

**Teaching and Learning as Inspired Dialogue:
Implications for Cross-Cultural Teaching Ministry**

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The ‘Guru-shishya’ (lit. Teacher-student) relationship in the context of India is not only one of the most sacred and respected relationships but also considered an inevitable one for the attainment of the ‘Moksha’ (lit. emancipation from the cycle of rebirth). As a result, positionally, there exists a huge chasm between the students and the teachers. This might be the case for other Asian countries too. Even with good intention, if a teacher encourages mutuality and equality, students will still find it difficult to relate and participate in the class. In my own experience being a student first, and now after almost about a decade of teaching experience in a small regional language Bible college in India, I found that quite often students fear to open-up in the class. They fear to raise questions or deferring from teacher’s opinion, considering it a disrespectful gesture. Sometimes, even mature students with wide field experiences rather than making an active contribution in the class, feel inferior even to speak in the class. They are conscious of either being rejected or mocked by the class or by the teacher. This paper is an attempt to respond to such situations where an educationalist is called forth to be a bridge of learning and growth. It proposes an approach of ‘conversational partnership’ with students. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part explains ‘teaching’ as an ‘inspired’ ministry. The second part describes the core elements of Teacher-Student conversation Partnership’ taking the paradigm from the conversation of Jesus’ and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-45). Finally, ‘growth’ into the fullness of Christ-likeness as the ultimate purpose of teaching ministry is proposed.

Teaching as Inspired Ministry

It is very interesting to note that when Paul was enlisting various gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:3-8, Ephesians 4:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11), two times gift of ‘teaching’; one time ‘wisdom’; one time ‘discernment’; one time ‘interpretation’ – are included. Which implies ‘teaching and learning’ are the Spirit-inspired services for the edification of the body of Christ. Further for Paul, ‘inspiration’ is ‘self-evaluating intimacy with the Life-giving Spirit’ which is a key resource for the formation of the Bible.¹ In the OT, particularly in Proverbs, ‘wisdom’ is constantly being distinguished from ‘knowledge’ or ‘skills’, and inseparably presented only in one’s relationship with God. The author of Proverbs identifies himself as “wise-teacher”, one who

¹ One of the key texts to understand ‘inspiration’ is when Paul was exhorting his student Timothy about continuing education depending upon his knowledge about the Scripture which he received since infancy, and upon the ‘breathing’ (intimacy and ‘life’ from where true knowledge comes) of the Spirit of God (2 Timothy 3:14-15. Such inspiration is useful for ‘teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...’ (v.16).

not only imparts knowledge but also ponders and searches the wisdom from God before writing even a sentence (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). From Wesleyan theological perspective ‘inspired wisdom’ corresponds to ‘prevenient Grace’ in which grace of God “goes before” any human actions or wisdom and made One-self available to all. Here the Spirit of God is the ‘initiator of any relationship’ to humanity.²

Robert W. Pazmino in his book *God our Teacher* (2001) affirms that the revelation of God is the starting point of our learning.³ He further takes an analogy of Trinity and explicates the constant presence of God at various stages of the process of teaching. Some educationalists may argue that the hypothesis of God or divine dimension is not essential for the development theories. Peter C. Hodgson a Christian theologian and educationalists clarify these tendencies in his book *God’s Wisdom* (1999). He clarifies that since the beginning of the classical theories of knowledge till the modern times the ‘religious understanding’ was central and ‘essential’ part of theories.⁴ But in the Twentieth-century religious insights were relapsed by the theories of secular interpretation which seek attested from the humanities and the department of psychology. Nevertheless, he further alludes that the postmodern theories of education are more and more inclining to ‘religious dimension of education’.⁵

Teaching is ‘divine gift’ and not merely a skill or technique. If teaching is a ministry inspired by the Spirit, in the process of teaching and learning, a teacher should rely more upon the spontaneity, control, and inspiration of the Spirit than only upon one’s accuracy, expertise, technique and comprehensive ability to communicate the knowledge. In the cross-cultural context, there are even more chances that a teacher would be inspired listening to the diverse cultural practices, experiences and stories like Peter the first public preacher and spokesperson of the Apostles confessed, "now I realize...who God is" (Acts 10:34) in his encounter with an Italian centurion Cornelius.

Teaching as Ministry to Dialogue

Teaching is not a monologue or random promotional mass-communication. But it is a well-planned purposeful conversation between selected individuals and among the specific groups, in a particular context. More than lecture or speech where the sender is active and the receiver is passive, ‘dialogue’ is an active engagement from the both. In providing the space for instant feedback and clarification, ‘dialogue’ creates a hospitable environment for effective learning and mutual growth. ‘Dialogue’ is an important part of *Transformative learning theory*. While explaining the process of *Transformative learning*, Cranton (2016) emphasizes the importance of ‘discourse and dialogue’ (p.19, 51-52, 74-75, 97, 144) particularly in the assessment of beliefs,

² Cited at <https://www.seedbed.com/a-primer-on-prevenient-grace/> accessed on 01/15/2019.

³ Robert W. Pazmiño, *God Our Teacher: Theological Basics in Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2001), 9. [Kindle Edition]

⁴ Peter C. Hodgson, *God’s Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), Vol. 1st ed., 2. [ebook]

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3

feelings, and values, including critical reflection.⁶ In Hodgson observation, ‘dialogue’ is central for the approach of ‘education as a practice of freedom’ where student-teacher both cognitively transforms oneself.⁷ Just as an ancient saying goes – ‘iron sharpens iron’ (Proverbs 27:17) – so also in the conversation, if a student is learning how to raise a right question, a teacher is identifying the precise method of response. Such ‘dialogical approach’ is applicable to different contexts of learning but highly favorable for the cross-cultural teaching in India.

In the context of India or probably further extending to Asia, one of the greatest difficulties is to put into practice teaching as ‘dialogue’. Because a teacher-student balanced relationship is not commonly fostered in the formal educational setup. Usually, the position of ‘teacher’ in a classroom is extremely authoritative and so high. On the other hand, if the teacher is not keeping distance or exercising one’s authority, the student will take it for granted and make all the excuses not to learn.⁸ The relational aspect of cross-cultural teaching and learning is one of the challenges to be dealt tactfully. Nevertheless, without adequate conversations between teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher, it is impossible to create a conducive learning environment and holistic growth.

Core Elements in Teacher-Student Conversation Partnership

I have identified four things to understand the process of ‘conversation’. 1) Listening carefully, 2) Evaluating critically, 3) Sharing mutually, 4) Growing collectively. First three points will be discussed in this section and the fourth point will be discussed in the final section. Let me explain it taking the real-life conversation example of Jesus the Master Teacher with the Samaritan Woman (John 4). The gospel of John is a record of long individual conversations. For example, Jesus-Nicodemus (Ch.3), Jesus-Pharisees (Ch.8), Blind man-Pharisees (Ch.9), Jesus-Mary & Marth (Ch.11), Jesus-Disciples (Chs.13-17). Some of the timeless teaching recorded in the gospel is the outcome of these conversations.

Listening carefully: The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows a strong element of carefully listening, questioning and responding to each other. Even though Jesus was thirsty, he kept on actively listening to her. In a similar way, even though the woman might have filled her jar and she should be going on her way back, she was apprehensive to speak with Jesus. Further, careful observation is also part of active listening. Jesus intently went there, carefully observed the woman and knew beforehand that if he would initiate the conversation, she will surely be a potential conversation partner. John's record indicates that this conversation was an essential part of Jesus' ministry to Samaria. It was an essential part of Jesus' ministry where the entire village

⁶ Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016), 51.

⁷ Hodgson, *God's Wisdom*, 75.

⁸ Frieder Ludwig, “How Do We Teach Across Cultural Diversity? Teaching in the Face of Cross-Cultural Conversation,” 148 [e-article] cited at

https://asburyseminary.instructure.com/courses/724/files/21891?module_item_id=23640 accessed on 01/17/2019.

comes to Jesus and asked him to stay two more days with them. Attentive listening and observation are prerequisites not only for the healthy conversation but also for the effective teaching ministry.

Evaluating critically: The Jews and the Samaritans do not associate with each other (v.9). Jesus knew this even before asking for a drink. When disciples came, they were greatly surprised (v.27), which implies probably in the presence of disciples, Jesus had never tried talking with a Samaritan. By initiating a conversation, Jesus is self-critically evaluating the assumptions of one's own culture regarding the Samaritans and one's own limitation of the context where he is not supposed to ask a Samaritan and particularly to a woman. In the context of education, self-examination and critical assessment of one's own assumptions are core to the transformative learning.⁹ Probably in the process of learning one of the strongest barriers is 'assumption' about 'self' and about 'the other'. Most of the time these may lead to faulty knowledge or further presumptions and ultimately away from the reality itself. Contrary to that, the critical evaluation creates space for reorientation. For Hodgson, 'critical thinking is a 'thinking of the being, truth, and reality of things at a level of awareness unobtainable simply by technical methods.'¹⁰

Sharing mutually: Jesus was thirsty. The Samaritan woman was suffering from the stigma of losing five husbands and the social isolation of having no one to rely upon. In conversation, both expressed their need. Both were truthful. Jesus commended her for telling the truth (v.18). I want to look at Jesus-Samaritan woman conversation from the perspective of Host-Guest (hospitality) analogy.¹¹ Jesus being host offers 'living water' even though there were many socio-cultural barriers between them. Jesus being host made such an atmosphere that the Samaritan woman found it comfortable sharing her doubts and some of the most intimate fears of her life. Henri J. M. Nouwen affirms that teaching creates a space 'where students and teachers can enter into a fearless communication with each other...'¹² In the cross-cultural setting, this is one of the best approaches to practice along in the conversation where teacher being a host values the students and make fearless comfortable environment of learning.

Growth into Christ-likeness: Mutual and Collective Growth of the Community

⁹ Jack Mezirow details the ten phases of the 'transformative learning' process where disorientation, critical assessment of assumptions, discourses, reorientation etc. are some of the essential elements. Cited at Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor and Associates, eds., *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009) [ebook] cited at https://books.google.com/books/about/Transformative_Learning_in_Practice.html?id=OcVhvLDB22MC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false accessed on 01/16/2019.

¹⁰ Hodgson, *God's Wisdom*, 116.

¹¹ Host-Guest analogy was widely discussed in the class and also practiced, introduced and emphasized by Dr. Ellen Mormon. The article by Henri J. M. Nouwen is also introduced in the class to understand the concept of hospitality in education.

¹² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1975), 85.

The purpose of ‘dialogue’ in Christian education is mutual growth. But this growth is not uneven or arbitrary. It is an orderly growth. Just as seven colors come together to form an orderly beautiful pattern called ‘rainbow’, so also in the mutual ongoing conversation we entwined with the conversation partners to grow into the perfection of Christ-likeness. When Paul explains to the Ephesians the principles of service to the church in which ‘teaching’ is also included (4:11), the ultimate purpose is ‘to grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ’ (v.15). On the way to this destiny, we are constantly being growing to ‘become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ’ (v.13). If God the Father is Teacher par excellence, and if the Holy Spirit is the true intimate inspirator, then Jesus the Christ is the Ultimate Exemplar of the Perfect Humanhood. Which means the ultimate purpose of the teaching and learning is not just to impart knowledge (cognitive); nor just to build relationship and the community (cultural, social, political); nor just to grow into full potential of humanity (psychological and physical); and not just to transform into any unknown perfection (transcendental), but to grow into fullness of Christ-likeness which is evidently exemplified in and through Jesus.

The mutual growth of the ‘conversational partners’ leads to the ‘collective growth’ of the community. After the mutual conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, there was ‘collective growth’ of the disciples and the villagers. This conversation made a deep impact in the lives of disciples and the villagers, even beyond Jesus’ physical absence. It happened that after few years an evangelist named Philip (Acts 8:5) appointed by the apostles went to Samaria for further ministry.

Missiological Implications for the Cross-Cultural Teaching Context of India

1) Being an Authentic Teacher: A Truthful Conversational Partner

Without being sufficiently inspired or challenged by the Word, for a teacher to enter into a ministry of teaching is futile, ineffective and redundancy. It is a call to be a truthful teacher who is congruent with oneself, with others and with the Spirit of Truth. Unlike magician who impresses his audience and influences them through tricks, the profession of teaching is to be truthful about one’s strength and limitation, and one’s relationship with the Spirit. They are far more effective in the hearts and minds of their students than those who exercise intellectual superiority, control and crave for self-praise intoxicated by the competitive spirit. In Palmer’s word “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”¹³ This will help the students to overcome the chasm and build a relationship of mutual care and respect.

2) ‘Readiness’ in the Ministry of Teaching: Open for the Inspiration of the Spirit

¹³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach : Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), vol. 1st ed. [ebook] cited at <http://ezproxy.asburyseminary.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=26046&site=eds-live> accessed on 01/15/2019.

‘Inspired wisdom’ also implies ‘readiness’. One way of ‘readiness’ implies a willingness to listen, discern and share. Just as Peter in a cross-cultural encounter with Cornelius, was finally prepared to discern God’s hand in the event so also it is possible that a Christian educator can identify God’s working in the cultures who are thus far unknown to the Christendom. ‘Prayer’ is another gesture for readiness to listen. For an educator, prayer is becoming ‘open’ to love the community around oneself and in this process, one can discover one’s own wholeness and connectedness with the community. "In prayer, I not only address the love at the core of all things; I listen as that love addresses me, calling me out of isolation and self-centeredness into community and compassion."¹⁴

3) *Humility in the Ministry of Teaching: Mutual Integrity and Openness with the Conversational Partner*

Humility is the most effective element to overcome the chasm between the conversational partners. The conversations are not the process of transferring knowledge or proving one’s superiority in winning the argument and defending one’s positions. Contrary to that, dialogue, discourse or conversation are grounded upon the openness of both, the learner and the educator. It is a participatory act where both share their educational vulnerability, limitations, and doubts. Probably, one of the best ways, particularly in the cross-cultural context would be practicing the host-guest analogy. In the process of doing so, both will gain confidence and authenticity in one’s own learning and in the partnership.

4) *A Relevant Content is Inevitable for the Effective Conversation*

One of the major challenges for cross-cultural education is to identify the relevant content in the conversations. One must be aware that the conceptual framework and the epistemology of one particular context may not be applicable to the other contexts. And so fixed course outlines and content-oriented learning may not be the best option for the cross-cultural teaching ministry. Instead, integrating diverse reflections and perspectives, openness to the revisions of the content based upon the conversations, and a careful inquiry of the applicability of the content is indispensable. Jesus, in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, did not begin with conceptual realities of heavenly realms but with the most immediate contextual questions and conversation. Further, in the mutual conversation, the content was revised. This does not imply that the teacher should not prepare the content. Rather, it asks to create space for appropriate spontaneous and planned conversations including sharing of stories, interviews, life-events, table-talk, etc.

5) *Honest and Timely Feedbacks are Key to Mutual Growth*

As we have seen earlier, self-examination and feedback are essential parts of a healthy conversation. This is the only way to assess and understand one’s biases, false assumptions,

¹⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 11.

and uncritical accommodation. There are formal and informal ways of receiving and giving feedbacks. But when there is a healthy conversation, there is always a possibility of instant feedbacks and reflections. Teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher conversations are becoming more popular to develop a culture of healthy and timely feedbacks. The entire book *The Heart of Higher Education* (2010) which is promoting the integrating learning approach, is the outcome of "collegial conversations" where the Palmer and other co-author argues that 'the conversation of colleagues is a critical element in advancing the cause of integrative education'.¹⁵

6) *Growth into Christ-likeness is the Ultimate Goal of the Conversation*

Jesus is the ultimate role-model and destiny of 'conversational partners. One of the challenges I observed in the transformative learning process is that the ultimate role-model is not explicitly represented. For Mezirow, probably 'building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships' and 'reorientation into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective' are the ultimate goals.¹⁶ Whereas for a Christian educator, in any given context, may it be a church, mission field or secular school, the fundamental purpose is to reveal and grow into Christ-likeness. The growth in Christ-likeness can be defined as 'becoming like Christ in all the areas of one's life in loving God and in loving one's neighbor' (Mark 12:29-31). It can also be interpreted as 'build up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ep. 4:13).

Conclusion

Teaching is divinely ordained ministry in which inspiration of the Spirit and committed formal and informal conversations with the students are prerequisite for healthy learning. The dialogical interactions need to be substantiated by 'openness to listen, readiness to respond, and willingness to be an authentic teacher. 'Dialogue' is also a call for relationship and friendship. In this process, attentiveness, critical evaluation and careful sharing of not only the different perspectives but also the vulnerabilities and doubts between the 'conversational partners' (i.e. teacher-student) are the fundamental curricula. Such an approach caters the need to bridge the student-teacher gap in the context of India. In the responsible truthful teacher-student conversations, positional superiority is removed, and the true learning occurs. This also provides a substantial foundation for the cross-cultural educational ministry in India or Asia at large.

¹⁵ Parker J. Palmer, Arthur Zajonc and Megan Scriber, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 128.

¹⁶ Mezirow, *Transformative Learning* [ebook] cited at https://books.google.com/books/about/Transformative_Learning_in_Practice.html?id=OcVhvLDB22MC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false accessed on 01/16/2019.

Finally, the purpose of this entire process is to grow individually into the perfect humanity represented in Christ, and participate collectively, as a body of Christ represented in the Church.