. "Over the last twenty years, more than twenty thousand teachers have worked for Teach for America. [...] More than half leave after their two-year contract is up, and more than 80 percent are gone after three years. About a third of TFA alumni walk away from education altogether," Adam Grant reports in 'Give and Take'.

One response to that burnout is technology. Two teachers in our CQ circle worked at Silicon Valley's Summit Prep -- voted in top 100 high schools in the country -- where every student gets a laptop, and teachers aren't allowed to lecture for more than 2 minutes. Two minutes?! Basically, they don't want teachers teaching. Their faith lies in their "blended learning", led by computerized curriculum. The upside to online, personalized learning is that it can create dynamic lesson plans based on the student aptitude, and indeed, Newsweek pegged Summit Prep in their 10 Miracle High Schools for "taking students at all skill levels, from all strata, and turning out uniformly qualified graduates."

Yet, from the perspective of CQ, uniformity is actually a cost -- not a benefit. Qualities like compassion, kindness, and generosity can only thrive in a context of diversity, because inner transformation tread a unique journey for every mind. Moreover, if we strip out the nurturing care and presence of an intrinsically motivated teacher, what are we left with? Just content.

Simply pouring content into student brains is a definite way to lose engagement. And sure enough, every teacher has stories of how kids are paying lesser and lesser attention in class. Do we use Ritalin to calm them down? We now gives medication to 3.5 million children (up from 600,000 in 1990). Or do we gamify their content, so it can feel more like video games they play? Yes, we do spend 9 billion person-hours every year just playing solitaire! Or should we just pay kids to go to class, submit their homework (and eat their veggies), as many schools are attempting?

When we lose sight of CQ, we have no choice but to turn to these desperate measures. Fear of not having a job can't be the best way to motivate students or teachers. Addiction to an online terminal can't be the best way to engage a classroom. Replacing dynamic teachers with algorithmic curriculum can't be the best way to ignite a heart of learning.

Can we imagine a different design?

When the bell rings in the classroom, all the students race out. Can it be the other way around? What does it take for students to race into the classroom, when the bell rings?

In our CQ circle at Mount Madonna High School, we brainstormed many new possibilities. What if we saw each classroom as a space to catalyze inner transformation? What if teachers were space holders that were rooted in WONK -- Wisdom of Not Knowing? What if we spent a bit more time understanding the power of self learning? Anne spoke about Kindness Circles, Audrey spoke about her experiment of spending a day with a vegetable seller in India, Min spoke about Honesty Circles. Even during the breaks, stories and examples were abundant, like this School in the Cloud vision:

"On the other side of Sugata Mitra's office is a wall that connects to a local slum. Sugata decided to place a high-speed computer in the wall, connect it to the Internet, and watch what happens. To his delight, curious children were immediately flocked. Within minutes, they figured out how to point and click. By the end of the day they were browsing. In nine months, they had taught themselves enough skills to get a job as a receptionist."

Pancho loved Buddha's articulation of a teacher's role: "First, remove fear in student. Second, impart knowledge. Third, don't give up until they learn." Ward similarly elaborated on using "curiosity is a gateway to empathy", inspired by Dacher Keltner's recent work on awe:

When you look up into these trees, and their peeling bark and surrounding nimbus of greyish green light, goosebumps may ripple down your neck, a sure sign of awe. So in the spirit of Emerson and Muir - who found awe in nature and changed our understanding of the sublime - Paul Piff staged a minor accident near that grove to see if awe would prompt greater kindness. Participants first either looked up into the tall trees for one

minute or oriented 90 degrees away to look up at the facade of a large science building. Participants then encountered a person who stumbled, dropping a handful of pens into the soft dirt. Our participants filled with awe picked up more pens. In subsequent studies, we have found that awe - more so than emotions like pride or amusement - leads people to cooperate, share resources, and sacrifice for others, all of which are requirements for our collective life. And still other studies have explained the awe-altruism link; being in the presence of vast things calls forth a more modest, less narcissistic self, which enables greater kindness toward others.

In many ways, ServiceSpace itself is a multi-faceted learning platform. You could wake up to a DailyGood article in the morning, watch KarmaTube videos with your kids, embark on a 21-day kindness challenge with your colleagues at work, incubate a community project within a Laddership Circle, connect in stillness via a local Awakin Circle, experience generosity at Karma Kitchen. But there are no demarcations between students and teachers, and every space becomes a classroom and a learning opportunity. Anchors learn how to hold the emptiness of a circle, technology facilitates sharing of recordable content, and all participants orient themselves around the dynamic quality inner transformation. It doesn't require any marketing; our innate gratitude itself propels its spread.

All of this, though, is in stark contrast with what our dominant paradigm currently amplifies. In a recent survey, kids were asked which of these three things would they like to give up: internet, smartphone or sense of taste. 72% chose to give up taste!

In today's culture, we have started to resort to static, low-octane mediums to restore our sense of connection -- but we can do better. Way better. We can awaken our Compassion Quotient.

It was a telling serendipity that our dialogue was held at Mount Madonna School. Back in 1971, a monk by the name of Baba Hari Dass came to the US at the invitation of some spiritual seekers. In the popular "Be Here Now" book, Ram Dass had named "this incredible fellow" as one of his teachers. By 1978, Baba Hari Dass had started Mount Madonna Center in Santa Cruz mountains; every day, he would offer his prayers in the form of physical labor, often just carrying big stones from one place to another. Today, that 355 acre space has become a pilgrimage spot for thousands around the globe. Everything about him was humble, small, and invisible. And silent. He took a vow of silence in 1952 and has managed to teach profound concepts of non-duality without uttering a single word.

"I teach to learn," he once wrote on his chalkboard.

If we can teach to learn, and learn through silence, Compassion Quotient would certainly rise -- and we'd revolutionize the education system.