The secret of a good teacher

Teachers need to trust their students with knowledge and let them outshine the generation that taught them

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The profession of teaching measures success by how much knowledge manages to give away. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockPhoto

Last Republic Day, among the generals and the gallantry awardees, a woman from a small village in Etawah sat as a special guest of the nation. Mantravati Shakya had learned to fly an agricultural drone, earned ₹300,000 in a year, and then did the thing that matters most: she taught more than 50 other rural women to do the same. Many of them now train women in their own villages. She did not hoard her new skill like a trade secret. She gave it away and, in doing so, she multiplied it, twice over.

Her story is the Namo Drone Didi scheme in miniature, the national programme placing agricultural drones in the hands of 15,000 women's self-help groups. But it is

also something older and deeper; a parable about what knowledge is for, and about the one profession whose entire purpose is to give itself away. I mean, of course, the teacher.

Two philosophies

There is a famous handbook of worldly success, Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power*, a book that a certain kind of ambitious reader keeps by the bedside. Its Law 11 is admirably blunt: "Learn to keep people dependent on you. Never teach them enough so that they can do without you." Law 7 advises you to get others to do the work and take the credit; Law 1 warns you never to outshine the master. It is a cynical catalogue of how to accumulate power by keeping others small.

Now hold that beside the teacher and the Drone Didi who trained 50 others. The entire ethic of education is the precise inversion of Law 11. A good teacher's whole ambition is to make herself unnecessary and to teach the student so well that he no longer needs her; to be, in the end, joyfully outshone. A profession that measured success by Greene's laws would hoard, obscure, and gatekeep. The profession of teaching measures success by how much it manages to give away. These are not two styles of the same trade. They are opposite theories of what a human life is for.

Indian storytelling has worried over this for millennia. Generations of Indians have grown up with the story of Eklavya, the forest boy who taught himself archery before a clay image of Dronacharya, only to be asked for his thumb so that the teacher's favoured prince would have no rival. It is usually told as a lesson in caste cruelty, which it is. But it is also the enduring story of a teacher who followed Law 11, guarding knowledge as power and crippling a student to keep a prince supreme. Bound, he would say, by loyalty to his king. Yet the effect was the same. Dronacharya is what a teacher becomes when he forgets that his gift was meant to be given.

The Jataka tales offer the happier opposite. In them the Bodhisatta is, again and again, a teacher at Takshashila who pours everything he knows into his pupils — the clever and the dull alike — asking only that they use it well. The measure of the teacher, the old tales insist, is not what he keeps but what he successfully hands on. That is the quiet moral at the heart of a note I was once shown on why academics choose their profession: many of us, it suggested, enter this life to escape a world of value-dilemmas and naked power games, and to practise instead a kind of "practical integrity", the daily, unglamorous habit of giving students what is true and letting them surpass us with it.

Why this matters

Consider what is actually happening in Indian education because the numbers tell a story of knowledge handed on at unprecedented scale. Higher education now enrols a record 4.5 crore students. For the seventh consecutive year, the female Gross Enrolment Ratio (31.2) has run ahead of the male, a Gender Parity Index of 1.08. Women are now 44% of all STEM enrolment and the majority in the Sciences. Beyond the campus, the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey records female labour force participation climbing to 40%, with rural participation leaping from 33% to 46% in five years. The Drone Didis are not an anecdote. They are the visible edge of a vast, quiet transfer of capability to people who were long kept dependent.

That transfer is exactly what an education system is for, and it is fragile. Morality and knowledge both shift with time: what counted as settled wisdom (about caste, about a woman's place, about what a village girl could never operate) is overturned within a generation. The *purdah* that once seemed eternal did not survive contact with the schoolroom. The teacher's task is not to freeze knowledge as it was handed to her, but to keep handing it on even as it changes under her hands, and to prepare students for dilemmas she herself never faced.

In reality

What does this mean for each of us? For students, in schools, colleges and universities, the lesson is to treat every teacher who gives freely as the rarest of allies and to also become a giver. The knowledge you are gaining is not a weapon to hold over others, but a gift meant to move through you to the next person. Mantravati Shakya's ₹300,000 mattered; her 50 students mattered more.

For faculty and academic instructors, the message is a reminder of why you chose this. You are not in the business of power but of its generous opposite. Resist the small temptations of Law 11: the withheld reference, the guarded technique, the student kept dependent to flatter your own indispensability. Your dignity lies not in being needed forever but in being outgrown with pride.

For academic administrators and leaders, including Vice-Chancellors, Deans, HoDs, IQAC and programme chairs, the task is to build institutions that reward giving rather than hoarding. This week, ask your IQAC to count one thing it has never counted: how many of your graduates have gone on to teach, train, or mentor others. Measure a department not only by the papers it keeps behind paywalls but also by the capability it

releases into the world. The best academic leader, like the best teacher, grows people who will not need her, and counts that as the achievement it is.

For student development and counselling units, the frame is quietly powerful. A student taught to see knowledge as something to share rather than as one to weaponise is a student inoculated against the loneliness of the power game. Help them understand that the 48 Laws promise a fortress and deliver a prison, and that the surer path to a life worth living runs through generosity.

For the academic bodies that shape what is taught — the Boards of Studies, Academic Councils and Examination Committees — the charge is to keep the curriculum as a living act of transmission. Build syllabi that equip students for the value-dilemmas of their time, not ours; assess whether they can use knowledge wisely, not merely hold it; and remember that an examination which rewards hoarding over understanding teaches the wrong philosophy before a single lecture is given.

The *48 Laws of Power* are not wrong about the world; they are a shrewd map of how power behaves in boardrooms and durbars. But they describe a closed game, a fixed pie divided by cunning. Knowledge is the one good that breaks the game because it is the only thing that grows when you give it away. The drone Mantravati Shakya learnt to fly did not become less hers when she taught 50 women to fly their own. Her power multiplied precisely because she refused to keep it scarce.

That is the teacher's secret and India's best hope. A nation that hands capability to its daughters in Etawah, and to the 4.5 crore students on its campuses, is not giving its advantage away. It is doing the one thing that makes a country larger: trusting its people with knowledge and letting them outshine the generation that taught them. The laws of power tell you to keep the gift locked in your hands. So, the test for any of us who teach, lead, or learn is a simple one: in the last month, did you make yourself a little more needed or a little more dispensable? The oldest wisdom, and the newest data, know which answer makes a nation larger: open your hands and watch it multiply.

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