

Pedagogy in Bangladeshi Private Universities: Context, Culture, and Confusion*

Manzurul Mannan^a

Abstract

Pedagogy teaches teachers how to teach, so that they may effectively teach students how to learn; it offers important training for teachers to transform students from mere parrots of information into challengers of and innovators of knowledge. Yet, while Bangladesh has had a long history of university teaching, pedagogy has hardly entered the imagination of university educators. At the university level, pedagogical training would address cultural hindrances to students' advanced learning. Today's teachers are yesterday's students, with each generation being groomed in the same cultural patterns of learning that are continually repeated without examination. At the same time, the majority of faculties lack pedagogical methods for adjusting their teaching framework to accommodate the diversity of students' worldviews to nurture knowledge progression in classroom settings. Importantly, students acquire cultural practices of rote learning and memorization by way of lectures and homework that parrots texts and lectures. Many faculties are unaware that the purpose of a university is to stimulate new ideas and knowledge, provoke assumptions, and teach and encourage critical thinking. The pedagogical challenge also derives from Bengali culture, from which teachers assume a hierarchical mindset and attitude that is counter-productive to students' learning.

Keywords

Culture, pedagogy, university, Bangladesh

Bangladesh has had strong tradition of public universities, but with the downfall of Soviet Union in 1991 and rise of a neo-liberal market philosophy, the way was paved for establishing private universities in Bangladesh¹. These private universities offered an alternate platform for higher education and have experienced exponential growth. Currently, there are 34 public universities, 90 private universities, among which are two international universities and 31 specialized colleges.

The change in global politics led to the commercialization of education, which reflected a global capitalist ethos (Bartlett, Frederick, and Gulbrandsen 2004). Under the compulsion of globalization, the University Grant Commission

(UGC), which oversees the affairs of public universities, allowed private universities to operate in Bangladesh. The UGC deals differently in its approaches to public and private universities. Public universities, which assume to promote the "value" of education, depend totally on government grants and subsidies, while private universities depend solely on market niches so as to produce the image of a "profit-making" enterprise². Private universities are principally preoccupied with recovering their costs

^aIndependent University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Correspondent Author:

Manzurul Mannan, Aftabuddin Sorok, Bashudhara R/A
Dhaka-1229, Bangladesh

and are oriented towards a market-based expansion strategy in a way akin to private sector firms. Consequently, given market insecurities, private universities lack stable means to ensure the quality of research and teaching output (Maitrot 2015: 21).

The euphoria to commission private universities started with a somewhat inflated idea. When private universities began their operation, many investors assumed that Bangladesh was brimming with scholars. In the initial years, private universities relied heavily on faculty members from public universities that offered their services on a part time or adjunct basis. As time passed, the sphere of private universities expanded and they gradually built up a pool of scholars by hiring full-time or adjunct public university teachers and fresh postgraduates from public and private universities. Importantly, private universities became an intellectual sanctuary for many scholars returning to Bangladesh with foreign, postgraduate degrees.

In general, private universities imported the North American structure or system of education. The first few private universities, such as North South and Independent University, Bangladesh, copied the model of American universities, but many universities commissioned later imitated the structure of the already established local, private universities. While US universities and curricula vary considerably, the “American curriculum” model that has been predominately imitated in establishing private universities emphasizes degree paths in business administration (BBA and MBA) and computer science. Because business and computer science graduates must interact globally, they must be competent in English. Hence, all private universities have established English departments. Consequently, because the core of all private universities revolves around business administration, computer science, and English studies, the foundational philosophy of higher education embedded in the disciplines of philosophy, social sciences, liberal arts, and natural science studies

has been undermined. Despite the vow of entrepreneurs to copy the American model, their undervaluation of the liberal arts and sciences defies the survey findings of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which concluded that “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major”. Ninety-five percent (95%) of employers wanted their employees to write, speak, and reason better. The ability to think innovatively and not just to recite yesterday’s information now ranks near the top of the qualities sought by employers. The same survey found that employers give a preference in hiring to university graduates with the capacity for contributing innovation to the workplace. Such skills and knowledge are provided by the liberal arts and sciences [HRS (Hart Research Associates) 2013].

The overemphasis on business and technology, with the mistaken assumptions about the global role and effect of the market model, also contradicts many parents’ expectations that higher education will offer their children social awareness, values, and ethics. Parents and students want a broad spectrum of subjects to be offered at the university level (Alam 2009). Unfortunately, an aspect of the American model of privatized higher education comes with a downside: Many business entrepreneurs who finance the private universities view higher education not only as source of business³, instead of as an institution of knowledge production, but they also see their investment in education as a means for enhancing their social status. With the emergence of a market model for university education comes the tacit modus operandi of treating university degrees as commodities; that is, such universities exist primarily to perpetuate and duplicate business models⁴. The misinformed euphoria of entrepreneurs also fails to account for the policy environment of higher education set by the UGC, which essentially promotes the British colonial

model of public university education characteristic to South Asia, and is highly critical of the market ethos and educational philosophy. While private universities must also conform to UGC policies, and because they evolved through the convergence of the American market-emphasis model and the British model of the UGC, a hybrid education management structure and culture developed. In this hybrid environment, tension and confusion between the UGC and private university approaches are evident. For example, private university governance is comprised of two parallel bodies of a Board of Trustees (BoT), which establishes the university, and the UGC-imposed Syndicate, without fixing each other's boundaries and roles in policymaking.

Given the conflicting aims of the BoT and the Syndicate, a scenario of permanent tension seems likely⁵. On one hand, private universities are eager to offer market-driven courses and certificates to ensure their financial viability, but the UGC opposes the market ethos. On the other hand, the strict regulations and statutes of the UGC require private universities to compromise their market ethos, which may make them replicas of public universities. Consequently, many private universities see the UGC as a real hindrance to their growth. Many private university actors see public universities as symbols of a decaying education environment with falling educational standards in a highly politicized cultural setting. Despite the rhetoric, the broader academic culture and practices of public universities have been reproduced in private universities because of the latter's initial reliance on senior faculty members from public universities.

Despite all odds and limitations, private universities have a somewhat positive image in the education market. Some universities are better than others, which in popular parlance means that good universities are those that have faculty members with doctoral degrees, permanent campuses, and more departments in different academic disciplines, and

conduct regular classes without political disruption. Parents have shown that they are willing to pay high fees to private universities for their wards' higher education.

To address the prevailing educational practices and problems in private universities, the author contends that the objectives of pedagogy training must be based on teaching problems at the level of higher education and that the following general determinations dictate the direction, content, and depth of training needed:

How aware are faculty members of the importance of pedagogy?

What skills do faculty require to learn to teach effectively, including how astutely can they deconstruct cultural contexts of learning to prepare students with analytical mindsets, skills, and knowledge?

How do instructors approach topics and content so that students can apply their academic learning to their future professional life?

Who is responsible for formulating pedagogy manuals to train and guide faculty members?

CREATING RELEVANCY IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING

The author's recent observation of pedagogic training of two universities suggests that the trainers, and consequently the teachers they train, missed current problematic teaching practices. The primary fault lies in failing to make exogenous (foreign) materials relevant to current and regional realities. The following dialogue took place during a training session among a junior faculty (JF), senior faculty (SF) member, and the author, and illustrated the lack of relevancy of materials for and approaches to topics.

The author: What is the purpose of teaching?

JF: *You tell me.* What is the purpose? No one ever explained it to us.

SF: The purpose of teaching is for the *production of knowledge in classes*.

The author: How do you produce knowledge?

SF: Usually I read from books and give lectures in class. Students become erudite from my lectures.

The author: Why have you been using the same literature for the last 15 years?

SF: True, the literature may be old, but it is new to incoming students that hardly know the subjects.

The above dialogue illustrates common expectations for class interaction: “You tell me” indicates an expectation of being handed information—usually and preferably for accomplishing a short-term goal of passing an exam—rather than taking a question or novel idea as a challenge for questioning past assumptions and formulating new perspectives and making specific applications. The phrase “the production of knowledge in classes” more specifically shows an expectation that students will simply absorb information that has been spewed out and that doing so constitutes successful learning.

So the universities in Bangladesh, as well as universities everywhere, face pressure and competition to prove that what they offer has relevancy in a global context. The universities in Bangladesh for the most part are not rising to the challenge, as Badrul Ahsan (2013) lamented:

Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, advised us to look for three things in a university: light, liberty and learning. Our universities have more light than before because classrooms and corridors are better illuminated. There is also more liberty because teachers and boards are running these institutions at their will. While these two things are taking more space, learning is getting squeezed (out). Lurid tales of lewdness, corruption and profligate greed are coming out of these seats of higher learning like bats flapping out of dark basements.

While Ahsan’s remarks are allusive, the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities provides evidence of a grim situation. Webometrics ranks

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) highest out of all public and private universities in Bangladesh. However, this grim reality is manifested in many ways. In global ranking, the best Bangladeshi university is BUET, which is ranked in 2012 (Webometrics, January 2016), and other public and private universities are placed much more below than BUET’s ranking. The two important global ranking systems, i.e., the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the QS World University Rankings⁶ hardly recognize the low quality of universities of Bangladesh.

The quality of education offered by institutions of higher learning has a deep impact on the job market. Currently, 47% of postgraduate students are unemployed [EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) 2014: 10]. More specifically, employers find graduates’ abilities lacking in two ways: Not enough graduates have specialized skills needed in high growth sectors; and where graduates have these skills, they are still not employable because they lack proficient skills with English, computers, and software systems, and with other softer skills, such as communication and problem-solving. In other words, university curricula are outdated and graduates’ work skills are mismatched for the job market [EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) 2014]. Employers, such as industrialists and business entrepreneurs in the fast growing economy sectors with over 6% annual growth, are unable to employ the low quality university graduates⁷. As a result, these entrepreneurs turn to Indian and Sri Lankan graduates to work in their enterprises. Currently, over 500,000 Indian graduates are working in Bangladesh, which annually transfers over US\$3,716 million in revenue to India (Siliconindia 2013). One such worker from India remarked, “We are unemployed in India because of tough competition, but in Bangladesh we enjoy a good salary and lifestyle”⁸. Obviously, then, universities are failing to supply the type of expertise that business and industrial sectors need.

The irony is that although the pass rates in public examinations are getting higher, a huge number of students are failing to master the desired job market competencies (Habib 2015). Frustrated parents of unemployed graduates want to know to what extent do universities prepare students with the appropriate knowledge and skills for the professional world. They ask this for two reasons: One is a matter of seeing real world success for their financial investment in their children's education; the other has to do with employers' having difficulty in matching university graduates' knowledge and skills with professional realities and needed expertise.

RECYCLED CULTURE

Today's faculty instructors are yesterday's students. They were all trained in similar cultural patterns of teaching and learning processes. Part of that culture is teachers' blaming students when the latter fail to meet performance expectations and criticizing them as being interested only in gaining certificates, not an education, for a lack of personal investment in their learning and looking for shortcuts, and for rote learning. To break the cycle of blame requires that instructors recognize their responsibility in transforming students' attitudes and performance. Instructors should ask themselves why high-achieving secondary school students perform poorly in higher education settings. Very basically, this requires that faculty members examine deeply and understand the pedagogical environments of two levels of educational instruction to help students make the transition from one to the other. This inquiry, of course, involves self-evaluation about assumptions of the processes and goals of higher education.

Teaching and learning behaviors and assumptions are also rooted in general Bengali culture. A professor at a European university that is a popular destination of Bangladeshi students gave this assessment of these students:

Bangladeshi students' ability to learn and acquire knowledge is (hindered by) their lack of critical thinking. They take things for granted on face value. They do not raise questions. They don't debate and argue and shy away from discussions. In the class they do not challenge what the professor is saying; reality, therefore, is given to them, not constructed by them. These skills of assessment, critical thinking, and analysis must be developed from childhood. At a later stage the values of acceptance and norms of shying away or hiding take deep root and (it is) difficult to change⁹.

Students' lack of critical assessment skills has been raised in a system of memorization rooted in an ethnic culture of silence, which can be attributed to the broader hierarchical culture that informs Bengali behavior (Mannan 2015: 26). People define their lives in hierarchical terms: big-small (*boro-choto*), elder-junior (*murubbi-choto*), teacher-disciple (*guru-shishaya*), respect-disrespect (*adab-beadab*), deference-disrespect (*sroddha-osroddha*), honored-dishonored (*jat-bejat*), and polite-impolite (*binoyee-abinoyee*) (Mannan 2015: 29). The criteria of rank are embedded in inferred Bengali behavioral codes (Davis 1983: 69). In the context of education, the culture of *guru-shishaya* is reproduced, which is understood as a one-way communication from *guru* to *shishaya*. The *guru* shares his wisdom and students abide by it by following his instructions. *Shishaya* must not raise questions, even if the *guru* is wrong; otherwise, the *shishaya* shows disrespect (*beadab*). This culture sets the premise for a culture of memorization and rote learning and lacks independent critical thinking. Being a part of Bengali culture, teachers have a hierarchical mindset and attitude that discourages questions and analyses from students. The gap between memorization and creative thinking puts students at a significant disadvantage.

When instructors assume the mantle of a dogmatic *guru*, their teaching becomes a hollow exercise in stroking their egos. Professor Syed Saad Andaleeb of BRAC University (2016) further noted a culture of laxity in such teachers. He lists the following critiques based on his observations:

The teacher does not attend classes regularly and has many excuses to be busy; could not make the class interactive; used the traditional lecture method and taught straight from the book; did not have a clear idea of either the content or materials; not approachable or friendly; laughed at us if we could not answer, as if it was our fault that we did not know the answer; would never answer questions and laughed at us for being so stupid; displayed (preferences/favoritism) towards a particular group; went through all the slides without explaining the subject matter; was rigid, not open to ideas, and lost patience when questioned; discouraged students from asking questions; was not available during office hours; the course outline was not up-to-date; the assessment system was questionable (especially its fairness); the lectures were disorganized; no clear expectations were set; the exams required rote memorization of mundane/trivial facts and writing essays.

The above observations corroborate findings of Objective Achievement and Recommendation Committee (OARC), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)'s task force (Razia et al. 2013) in that the tendency among instructors is to assume a role of a *guru*, rather than guide students in an active process of discovery and learning. The performance of university teachers in Bangladesh is described as:

Lecturing and reading the textbook is the common teaching style; There is little interaction with students; Teachers rely heavily on textbooks for classroom instruction; Teachers fear applying innovative approaches; Many teachers are unfamiliar with level of competencies of students; Pass rates in public exams increased over a given period, but not students' competence. (Habib 2015)

A cultural-structural aspect of higher education in Bangladesh is that students come from three different school systems: Madrasah (religious schools), Bengali, and English medium schools, each with its sharp, disparate worldviews; that is, students arrive at universities with particular ontological, epistemological, and ethical orientations to the world (Saila, Riitaaja, and Kuusisto 2016: 68). At the same time, the majority of faculties lack pedagogical skills for adjusting their teaching framework to accommodate the diversity of students' worldviews

and to nurture knowledge progression in classroom settings.

In summary, given certain cultural features, university faculty members often fail to make a distinction between their role and that of pre-university and college teachers. In Bangladesh, the job of secondary school and college teachers is to ensure that students learn given material and to evaluate students on the basis of the pre-determined learning outcomes. A university instructor, by contrast, is to guide students to and through sources of knowledge by ensuring that students develop critical scholarship for discovery, learning, and creativity.

A gap between present approach of teaching and learning of students could be attributable to students' unfettered access to internet viewing and learning, which is making them less interested in the lecture-based learning. For any assignment, students look first for easy-to-find references in internet search engines. The medium also gives them more access to visual and auditory learning, which they tend to rely on rather than trying to articulate ideas from print reading and writing.

PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS

A crucial starting point in changing prevalent pedagogical attitudes and practices is to communicate to university instructors that, first and foremost, the needs of the students are at least as important as any of their research projects or other tasks as a faculty member. To communicate this foundational understanding and give instructors practical tools for understanding and effectively meeting students' needs requires training in pedagogy. Second, given the teacher focused methods and goals of teaching in secondary schools and colleges that emphasize rote learning and evaluate students on the basis of pre-determined learning outcomes, university faculty requires training to compensate for earlier forms of instruction to guide students to develop critical

scholarship for discovery, learning, and creativity. Methods that overemphasize teacher-focused methods—lectures; demonstrations; direct or explicit instructions; rote learning; oral repetition; imitation; and copying—contrast significantly with student-centered learning, or constructed learning—inquiry-based; project work; individual and team activity, such as in small-groups, pairs, or whole class interactive work; problem solving; allowing for extended dialogue with individuals; and encouraging higher order questioning. In other words, the teaching methods are teacher-guided, but student-centered (Westerok et al. 2013: 10-12).

University level education is uniquely positioned to promote and nurture an analytical mindset and critical and creative thinking by challenging established ideas in order to inculcate new ways of thinking and ideas, along with new knowledge sets. To do so, "...faculties have to learn the modern way of instruction...They have to learn problem-based teaching where students are given specific problems to be solved in innovative ways. The students have to learn in teams and teachers have to know how to make it happen" (Klotz 2014).

Instruction in pedagogy theory and methods and their context appropriateness begins to address problems in higher education. Pedagogical training modules would include following aids: Most fundamentally, teachers' awareness of problems related to instruction in any setting needs to be raised. That is, teachers must be able to identify the symptoms of poor learning and take responsibility for low achievement.

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the World Wide Web has created unique challenges to instructors in higher education in part because such tools were not part of their educational process. The effective use of these technologies for students constitutes a new area of pedagogical analysis, and today's instructors need training on how to best use the technology. From his

extensive studies of the use of computers and the World Wide Web in many levels of education, Richard H. Hall of Missouri Science and Technology consistently found that "one of the most important predictors of how effective computers are in increasing student learning is the amount of computer training the teacher has" (Wenglinsky 1998) and "In order for the web to serve as an effective adjunct to traditional class, the instructor must know more than how to teach students to surf the web" (Hall N.d.).

Pedagogy training helps instructors keep course content relevant. Besides using outdated texts, as mentioned earlier, for some subject areas, instructors must know how to adapt materials written for students in another region and with other perspectives to location-specific situations. In other words, relevant curricula and syllabi should not be designed on a "linear education model" (Klotz 2014), which means updating the present design of courses as time and circumstances require.

Pedagogy training can also help instructors identify their students' learning abilities, as in whether they tend to be more visual or conceptual in their aptitude and teachers may be trained in deciding how materials and information are best communicated. That is, the learning mode derives from the thing to be learned, rather than students' learning styles dictating the mode of communication. The pedagogy training to faculty must be designed so that teachers may expedite the process of effective learning so that students can "develop" and "demonstrate" their learning capabilities. A teacher can contribute to increasing capacity of students to interpret a problem so that they can "develop" capabilities for qualitative and quantitative reasoning and "develop" expertise in planning and problem assessment with knowledge of social responsibilities. At the same time, students with analytical mindset can "demonstrate" their creative thinking and judgement capability along with communication skills.

Pedagogy training alone, however, is not enough to improve the learning environment. Beyond

classroom instruction, physical and professional policy and structural support systems are needed, such as proper library resources and a supportive environment for faculty research interests. Without the latter, faculty members stagnate in their areas of expertise, especially with burdensome teaching loads, which diminishes effective teaching and in turn affects academic standards.

By establishing teaching policies, institutes of higher education can further support their faculties in pedagogy and raise the quality of education. Teaching policies should include criteria for curriculum development and maintenance; guidelines for developing and directing the implementation of academic goals, objectives, policies, procedures, and standards; evaluation standards and procedures to monitor faculty members' compliance with teaching duties; guidelines for monitoring student performance; and standards and procedures for setting examinations.

CONCLUSIONS

In university classroom settings, students often have their first exposure to international experiences and where they have opportunities to gain experience and interact socially with people of varying religious, cultural, class, ethnic, and national backgrounds, as well as with those of differing gender orientation. The quality of this experience depends on how well a university, as a knowledge enterprise, creates an enabling environment where faculties play proactive roles in guiding students through and drawing them into new experiences that challenge assumptions, foster curiosity and creative thinking, and prepare them for the challenges of post-university life. An important aspect for fostering quality education is the university's policy-driven education management system, whereby faculty and students encounter transformative experiences in the process of knowledge production. Universities can significantly improve the quality of education by providing

pedagogic training, extensive, classic, and contemporary library sources, research support for faculty and students, and contemporary teaching materials, concepts, and knowledge. Having well-supported personnel and material resources translated into improvement in students' performance in their academic fields and a thriving intellectual and scholarly collegial community.

Notes

* The early version of paper was presented in an international conference "Education in the Current World. Pedagogy, Research and Social Change" organized by Independent University, Bangladesh, University Grant Commission, and World Bank on April 22-23, 2016.

1. The University Grant Commission Act of 1992 allowed for the establishment of private universities and was modified in 2010.
2. The long standing tradition of tuition-free higher education runs counter to the business model of private universities, where students are paying for a product—a certificate.
3. Both Nurul Islam Nahid, Education Minister of Bangladesh, and Professor Abdul Mannan, Chairman of UGC, categorically admonished the business attitude of many private universities in their speeches at the 24th convocation of Independent University, Bangladesh on March 24, 2016.
4. The business motif is reflected in university advertisements, as in "X is the first university in ..." or "Y university is the first digital university" along with promises to supply free laptops (not books) to entice students to join university. In many universities, management forces their faculties into positions of "intellectual slaves", where office peons monitor faculties' activities. Most of these universities are on a trimester system and their faculties are required to take on five to six courses or sections in each trimester. Many of these universities have extremely poor libraries; yet, university authorities want faculty to publish in international journals.
5. In light of conflict among BoT members, between the BoT and office of the vice chancellor, the forceful removal of the vice chancellor in some universities, and private universities' student movements against value added tax (VAT), the government is seriously considering formulating policy that would increase its control in the governance structure of universities by installing a government representative in the BoT.
6. Webometrics measures only the popularity of institutions' web pages; it does not measure anything about the quality

of teaching or research output. The Times Higher Education World University and the QS World University rank the top universities. The ranking is done mostly for potential students and maybe it affects grants and donations.

7. Personal communication with industrialists and entrepreneurs.
8. Personal communication with an Indian business executive.
9. Email communication with Professor Ishtiaq Jamil on February 19, 2016.

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Bio

Manzurul Mannan, Ph.D., associate professor, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Independent University, Dhaka, Bangladesh; research fields: university pedagogy, policy and academic management, NGOs and development, Islam, Sufism and terrorism, culture, environment and river.