Outstanding Educators and Popular Teachers

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Outstanding Educator Awards

Who is an outstanding educator? How do we distinguish between an *outstanding* educator and an *excellent* one, and between an excellent educator and a *popular* teacher?

It would help to frame these questions in a concrete context. Suppose we want to set up national awards in education for outstanding educators in schools, colleges, universities, and so on. What would form the basis for shortlisting candidates and selecting the winners?

One strategy (an often-used one) would be to go by student feedback on all teachers, and shortlist those who get the highest scores. We can then ask parents and heads of the institutions for recommendations on the shortlisted candidates, and narrow down the list of potential candidates. The third and final round may be interviews by a committee.

This strategy presupposes that students, parents, and educational administrators have a coherent concept of what outstanding education is. That may be questionable. For instance, how do we know whether someone who gets high scores in student feedback surveys is an excellent educator, and not merely a popular teacher?

In a Harvard University study, researcher Nalini Ambadi found that snap judgments of teachers based on a ten-second video clip without voice correlated strongly with their course final student feedback. ("Snap Judgments Work!" (http://harvardmagazine.com/2001/07/snap-judgments-work-html) This suggests that the scores in student feedback are a measure of the likability or the popularity of teachers, not their teaching quality.

This conclusion is corroborated in the article, "The Place of Student Feedback in Teaching Evaluation," based on a study conducted on student feedback scores in the National University of Singapore. It shows, for instance, that students systematically give lower scores to challenging courses and to teachers who require them to think. It also shows that those teachers who nurture higher order thinking abilities such as critical thinking, inquiry, and clarity of thinking and articulation are ranked lower than those who merely transfer a body of knowledge in an entertaining manner. (http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/publications/studfeedback/StudFeedback_TeachQuality.pdf)

Clearly, we need to look for more reliable indicators of quality in education.

What is (Outstanding) Education?

An alternative to beginning with student feedback would be to begin by asking ourselves, "What is high quality education?" An answer to that question would help us identify the characteristics of outstanding education.

To do that, we need to begin by asking, "What is education?" Suppose we define education as:

> *the process of guiding and helping someone learn something that is of lasting value to them and to humanity at large.*

In this sense, syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers/professors, educational administrators, and designers of assessment (entrance tests and final exams) are all educators. To select outstanding educators, we need to figure out what kind of learning is of lasting value to the learner and to humanity, and who facilitates that kind of learning.

Lifelong vs. Short-term Value

Our definition makes an implicit distinction between lasting value and short-term value. Doing well in the final examinations and entrance tests is of *short-term value* to school students. High scores in these exams qualify students for admission to prestigious programs of higher education, which in turn help the graduates get well-paid employment. Most students, parents, and school administrators judge as 'excellent' those teachers and institutions that help students score well in exams.

This requires teaching (almost) solely oriented towards students getting high scores. We must ask:

> *Does such teaching count as educating?*

To answer that question, we need to ask about what students learn as a result of such teaching:

> *Is it of lasting value to anyone?*

After their examinations, students mostly forget a lot of the syllabus 'topics' and the 'skills' covered by the examination. In school, they learn such things as the 'angle of the tilt of the axis of the earth'; the name for eight-sided polygons; the distinction between umbra and penumbra; dynamo and motor; the molecular formula for methane; calculating the square root of a number; the biological names for various species; the year in which certain wars were fought; and so on. Once people have graduated from high school, how much of the information they learn do they need to use? Only a small proportion. Of what remains, a lot of it no lasting value. Learning it by rote and remembering it is needed only till the examnation is over.

In contrast, consider capacities such as independent learning, critical thinking, and inquiry. They are acknowledged by educationists and policy makers alike as ingredients of Higher Order Thinking, and of lifelong value. Yet other capacities that would be valuable to develop through exposure and practice are imagination, intuition, and insight.

However, empowering students to develop such capacities calls for a substantial investment of time and effort, and may not have tangible value for students in the short term, although they would be invaluable for students in their life after graduation. Therefore, unless

(a) curriclum design perceives value in these capacities;
(b) the curriculum explicitly states the value system;
(c) the syllabus explicitly states the capacities as learning outcomes;
(d) their importance percolates down to teaching learning materials and pedagogical strategies; and
(e) board exams and entrance tests probe into these capacities of Higher Order Thinking;

it would be pointless for a teacher to invest time and effort to nurture these capacities in the classroom.

A teacher who chooses to focus solely on what is needed for final exams and entrance tests, without paying attention to the lasting value of what students learn, may be a popular teacher, even a highly competent one. But given our definition of education, such a teacher is not an educator.

In contrast, a teacher who is also an educator would spend part of the time on exams to ensure short-term gains, but also a substantial proportion of time and effort on learning outcomes of lifelong value, by nurturing independent learning, critical thinking, and inquiry. Successfully achieving such goals makes the teacher an outstanding educator.

Conflicts in the Investment of Time and Effort

Given that the teacher has a finite amount of time available to her, is it feasible for her to set the goals of Higher Order Thinking? Would they be in conflict with the short-term goals of doing well in examinations?

An important aspect of critical thinking, for instance, is the capacity to evaluate what is presented as "knowledge"; and to decide whether to accept it, reject it, or reserve it for further scrutiny. This requires understanding the evidence and arguments for what is presented as true. Such critical understanding and evaluation need to begin with what is presented in textbooks and in classrooms.

This means that teachers and textbook writers who seek to nurture Higher Order Thinking need to invest a significant time (and space in textbooks) on addressing questions such as these:

- Our experience tells us that the earth is stationary. But textbooks tell us that the earth revolves around the sun and rotates on an axis tilted to the plane of revolution. Why should we reject what our experience tells us, and accept the textbook claim?
- The Ancient Greeks and the Ancient Indians held that air is an element. We learn in school that air is a mixture. Why should we reject ancient wisdom, and accept the modern statement?
- Aristotle held that matter is infinitely divisible. Democritus and Charvaka held that the process of division stops when we get to the indivisible particles of matter. Modern science accepts the Democritus-Charvaka position. What is the basis for rejecting Aristotle's view?
- The Bible tells us that humans were created directly from inanimate matter. Biology tells us that humans evolved from unicellular ancestors. Why should we accept the claim in biology?
- Many legal systems sanction death penalty and imprisonment. Are such legal systems morally justified?

Helping students understand the relevant issues of *evidence and arguments* would take a significant part of curricular time. Making time for this would require considerably reducing the number of topics 'prescribed' in the syllabus. Still more items would have to be dropped to make space for other higher order learning outcomes like independent learning, inquiry, and integration of knowledge and inquiry.

Who is an Outstanding Educator?

The conflict outlined above can be formulated as a tension between the interests of the different stakeholders of education institutions — those who are affected by the actions or practices of that institution.

There are two kinds of stakeholders. There those who have the power to affect the functioning of the institution, positively or negatively. These include students, parents, administrators, governments, and industry. For example, a teacher who displeases students, parents, or the principal, for instance, is unlikely to be rewarded with financial benefit or higher position; therefore it is in the teacher's best interests to act according to the wishes of these stakeholders.

And then there are those who don't have such power. Now, some of the learners that a school educates may grow up to have positions of power, and whose actions and practices would have an impact on the lives of subsequent generations. Hence, future generations of students are nevertheless stakeholders of education today. Yet, they are powerless to influence it, because they are not yet born.

Clearly, the interests of these various stakeholders are varied. A large proportion of students and their parents would be interested primarily in high scores that ultimately lead to attractive employment. Administrators are interested in the visibility and prestige of the institution, one element of which is student performance in public examinations. Governments are interested in skilled manpower that can lead to quick economic growth. And industry is interested in the appropriately trained manpower that leads to instant profit. None of these stakeholders are particularly concerned about the state of the world fifty years from now, or about the other stakeholders.

Whose interests should a teacher or an educational institution be committed to? Those of the current students, parents, administration, governments and industry? Or the stakeholders of the future?

A teacher who seeks only to protect the interests of powerful stakeholders by helping students do well in entrance tests and exams, is simply a popular teacher. A teacher who strives to shape the minds of students such that when they grow up, they will serve the interests of humanity, both of today andof tomorrow, is an outstanding educator.