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The essay looks at the state of tertiary education in Bangladesh, in particular private university education. It illustrates the situation with a number of examples taken from day-to-day school and university life. The aim of the essay is to inculcate interest among education researchers to think of innovative ways in which the education delivery methods can be improved to produce graduates who are willing to pool efforts towards the development of the country.

Keywords

Tertiary education, Bangladesh, Tertiary teaching-learning methodology, Private university education, Quality education

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Tertiary Education in Bangladesh – Brief History, Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The essay looks at the state of tertiary education in Bangladesh, in particular private university education. It illustrates the situation with a number of examples taken from day-to-day school and university life. The aim of the essay is to inculcate interest among education researchers to think of innovative ways in which the education delivery methods can be improved to produce graduates who are willing to pool efforts towards the development of the country.

Background

The beginnings of the current tertiary teaching-learning methodology in Bangladesh may be traced to the times of British India. As researched and quoted by Sharfuddin (1996, p.6), in 1835, the then Chairman of the Education Committee of the East India Company, Thomas Rabington Mackle announced, "the objective is to create a class of people Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in mind and in intellect." This essentially meant that the British developed a system of higher education in colonial India that basically created only 'munshis' (i.e. clerks) as they were commonly known. Their skill revolved around record and accounts keeping and drafting of documents. This followed the declared education policy of the East India Company which was to create a class of loyal servants to work in offices of the British rulers. Creativity and independent thinking were not required of a loyal servant! Since that time, the region where Bangladesh (earlier known as East Bengal) is situated has faced two wars of independence, one in 1947 when Pakistan (consisting of what is today known as Pakistan together with what is known today as Bangladesh) broke away from India and in 1971 when Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan. The second war is popularly known as 'War of Independence'. Independence has had little or no positive effect on changing the basic education delivery methodology.

So how does this teaching-learning methodology translate into day-to-day classroom teaching? Before looking at tertiary education, one must look into the nature of the 12-years of primary and secondary education that students complete prior to entering the university arena. This is perhaps best illustrated with actual school incidents.

The Schooling Culture

Incident 1: The deputy general manager of a large bank reported that one day when he reached home, his daughter did not come to greet him at the door. Concerned he looked for his daughter. He found her frantically studying for a test. She was repeatedly reading out an essay. She said she had to commit the essay to memory for the coming test. The father read the essay. It was about two tall exercise book pages. It was not his daughter's handwriting. It had 12 spelling mistakes and an equal number of grammatical errors. When the father pointed out the mistakes, the daughter adamantly replied, "Teacher has written it, so it must be right!" This was a local-language-medium school. Nowhere in the school years are children taught self-expression or to write independently. Supporting this culture,

booklets of model essays are available to offer students choices on essays to memorize. Not familiar with self-expression, in the school and board exams, children just reproduce these essays.

Incident 2: My own daughter studied in a private English-Medium school. When in grade 4 in junior school, I was called to the school. It was to discuss a failed test on an English poem. I took along the poem. It was "Silver" by Walter De La Mare. By way of conversation, the section head reflected, "Oh we did this poem in Grade 9!" Responding, I asked, "How then do you expect a child in class 4 to understand the poem?" She was quick to defend the school saying, "Oh but our standard is high!" The school happens to be one of the largest private English medium schools in Bangladesh. As this is one of the earlier English-medium schools, many schools have modeled themselves on the curriculum used by the school. With such "high" standards children have no recourse but to memorize and be totally dependent on the teacher for what to memorize.

Incident 3: Given these problems, a private educational institute with branches all over Bangladesh offered to cure English language woes. The institute produced a booklet for its main English language course. The booklet contained 500 words. With each word a sentence was given. The idea was that the students would learn at least one sentence with each word. They students reproduce the same sentences in the exam and get a certificate!

Incident 4: Similarly, to help students pass exams a tutor culture has grown up over the years. Tutors are available for all sorts of exams, even foreign 'O' and 'A' Level exams that are conducted by the British Council. I was friendly with one such tutor. He taught 'O' Level Commerce. Regardless of background, all his students got top grades almost without exception. So I asked him the secret of his success. He said, "Yousuf, when I started tutoring, I analyzed the past 10 years question papers. I plotted the variations in each topic area and prepared model answers for each variation. I teach my students how to recognize the particular variation and get them to apply the appropriate model answer. This works most of the time with most of the students."

Incident 5: A particular private English medium school is run by a husband and wife team. The wife is the principal and the husband looks after the school administration and school discipline. For any grade level, for each quarterly exam, the principal provides the teacher with 10 model questions and answers. Each day, the teacher writes a selected question and the answer on the board from this set. The students copy from the board. For homework they reproduce the same question and answer. The quiz and exam questions come from this set of 10 and the students are required to reproduce what was originally written on the board. Almost no student gets less than 90% marks. Within a period of 4 years, the school's enrollment grew to over 4000 students.

To sum up, the education delivery culture forces children to memorize and provides resources to help them memorize. Parents go out of their way to provide their children with funds to go to the "best" tutors – often paying three to four times more than what they have to pay for regular schooling. When the child gets a top grade everyone seems to be happy. It is after 12 years of such schooling that students are eligible for tertiary or university education.

Private University Education

The willingness of parents to dish out for their children's higher education has created a demand that the number of seats in public universities i.e. seats in the state run or government funded universities have not been able to fulfill. The website at Belcampus.org provides a good summary of the tertiary education scenario in Bangladesh since 1971 (i.e. the war of independence). On average, sixty-five people apply for each place or seat at a public university. This demand led to the law titled 'Private University Act of Bangladesh' that was passed in the Bangladesh National Parliament in 1992. The first private university of the country, the North South University, started functioning in the same year. Today the country has 56 such private universities where over 124,000 students pursue their studies [1].

As market demand would have it, unconfirmed sources reveal that applications for a further 50 private universities are under processing at the University Grants Commission (UGC), the government regulatory body for higher education. Be that as it may, it is now 20 years since private university education started in Bangladesh. It is high time that we take stock of the teaching and learning scenario at these relatively new institutions. It is often thought that the need for quality is demanded by the market. Interestingly, however, studies made by Ashraf, Ibrahim & Joardar (2009) show that faculty credentials, the academic calendar, campus facilities, research facilities and cost of education are associated with quality education, and that the consumers (both parents and students) feel most of the private universities in Bangladesh provide quality education but at unreasonably high costs. Alarming, as Alam and Khalifa (2009) show, the speed with which private higher education is expanding has contributed to a commercialization and marketing approach to providing higher education. As recommended by Alam et al (2010) after additional studies, "Providing education for the economic and social development of country is more important rather letting it go with a market approach." This cautionary note was previously raised by Alam, Haque and Siddique (2007) where they point out, "There is a need to introduce quality control mechanisms in private universities."

So, What Is Quality Education?

As defined by UNESCO (2001, p.1), "A renewal of higher education is essential for the whole society to be able to face up to the challenges of the twenty-first century and to ensure its intellectual independence. Quality higher education needs to be restored to create and advance knowledge, educate and train responsible, enlightened citizens and qualified specialists, without whom no nation can progress economically, socially, culturally or politically." How does this translate in terms of quality of graduates produced by Bangladesh universities? As a developing nation, Bangladesh needs graduates who can think independently and are willing to strive and experiment with new ways to bring Bangladesh out of the vicious circle of poverty. The question is, will the current education delivery model, which can at best be classified as following the "behaviorism" model, produce such graduates? Sadly, this model is even applied to language learning. Can learning by rote produce independent thinkers? If not, what needs to be done?

Before attempting to answer this question, let us look at a few examples that speak of underlying problems to understand what is going on at the majority of the private universities in Bangladesh.

Example 1: All private universities claim that their medium of instruction is English. This means that students entering the university need some basic self-expression and comprehension skills in the English language. Most teachers complain that students do not read and cannot write even a sentence of English correctly. To understand the trouble students have with sentence making, 18 students in first year, first semester were given a task in free-writing – any incident in their lives that affected them. The 334 collective sentences were analyzed for the type of mistakes made. 63.5% of the sentences were found to have one or more problems. The highest type of error was subject-verb matching which was found in 19.3% of the sentences followed by preposition errors at 14.2%, etc. Students who wrote correct sentences were generally found to be writing simple sentences like those of a 3rd or 4th grader. This whole exercise was abandoned when it was accidentally discovered that when a student was asked to repeat the whole exercise, the types of mistakes were different. After a few trials, it was concluded that errors are randomly made – students have little or no idea of sentence construction.

Example 2: Coming from a background where model answers are available for all subjects, students generally ask the university teacher for notes, if notes are not forthcoming from the concerned teacher. Marks are deducted for answers that are not identical to the notes. Good grades are awarded to those who are able to reproduce what the teacher originally had given as notes. This practice is so ingrained that both teachers and students support each other to perpetuate this culture. Rarely one meets students who are self-learners or like to create their own notes. One such student prepared his own notes after studying three reference books on the subject. The teacher marked his answers wrong in the final exam. When the student queried, the teacher simply brought out notes that were given by his own teacher. He gave this to the student and asked for a comparison. The teacher said that as answers did not match word-for-word, he could not give marks. Later when this student could not graduate with his classmates, he had a nervous breakdown.

Example 3: The way assessments are designed forces students to even memorize the sequence in which lists are given in the textbook. As I was not permitted to use the particular question, I have completely changed and disguised a question that appeared in a tertiary education final exam, to illustrate the nature of this type of assessment. The original question is a multiple choice question with the same answers given in four different sequences. The student is expected to recognize the correct sequence in which the list is given in the textbook!

- From the list below, select the identifiable qualities of a human hair:
- a. Texture, length, color, thickness
 - b. Length, color, thickness, texture
 - c. Color, thickness, texture, length
 - d. Thickness, texture, length, color

Figure 1. Disguised example of a multiple choice exam question

Another illustrative question from a private university exam paper: Name the 64 districts of Bangladesh. The students unfortunately have no way out other than to memorize notebooks and text books.

Example 4: In a computer science programming course, the teacher dictates examples from a programming book. In one particular lab class, the teacher wrote an example from a book

on the white board. The job of the students was to copy the program into the interpreter and make it run. As the program did not run the first time, the teacher went around correcting simple mistakes by the students, e.g. missing comma, missing or misplaced colon, etc. After correcting the mistakes, the program worked OK. This was the end of the lab exercise. One student at this point said, "Sir, the program should run, because you gave it, the question is, what have I learned, other than to copy and paste?" At the end of the computer science degree program, the students are still not able to write a line of code – they have no confidence as programmers. Finding no other options, for their capstone project most students get their programming code written by experienced programmers!

The above examples illustrate the teaching and learning approach in private university higher education. Sadly, not only do students end up with poor language skills, their subject skills leave room for much to be desired. When deciding on a topic for their capstone project, computer science students prefer projects that do not involve coding or programming! Once these students join a job, to help employees adapt, on-the-job training is becoming more and more popular. However, in the words of an employer, "Give me a person who can at least read and write, I'll organize the rest!"

So in the language of UNESCO (2007, p.1) are the private universities in Bangladesh educating and training responsible, enlightened citizens and qualified specialists, to help with the economical, social, cultural and political development of the country? If not, what can be done?

Awareness

The teaching-learning situation in Bangladesh presents a lot of scope for education researchers as well as education developers. As an example, one of the first things to do is develop awareness of learning models. The popular Bloom's Taxonomy model may help educators understand the existence of higher order thinking levels. Awareness needs also to be developed among parents and students as well – they need to demand improved learning from the private higher education institutions. At the same time, employers need to demand a better skilled workforce from the same higher education institutes.

The next step would perhaps be how to introduce higher levels of thinking into different subject areas. Teachers would need to experiment with a variety of methods to see what works best. At the same time research needs to be done on how, given the background of the students, how they adapt to such demands.

Experimenting with Technology

Developing language fluency would perhaps be a major area where technology may help. Although rural areas have less than 1% computers, almost every rural household has access to a mobile phone (Rahman, 2007). The major cities where the majority of the private universities are located do have good Internet facilities. The author's university, Daffodil International University (DIU) (<http://www.daffodilvarsity.edu.bd>) is expanding its digital or e-services step-by-step. One of the services available is called "Classroom Interactive Feedback System" or Social Web. Here teachers and students interact in course blogs. Some teachers have started using the Social Web in innovative ways. A business department teacher asked his students to collectively write the job description of a job not given in the text. The first student to enter the blog could only write a sentence. The second

student looked at this and added two more sentences. By the time 10 students entered, almost a page of description was ready. The 11th student reformatted the entire job description to make better sense. This way the whole class developed a sense that they could do things collectively and that they should be now able to attempt job descriptions on their own!

Conference

Perhaps a good platform for discussing the way forward would be a teaching and learning conference. The conference could look at the teaching and learning needs of developing countries in general and Bangladesh specifically. DIU would like to host such a conference. The purpose of this essay is to invite education researchers to come together to share their ideas on how developing countries can be supported in their endeavor to improve quality of education.

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