The Teacher: Facilitator? Dictator? Innovator? Ethical Authority?

"You are such a convincing teacher" said the student. "Why?" asked the professor. "You are so modest." "But this is normal", replied the teacher. "No, most of our professors behave like half-Gods as if they have all the truth and we are nothing." I could not forget this interaction that I heard.

Violence against teachers is an increasing concern worldwide, especially at secondary school level with (male) teenagers attacking their teachers. In addition corporal punishment of children by teachers is still a legal means of punishment in 69 countries. In India, 83% of boys and 73% of girls experienced corporal punishment by their teachers in 2017, as UNESCO has reported in reference to the Global Learning Initiative:  Know Violence in Childhood. Violence and bullying among children as peers affects 9-25% of school children in Western countries. Violence in higher education is less obvious, taking the form of verbal threats, asking for bribes, trading sex for grades, unequal treatment and disrespect.

Violence is an expression of a lack of respect on both sides and it is often an attempt to dominate and control. How can we find the right balance between an authoritarian teaching style and one which is more laisser-faire? Is the teacher an authority who can command absolute obedience and subordination or is the student a person with  their own views, autonomy and dignity? Is the teacher just a facilitator for students who learn mainly on their own, as contemporary trends promote? Has the teacher – mainly in higher education – primarily to be an innovative thought leader stimulating students to engage in critical and creative thinking out of the box in order to make students fit for the future? Is the teacher a moral, ethical authority leading by example through her/his behaviour and integrity?

There is not one model of who or what a teacher is or could or should be, but in each case and across cultures, the ethical basis for the teacher-student and student-teacher relationship is simple and global: the teacher needs to have integrity, modesty and creativity. The student needs to have respect, critical creativity and curiosity.

Teachers' Day is celebrated every year in 94 countries –to express appreciation of and to give thanks to teachers for the public service that they carry out with great dedication and responsibility. This year marks the 21st anniversary of the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel, a good occasion to celebrate university teachers and to show them the respect that they are due. Why not also introduce within a university an annual Students' Day, to give  teachers and the community at large the opportunity to demonstrate their appreciation of and gratitude to students?

The Globethics.net focus on Ethics in Higher Education aims at contributing to this respectful teacher-student-teacher relationship, in its training of teachers and its students' programmes. Let us be a global community which says NO to all forms of violence in (higher) education and promotes a culture of mutual respect.

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