

The Teacher as Researcher and Policymaker¹

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This year marks the 65th year of my existence on earth and this year also marks my 45th year as a teacher. I teach only on Saturdays at the University of the Philippines and everyday that it is not Saturday, I wanted to pull the days so it will be Saturday and I will once more be in very involved discourse with my students in research and my graduate students in geopolitics. There is always the spring in my steps as I walk from my house on campus to my classroom and as I anticipate yet another 6 hours of productive learning.

Why learning? And, why have I kept the fire of passion in my teaching after more than four and a half decades ?

Many reasons why...

Yes, I learn as I teach because even if I teach the same courses semester after semester for many years, the students change every term. There is always new blood, there is always a new cadre of students coming from different persuasions, from different ideologies, with different personality attributes.

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I learn as I teach because teaching is not a one way street of simply dishing out so called facts and demanding that students memorize them and spew them out later in an exam incorrectly labelled an objective exam of multiple choice. I say incorrectly labelled objective exam because there is no such thing as objective. What we call objective is simply the consensus of certain powerful political and education elites who declare certain things to be so but so called facts do not make them “objective” because what we consider objective are simply very high level of consensus on subjective judgments of people who set certain criteria for deciding certain things.

When we give so called objective examinations, we actually hostage the minds of our students to these so-called facts. Those so-called facts have no certain empirical referents as we discover as teachers and as researchers that there is always as many stories as there are storytellers.

Consider the story of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When you visit the Hiroshima Museum in Hiroshima shrine in Japan, the narrative of victimization is so palpable in the exhibits of burned flesh preserved for future generation to see the ravages of the use of the atomic bomb. One’s heart must be made of stone not to be deeply moved by the Hiroshima story told in the many artifacts of the aftermath of that decision made by the United States of America. Now, when we visit the same event as told by the Americans in Washington, DC, what do we see? We see the Enola Gay, the plane which dropped the bomb in Hiroshima and the narrative accompanying that plane is the narrative of victory, of ending the war. By the way, the name Enola

Gay on the planes' side was the name of the grandmother of the pilot who dropped the bomb. So, when we tell our students about the Hiroshima story, there is no one story. That there are as many stories as there are storytellers?

This should be the first learning of our students as we guide them as mentors in the so-called search for knowledge. What our students should discover is that there are many stories and there is no sovereign story and it is up to them, on the basis of their judgments to make a determination on which story they are going to accept and which story will become the basis of their decisions.

Another lesson we can impart to our students is to signal to them that there is no such thing as absolute certainty. Even scientific findings are couched in many assumptions and conditionalities. Every knowledge claim that we make has a "thus far" at the end of it. This also teaches our students the humility of scholarship, that is, the humility to accept that their earlier claims had been overthrown by another one with harder evidence. Remember Ptolemy and Copernicus?

The use of precise term and meanings is also important. One cannot say "I love you forever" because there is no empirical referent for forever. Thus, when a word does not have an empirical referent, we expunge same from our vocabulary. This exercise will also train our students to be less reckless and less careless when they use term or worse, when they label people.

Many times as I listen to horror stories upon horror stories of teachers making definitive statements and conclusions which they demand of their students to memorize and again spew back in an examination to test their so called knowledge I cannot but begin to remember John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Who are these two people? John Locke and Thomas Hobbes are the two great philosophers/thinkers who have theorized or made hunches or guesses about why we have government.

John Locke tells us that man is a rational creature, who knows what is just and right but he needs government so his private property may be protected. Thomas Hobbes, in turn, tells us that man is a creature full of passion and left to his own will lead us to a life which is short, nasty and brutish. Thomas Hobbes advises us that we should have a Leviathan or a dictator to temper the passions of men or they will just kill each other.

John Locke believing in the essential goodness of man believes we should have a liberal democracy where government simply regulates the conduct of men so he does not transgress into another men's rights. We know, of course, that the basis of our constitution and our political system is John Locke. John Locke tells us that if we give free rein to the human spirit tempered only by some regulation from the state, then, everyone will be benefitted. Thomas Hobbes is the favourite of dictators for rationalizing why their citizenry have to be hostaged to what the leaders say because on their own, the citizens do not have the wherewithal to govern themselves.

Why are these two political philosophers important to us as teachers?

Why? Immediately, I see the disjunct between the basis of our political system which is liberal democracy from John Locke and the way we conduct our classes which is dictatorship according to Thomas Hobbes. Immediately, we see that we many times wrongly assume that our students are simply empty vessels, tabula rasa, to which we pour so called facts which we label knowledge. Immediately, we see that the students who excel in memorizing dates and names and places get all the medals of excellence that the school can give while the student who questions and the student who challenges the dominant discourse gets a failing grade.

The teacher as researcher should be open to all challenges by the student. The teacher as researcher and as a scientist must realize that there is no one correct, so called objective answer. That for most parts, the answer is conditional, probabilistic, tentative and rarely, if at all, determinative. The examinations that we need to give our students are those that demand that they use their critical faculties. The examinations that we should give should not only ask the what, the who and the when of an event which happened. The questions that we should ask of our students should be the why's and the so what's. Why? Because these are the things that should matter in the scholarship of the student as we guide them as their teachers.

Why EDSA I? Why shouldn't we call it a revolution? These are the kinds of questions we should ask, not the who, what and when questions.

Technology has so far advanced that the what, who, where and when are immediately available to the student through their electronic gadgets. However, the why and the so what have to be answered in a continuing discourse in the classroom. Many times, we discover that there are so many answers to the why and the so what and many times, because of different answers, unfortunately, people go to war and kill each other.

After that young Norwegian went on a killing rampage resulting in the senseless deaths of mostly 77 young people, we need to ask ourselves whether as teachers of that young man, he has been socialized to be exclusive, to think of non Norwegians as unacceptable. To think of Muslims, particularly, as a group of people who do not have any right to live side by side with the Norwegians. Unfortunately, the tragic story of these killings tell us of the seeming failure of the socialization through education of this young person.

This brings me to my graduate course on geopolitics which I love to teach. This course is so difficult to teach because you need substantive knowledge of many, many stories like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the South China Sea, the Cyprus, the Tamil, the Kashmir, the Kuriles

rival claims and each one has to be presented with the respective stories of each of the protagonists of the conflict. Why is there continuing conflict? Because there are two or more narratives which cannot be reconciled. Because there are as many discreet stories as there are rival claimants. The geopolitics course tells us that the continuing divides amongst people are borne out of and reinforced by their socialization through education.

There are 6 claimant countries in the South China Sea which we have labelled the Western Philippine Sea. When we present this issue to our classes, we have to present 6 stories and we have to challenge the students to find ways of reconciling those stories. China's historic claims declaring the whole South China Sea as a Chinese lake is contested and matched by the claim of the Philippines.

Then, there is as well the specific claim of the Bangsa Moros that as seafarers since the pre-colonial period, the places which China claims to be historically their trading areas are the same trading areas of the muslims in Mindanao during many centuries of the very advanced Sultanate of Sulu. Telling our students of this story of the vast Sultanate of Sulu which encompassed Sabah which we own, by the way, has an added value of engendering pride in them and demonstrating that there, indeed, was a very advance political system which existed long before Spain, United States and Japan colonized our country. This will also challenge the claims of the colonizers that when they came here, we were un-civilized, living in the trees and did not even have language. Of course, this means that the teacher as researcher has to search archival data that will demonstrate all these.

Mercifully, such archival data are just a click of our mouse away as they have been translated and accessible to anyone.

And, yes, while we are telling the many stories of the South China Sea, we can already inject environmental issues there where our own marine scientists have documented that the sea life, the fish, the corals, the sea plants, the reefs of that vast body of water is one ecological system. And so, as we share the conflicting and colliding stories of the various claimants of the South China Sea, we also make our students so conscious of the ecological unity of that contested water. Who knows? Our student may later on become congressman, governor, mayor, even President and his/her decisions as leader or legislator will certainly be informed by that discussion in class that you very ably handled.

So, to go back to Hobbes and Locke. Let us conduct our classes in synchrony with the philosophy of liberal democracy as John Locke had propounded. Let us NOT conduct our classes a la Thomas Hobbes where we dictate what they should think and how they should think. Our classroom must be the microcosm of our own political framework which is liberal democracy ensuring the freedom of our students to articulate their views and to defend them adequately.

So, what is the role of the teacher as policy maker? The role of the teacher as researcher and policymaker are actually intertwined.

The products of our researches are supposed to be published and put in the public sphere to be vetted. The findings of our researches need to be put in the public sphere because that is what science is all about, that whatever claims we make must be tested in the cauldron of counter claims. And, that the researcher/teacher who can present the better or best hard evidence based on observations on the ground can get his findings used to inform public policy. As such, the teacher becomes a participant in achieving the public good which we think is only within the jurisdiction of our political leaders.

Every legislation and every policy decision has to be based on hard evidence. It is us, as researchers and scientists who shall provide those hard evidence. Why us? Because as teachers, we ostensibly do not have any political agenda to pursue so we conduct our researches mindful only of the highest standards of scientific inquiry shared by the international community of scholars. Thus, we are invited to be subject matter experts or resource persons in many public hearings in Congress because the legislators do not have the luxury of time that we have to conceptualize, to think through and conduct our researches. But, that said, there are also many cases where scholars' findings are at cross purposes and it will be up to the legislators to make a determination of which of the findings will be used to inform or support a piece of legislation.

Of course, we are not saying that as teacher/researchers we now belong to the category of angels. Far from it because our scientific history is filled with many narratives of rogue scientists, an oxymoron no doubt, who have turned their backs on the canons of scientific inquiry and have fudged or worse, changed their findings in the altar of greed and money. I do not need to remind you of rogue scientists who have kept the findings of statistically significant correlations of smoking and lung cancer as early as the mid 50's. Of course, we discover later on that their studies were being funded by the very powerful tobacco industry. We see here clearly that the teacher as researcher/scientist has turned his back on all the dicta of scientific inquiry.

In the medical field, we see many evidence of the major role of teachers as researchers. For example, now that there seems to be a dramatic upsurge of autistic children, 1 in 69 births in the United States, mostly boys, the whole scientific community of which we are a part as teacher researchers needs to harness its collective expertise to seek the causalities of this medical challenge.

One British med who fudged his experiments and proclaimed that MMR vaccine causes autism has since been dismissed because his results cannot be replicated by other scientists but not after there was a near epidemic of children who did not get these vaccines for fear of their parents that they will develop autism.

And so as we assess who we are in the larger scheme of things, we discover that we have a pivotal, nay, a very central role in the changing of our society. The way we conduct our classes, the way we challenge and develop the critical faculties of our students is very, very critical for the learning process.

We, teachers as researchers is, in fact, the very foundation of our liberal democracy. Our democracy continues to flourish because we have developed the minds of our students to question, to challenge and to analyze things.

I would like to end on an administrative note and bring us back to the ground given all this lofty discourse. Yes, we would like to have our teachers conduct research as a natural adjunct to their teaching. But, do we give them time to do research? Or, do we burden them with huge classes to teach, with so many courses to teach so not only do they not have time to do research, they only go through the motions of teaching and produce mediocre students who have memorized certain things which pretty soon they forget. I urge the administrators of the various universities and colleges to address this challenge. If you want your faculty to conduct researches that will input into policy and make their teaching more robust, then, they should be given teaching load that allows them to do research. In the University of the Philippines, we teach only 3 courses every week, or equivalent of 9 units and the rest of our time, we do research or consult with students.

I urge the school administrators to free your teachers from too many teaching loads and even administrative work which they are not supposed to do. Give them reduced teaching loads so they can go on field and conduct their researches and become better teachers and better scholars.

We are here as teacher researchers to awaken the mind of our students, to embolden them to challenge the claims of the authors of their books and the claims being made therein. We are here to hold the hands of our students as they advance in their scholarship.

After all, when our students become better scholars, they also become concomitantly , better persons....

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