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Education

How long is the Jamuna Bridge?

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It's a promising start. The social science teacher enters the class bearing two large drawings. One portrays a parental couple with their two children. The second shows the same family, with two grandparents and a few other adults, perhaps aunties and uncles. Briskly she attaches the pictures to the blackboard and launches into the lesson. Using the pictures, she asks the students to tell the difference between the two, which they do easily enough. It's clearly a lesson about nuclear and extended families, and this is a sound way to begin it, with carefully prepared visual aids.

She then asks her Grade 7 students to label the people in the picture one by one. Rather an easy task, you might think, and sure enough, the students find no major conceptual difficulty in saying (in Bangla of course), "mother, father, son, daughter". These thirteen-year-olds can even stretch to identifying "grandmother and grandfather", much as they might have been able to do when they were three years old. But still, perhaps there's little harm in stating the obvious, this early in the lesson. There is plenty of time to develop the concept over the next thirty minutes. I sit back and wait.

The problem is, the concept never is developed. Four, eleven , sixteen students are asked to repeat the same answers. Then the students are asked to look at their books, where there are similar pictures, and identify the family members once again. Which takes half an hour. No prizes for guessing the homework: to write down the labels in their exercise books.

Your despondent correspondent sits in rather stunned silence. A full forty minutes has been devoted to the mere labeling of these pictures, and what has emerged from the collective endeavour is a single fact: that extended families include more family members than nuclear families. A fact which should, arguably, need about twenty seconds of teaching time. But the problem is more than unproductive use of time. The real issue here is in the task itself.

What we are witnessing is, to resort to a bit of teaching jargon, the repeated use of a "closed question": one to which there is only one possible factual answer, a question which can therefore be answered rightly or wrongly, and whose answer can of course be memorised.

And it is a type of question which overwhelmingly dominates the Bangladeshi approach to teaching.

In classes up and down the country, children are being asked questions like "How long is the Jamuna Bridge?" There can't be a schoolchild in the land who doesn't know it's 4.8km. But never once have I heard a teacher ask a question like "Why did we build the Jamuna Bridge?" or even "What has been the impact of the Jamuna Bridge on Bangladesh?" Similarly, children everywhere are able to answer the question "What is the capital of Bangladesh" but are never given the chance to reflect on "Why do we have capital cities?" or, more simply "What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a capital city?" Both of which are, of course more challenging "open questions" to which there might be a variety of answers, all plausible in their own ways.

Exclusively asking questions like "How long is the Jamuna Bridge?" sends a subtle message to the students. It teaches them to memorise and not to analyse, to recall and not to reflect. It says the world is "out there" and "this is how it is" rather than "it's something that belongs to you, something you can make choices about and influence". It therefore shuts down the avenues of creative independent thinking, with catastrophic effects on the students' development.

Of course, closed questions are "safer" for the teacher, involving less unpredictability and allowing him or her to exercise more authority and power than an open question. In that sense, it's easy to see why it's the preferred option, perhaps even for the students too, as most of us just want a quiet easy life, even if it's boring. But in terms of its educational value, it's almost nil.

Yes, we need to know that 2+2=4, the meaning of "velocity", and that Chittagong is Dhaka's major port. Facts like these have a role at the starting point of any learning journey. It's when the lesson stops there that we are in trouble. Facts are only useful if we know what they actually mean for us.

We live in a century where if anyone really wants merely to know the facts about the Jamuna Bridge, they can google them, much as you would if you wanted to find out more about Venezuela, diabetes or the iPhone. Facts in themselves are far more accessible than they once were. What kids need is to know why certain facts may be important, what the relationships between facts are, what lies behind them. how to go about finding the ones you need but don't know, and what to do with them once you know them. To achieve this, there's no substitute for independent thinking, which is precisely what we are failing to promote through closed questions.

You might think that kids aged thirteen have little insight to offer, and so asking for their views is pointless. That's clearly, whether acknowledged or not, the thinking behind this way of teaching. But you'd be completely wrong.

At the end of the lesson, my colleague and I asked the teacher's permission to speak to the students. We asked how many of them actually lived in nuclear families. Out of eighteen girls in the class, five lived in families of fewer than six members. At the other end of the spectrum, we found out that the class champion shared her home with thirteen others.

Over the following twenty minutes we talked about the advantages and disadvantages of each family set-up, and, unsurprisingly, these articulate girls were full of ideas. Nuclear families, they suggested, involved less expenditure; they were more mobile and led to fewer family arguments. There was laughter when we suggested there was also more likelihood of sleeping due to a reduction in snoring. On the other hand, extended families, two girls argued, offered more support networks, and looked after the old more effectively.

We moved on to talking about why there were now far more nuclear families than before. Initially hesitant, some of the girls began to offer opinions. Perhaps because of economic conditions? Or increasing urbanization and lack of space? Another bright spark, a serious young girl, chipped in with "Developments in family planning?"

It was clear that these girls, whose entire lesson had been devoted to the primary-school-level activity of labeling pictures, were well capable of developed adolescent social analysis, reasoning, and reflection. After all, they had valid experience of families. What's more they obviously enjoyed the experience of being made to think. But for that to happen more, they need teachers who believe that students have something to say. And that's the major challenge for educators here.

Our improvised add-on lesson had nothing hi-tech about it and no fancy materials. Just the basic idea that learning is about meaningful interaction between students and the material they are studying, with the teacher guiding them through the process, rather than simply proclaiming unassailable truths.

Until classrooms nationwide begin to practice more such openness, trust the students' experience and knowledge, and show a willingness to engage their minds, we will go nowhere but round in circles.