



Of Debating Matters and Engaging Classrooms

Description



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Engaging classrooms are rare to find, the communication process is mostly one way, but the trend is slowly changing.

The Pondicherry Central University is as misleading as the place it is located in. Behind the peace and inertia of the campus, is packed vibrant energy and very active minds working with ideas, concepts and notions. Every visit to the university opens something new and endearing which just challenges me out of the comfort zone and beckons me to keep going back.

This time, it was my encounter with the students and faculty of School of Mass Communication and Electronic Media. While freedom of speech, its manifestations and contours are taken as a *given* in most of our limited spheres., for the journalists and film-makers, it is the non-negotiable tool. So discussing the tension between “freedom of speech” and “reasonable restrictions” brought out some of the gems of responses, interjections and reality checks from the members of the department. To experience complexities being unraveled by 1st year students on their own reading up (and down) of the “free speech” regulations was a mental feast, akin to dessert, to say the least!

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That brings me to the next question, how much of teaching, especially for the visiting faculty, is a two-way-street? How much of these lectures and presentations do actually generate debates and engages the class? Is it about the topic, the presentation, the students and their backgrounds/confidence levels with the language, that determine the quantum of debates. My guess would be, it is a combination of all these and more. But, the good news is, there is nothing as exhilarating as a very engaged class debating matters (within the lecture topic and beyond) and challenging the lecturer with new interpretations and material facts. I was lucky to experience all this at the Mass-Communication Department.

While dissent is important for any functioning democracy, debating is key to active citizenship and strengthening the *epistemology*. That every hypothesis can be dis-proved, has been the fundamental presumption of scientific research and what are class-rooms, if not the hot-spot for nurturing and furthering scientific temper?

I feel universities, which actively invest in exposing their students to varying world views and encourage debate irrespective of the vocabulary, do a world of good to the confidence and rational thinking of these students and what they build at the end of the course is not just “subject matter specialists” but *active citizens* with a point of view and the ability to process information and translate the same to knowledge. There’s much for the teachers too, the irreverent counter-points which strengthen the discourse and the reverent sharing of facts which either further proves, dis-proves or nuances the submissions.

And I can say on behalf of all the visiting faculties at the university, we have our fair share of encountering such “active citizens” as they are being nurtured and in the state of “work-in-progress” by the core teachers within the campus. And the Communication School has a fairly large share of those ones!

About the author

Ms Biraj Swain is an ‘essential services’, governance and development expert with experience in South Asia and East Africa. She contributes to bridging the gap between “praxis” and “lexis”. Her research interests are citizenship, democracy, participation and the notion of public sphere in the civil and economic rights’ arena. She is also trained in journalism and has practiced the profession before she got into international development and policy.

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