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Reimagining Teaching Strategies in Humanities post July

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogy exists at the intersection of culture, power, and state dynamics, particularly in moments of political upheaval. The post-July context in Bangladesh revealed profound disruptions in the teacher-student relationship, shaped by the violence and trauma predominantly experienced by students. In this period, many students sought support from their teachers, which was sometimes extended but was often met with rejection or indifference, while some educators were perceived as aligning with authoritative regimes, leading to institutional consequences, including both forced and voluntary resignations from their positions of authority. This paper explores the shifting dynamics of power and authority within the classroom, addressing both the immediate aftermath of these events and the broader implications in the post-upheaval context. This paper also explores whether the collective consciousness of students, shaped by their vulnerability and heightened political awareness, prompted these reactions, or if they stem from long-standing pedagogical practices where teachers embodied hierarchical control, evolving into this archaic metaphor of authority for the students. Drawing on theories of critical pedagogy and the politics of power in education, this paper explores how educators can reimagine teaching strategies in this "new normal" marked by student sensitivity, mistrust, and trauma. It argues for a pedagogical framework that fosters empathy, inclusivity, and dialogic engagement, enabling teachers to navigate the delicate balance between supervision and support in rebuilding trust and resilience in post-crisis classrooms.

… student leaders who remained active found that university reform was far less exciting than bringing down a dictator. At every turn, students were measured (and measured themselves) by revolutionary qualities they no longer seemed to possess and democratic ideals they no longer seemed to embody.[1]

- Jessica Greenberg

Bangladesh, alongside the rest of the world, witnessed the manifestation of critical pedagogy[2] — an approach to teaching once envisioned in the writings of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and others—when its students abandoned the confines of the classroom to assert their rights not only as youth but as human beings culminating in a collective uprising that led to the historic overthrow of a fifteen-years-old authoritarian regime that had long wielded education as a tool of hegemony and as an agent in perpetuating a cycle of silence. There is no doubt that the atrocities in which students were both victims and, in some cases, perpetrators (given the involvement of many with the political wing of the ruling regime) have left grave wounds not only on their individual psyches but also on the nation's collective consciousness, that have undeniably in many ways altered the dynamics between teachers and students. The movement began under the banner of the "Anti-Discriminatory Student Movement"—a name that resonates with the very ethos of Humanities education, a field of education that teaches students "the critical thinking that is necessary for independent action and for intelligent resistance to… authority"[3]; yet the subsequent violence and bloodshed have compelled us to reflect critically, not only on the nature of the movement itself but also on the values we uphold in education as educators and beyond. The "revolution" has caused a breach in the trust between teachers and students and also it has led to many forced resignations of teachers from their "authoritative" position, as H. M. Nazmul Alam, a Lecturer in the Department of English from IUBAT writes, "The recent political changes in Bangladesh have fundamentally altered the dynamics between students and faculty in

educational institutions. What began as a movement for justice and reform has evolved into a situation where students, empowered by their success, now wield significant influence over academic administration and faculty decisions."[4] What is more concerning is the resurgence of binary thinking within the classroom, where those students who were vocal and visibly active during the revolution are now fostering a hostile environment toward peers who were either less involved or whose family affiliations are perceived to be aligned with the previous regime. Yet, no one can deny that post-July classroom environment is more open, more politically aware and the hesitance that was there is breaking and voices can be heard after almost fifteen years of silence. A third-year student, Hema Chakma from Dhaka University comments, "People are much more vocal now. We have a long way to go to understand how it (the change) will serve us."[5] Thus reimagining pedagogy in this recent time calls for a more inclusive, humane, dialogic approach that would make us aware of the conflicting ramification of revolutionary process, that would balance the extremities in classroom and help students to navigate with intelligence.

Pedagogy and revolution are in themselves a vexed terrain and full of contradictions as Thomas Eewing muses on this: "revolution is repressive as well as liberating, stultifying as well as emancipating, and destructive as well as constructive. Pedagogy embodies these same contradictions, yet also provides an alternative source of visions, practices, and interventions."[6] These paradoxes are not abstract as they directly shape how education is imagined, delivered, and received in times of political upheaval. John N. Hawkins exposes a further dimension of this tension, particularly in revolutionary periods, highlighting the "contradiction between a revolutionary ideology of mass participation and egalitarianism" and how "the revolutionary society attempts to maintain an ideological commitment to egalitarianism by utilizing three major outlets: formal education, nonformal education, and the mass media. Education is considered by far the most important transmitter of these goals… Egalitarianism thus became part of the revolutionary regime's claim to legitimacy. Yet the higher education system continued to move toward stratification and inequality."[7] This contradiction between the ideals of revolution and the realities of educational inequality finds a sharp resonance in post-July Bangladesh where the discourse of equality and inclusion gained momentum during the protests, the educational structures have largely reverted to, or perhaps never truly left behind the modes of exclusion, stratification, and surveillance. Egalitarianism, though vocally celebrated, championed and cherished, remains unequally distributed. Thus, in post-July Bangladesh, educators must ask: What does it mean to teach and learn in a moment that promises change but reproduces inequality? It is within these unresolved tensions that the true labor of post-revolutionary pedagogy begins.

Although the Humanities, as a field, holds immense potential to guide students through socio-political upheavals, particularly when its ethical foundations are actively integrated into pedagogical practice—its transformative power can be undermined when the teacher's role is steeped in authoritarianism. In politically vulnerable contexts where students are not mere observers but active participants, the educator's positional superiority and the intentions underlying their authority can become problematic as they risk becoming symbols of domination. Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, articulates this dilemma through what he calls the "teacher-student contradiction," noting, "the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students,"[8] This tension is not unidirectional, however. As Chun Lai et al. emphasize, "Teacher authority is a two-way social relationship that relies not only on teachers' dispositions and capacities to influence students into behaving in certain ways, but also on students' perceptions and acceptance of teachers' power."[9] As "authority needs legitimacy"[10] Bryk et al. underscore the centrality of "relational trust"[11] within the classroom as the foundation for meaningful educational engagement. In the context of Bangladesh, this trust has been deeply shaken. Dr. Siddhartha Shankar Joarder, Professor of Philosophy at Jagannath University, observes, "Teachers do feel embarrassed now to go back to their class with their clean hearts," adding that "the only answer to the paradox of the future is that this holy relationship between teachers and students is in disarray"[12] Also H.M. Nazmul Alam warns about the "potential

erosion of academic integrity," cautioning that "in the long run, this could lead to a decline in educational standards, as teachers may prioritize appeasing students over maintaining academic excellence." Even more troubling is his observation regarding "mob psychology": "If students believe that they can achieve their goals through force or intimidation, they may become increasingly willing to engage in disruptive or violent behavior."[13]

So, what emerges is again the paradox: revolution, often fueled by a utopian vision can blind its agents to the unintended consequences it engenders. In this regard, Karl Mannheim's insights into how the oprresed (in this context the students) may ignore the existing positivity can be insightful as he says, "

"…certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it. They are not at all concerned with what really exists; rather in their thinking they already seek to change the situation that exists."[14]

This thoroughly captures the collective unconscious of the student body in Bangladesh today, a space where students are sensitive towards any authoritarian behavior, and where a teacher should tread carefully and constantly be conscious of his own standing as a human being. Thus, as a teacher of the humanities, one must critically examine the meaning of authority in the classroom and may turn to Charles Bingham's reflections on authority in education. Bingham asserts that authority need not be "necessarily unidirectional, monological, or atomic. Authority might be predicated on relation."[15] He contends that when a teacher's behavior becomes a symbol of bureaucracy—unsympathetic and unemotional—he not only alienates his students but also forfeits his "authority." A teacher of the humanities, therefore, must recognize the student's active role in "the circuit of authority" where "he or she must decide to let the teacher's knowledge take priority. For authority to succeed in its aim of educating the student, the student must acknowledge that there is an important insight to be gained from the teacher."[16] So in post-July period reimagining authority as "relational" rather than "hierarchical" becomes crucial for rebuilding trust, restoring mutual respect, and reanimating the transformative spirit of humanities education.

Teaching the humanities has perhaps never been as open and relative as it is now in Bangladesh. If we consider the brighter side of this paradox, students are now more inclined toward political discussion and open questioning—an engagement that the humanities, more than any other discipline naturally cultivates. As we teach Socrates, who sacrificed his life for the ideal of critical inquiry, we, as educators, must commit ourselves to the very spirit of the Socratic method, particularly in a time when students and teachers struggle to find common ground; As Martha C. Nussbaum affirms, "Socrates' attitude toward his interlocutors, by contrast, is exactly the same as his attitude toward himself. Everyone needs examination, and all are equal in the face of the argument."[17] Thus, a teacher must reimagine his strategies, especially if he once believed in his own "infallibility." Now more than ever, patience and resilience are essential virtues for teachers, as Socratic pedagogy reminds us. If we relate the Socratic dialogue, *Allegory of the Cave* to the current moment, the teacher must "...drag him out into the light of the sun..."[18] (Republic, 515e). But at the initial stage the student would be "...distressed and annoyed at being so dragged'" (Republic, 515e-516a). However, as the student progresses from vague representations of the good to the good itself, he also progresses from repulsion to affinity: "When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there… don't you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others? (Republic, 516c). In post-July Bangladesh, we, as teachers of the humanities, must embody "Socratic resilience", guiding our students patiently toward critical self-awareness without succumbing to prejudice, thereby nurturing not only their capacity for learning but also their newfound confidence and openness to argument.

From July to the early days of August, the students had to face violence, or witness it directly or virtually, but what we fail to recognize is that teachers have also gone through the same, as SM Abbas writes, "The violence during the July revolution has left both students and teachers deeply traumatized."[19] There is a need for counselling in educational institutions, yet the question is

raised by the former caretaker government adviser Rasheda K. Choudhury: “who would provide this support when teachers themselves are traumatized?”[20] Yet, one cannot deny the fact that what teachers are facing may harm their self-respect — a narcissistic wound Freud would describe as a blow to the “ego ideal”[21] — but thousands of students have been killed in this revolution. As teachers of humanities, we must first acknowledge this difference and actively work to address it. One important step could be adopting a “trauma-informed approach in teaching.” Alex Shevrin Venet postulates on this and says how trauma inflicted by political upheaval may take the form of hate and bias incidents, but we as educators have “to have hard conversations to uncover all of the ways we as teachers have perpetuated trauma, so that we can see clearly what needs to change.”[22] Moreover, drawing from Paulo Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy, the aim is to guide students toward "a critical perception of the world"—which, as Freire argues "implies a correct method of approaching reality" that enables them to attain "a comprehension of total reality"[23] However, as we have observed, even in the aftermath of a revolution, the binaries in thought and action persist, so critical pedagogical approach must be integrated with what Bell Hooks refers to as “holistic education” or “engaged pedagogy” which primarily “emphasizes wellbeing,”[24] not only of the student but also of the teacher where he is perceived as “a healer” who himself is healed and “employs a holistic model of learning.”[25] Hooks also emphasizes that, alongside the dialogical approach to teaching proposed by Freire, an educator must embody “belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth.”[26] It is through the synthesis of these ideas that educators in post-July era can forge strategies that not only address the academic and emotional needs of their students but also reshape the very fabric of teaching, stimulating a space of healing and dialogue.

Thus, from the complex contradictions of revolution, it becomes clear that as teachers of the humanities—a field inherently open and critically fluid we must not only teach "interdisciplinarity," but embody it. The content we engage with offers its own quiet suggestions: Socratic resilience, a dialogic approach, and a genuine understanding of authority must first reshape us if we are to hope to reshape the youth. I would like to conclude my study by recalling a moment from my own classroom—a moment that captured the profound shift the July revolution inscribed upon our teaching spaces. While discussing Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, I was, as always, cautious, hinting indirectly at the political factions mirrored in our own country to contextualize the novel. Yet from the back of the room, a student interrupted with a clarity that startled me: “You can utter their names now, Ma’am. There is nothing to be afraid of. Now we are a free country.” In that instant, I realized the ground had shifted: political discourse was no longer distant or academic—it was lived, urgent. And so, we are left with hope that if we nurture this newfound awareness with openness, empathy, and true dialogue, the classroom may yet become a place not only of passive silent learning, but of active reverberating engagement and collective growth.

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