**[Learning: an act of courage](https://www.dawn.com/news/1665519/learning-an-act-of-courage)**

[Faisal Bari](https://www.dawn.com/authors/568/faisal-bari)Published December 24, 2021

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.

AN effective teacher is able to raise the learning levels of her students significantly over one who is not effective. Empirical evidence from literature on ‘teacher value-added’ shows that clearly. Personal experience and anecdotal evidence confirm this: if you look back at your own educational experience, you would remember some ‘good’ teachers that you had and they must have impacted your learning much more than the ones who were average or not good.

The good teachers have a deep understanding of their subject (content knowledge) and they are also able to make learning an engaging process (pedagogical knowledge) for the students. They have a number of other qualities too, but content knowledge and the ability to engage are almost necessary conditions. However, there are no set ways through which a teacher might engage her students. It depends on the teacher and her personality. A teacher is a human being who has agency. Her actions, words, gestures, beliefs, knowledge, biases, body language, pronunciation, the smallest of things and the largest of things, all become ways in which communication takes place with students. Good teachers are able to employ some or all of these more effectively to engage students and to make learning more effective.

What we do not have is a recipe for things that will work for each teacher. These ‘skills’ cannot be learnt by rote. We are not saying that these skills cannot be taught or learnt. They can. But what is being said is that to make a subset of or all of the skills mentioned more effective, they have to be internalised by a teacher and they have to sync well with the personality of the teacher as well.

Herein lies one of the bigger difficulties in the area of teaching and learning. To learn new things, the teacher and the student have to be courageous. They have to open themselves up to both new knowledge and new ways of being when they come in to learn. This is dangerous and it can be scary as well. It is dangerous as new knowledge and new ways of thinking/being can challenge settled beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and habits. A challenge to these, some that go to the core and to our notions of our identity, are never easy to accept. But if the student and the teacher do not enter the class with such openness, all learning and teaching will remain superficial; it will possibly be just rote learning. This is when we hear phrases like: ‘…all this education has done nothing for x or y’.

We have not been able to move the needle on learning outcomes.

Where, for the student, an attitude of openness, curiosity for knowing, thirst for learning and courage for challenging older knowledge are enough, for the teacher the issue is more complicated. She needs to have the ability to convey new knowledge, often disturbing and difficult knowledge, to her students as well. In addition to skill and courage, she needs qualities of leadership: she needs to know herself deeply and well. She needs to understand her moral and ethical values, she needs to know the subject and the context in which the subject is being taught and have the ability to explain it well and engagingly. She needs excellent interpersonal skills and needs to know how new knowledge is to be generated in the context she is teaching. As we said: she needs to be a leader.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand why we find so few ‘good’ teachers and why ensuring access to quality teaching for a large number of students has been such a problem for us. Most of the people working as teachers in Pakistan, in the public as well as the private sector, did not come into teaching because they wanted to be teachers. Most of them are teachers because they could not find other jobs. A lot of them do not have the motivation, intrinsic or extrinsic, to do a good job or to improve themselves as teachers. The public sector as well as most of the private sector not only pays low salaries, relative to living needs for a middle-class life style, it does not have other motivating factors either, and job satisfaction for most teachers remains low. It is no wonder that despite all sorts of other reforms in curricula and books etc. we have not been able to move the needle on learning outcomes.

This also explains why most teacher training has limited impact. The provincial departments of education, across Pakistan, spend hundreds of millions of rupees in teacher training every year. But the impact on outcomes has been found to be limited. Most teacher training goes to content and, if stretched, to issues of pedagogy. These trainings do not try to engage with the issues of human agency and personality. Most trainings are not able to get teachers to open up. In other words, most of the trainings do not get to the learning part.

Learning requires courage — the courage to be open, to be vulnerable and to be awake to the possibilities of deconstruction and reconstruction. This is a difficult process to engage in. It requires good guides and teachers to make the process smoother. Good teachers are able to provide an environment of safety and trust in which students can open up. They also have the skills through which they can engage students and model learning for them. But for this to happen, teachers have to have evolved to a certain stage of agency themselves. They have to be secure in their personhood, know their values and be able to move beyond their egos and personalities in order to help others grow. This is a tall ask. It is not surprising that, despite all sorts of reforms, even through teacher training we have not been able to ensure a large enough supply of ‘good’ teachers and quality teaching.

*The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.*

*Published in Dawn, December 24th, 2021*