

TEACHING-LEARNING: A PERCEIVED REALITY

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Sitting in the herringbone style well designed classroom, Ramakanta first year MBA student was gazing at the timetable on his i-pad, to understand the schedule of sessions that were to follow that day in order to kill the time, as the professor for the next session was yet to enter the classroom. He appeared to be frustrated and baffled as he failed to learn anything in the previous lecture on Advanced Quantitative Techniques for Managers. As per the timetable the next session was Legal Aspects of Business and he couldn't resist the temptation to poke Nandini a fellow classmate, "What will we gain by studying this course, Legal Aspects of Business? When we all know that for all legal matters the organizations hire legal professionals or professional firms and we managers are not expected to dabble into legal matters."

Immediate came an equally sharp response from Nandini sitting around the corner, "Most of us shall be placed at customer facing positions, where all we will be required to do is to bring business for our organizations. Knowledge of these laws would be of very little use in our professional life, where we are expected to be a specialist of our domain."

Very reluctantly and trying to act modest, Mohit murmured in a low tone, "But, according to my little understanding the knowledge of law is very important as ignorance of land of law, is no excuse. So, I feel we must be conversant with legal aspects related to business". Ramakant who was not expecting this response from a fellow student immediately rebutted, "How much legal knowledge, do you think we can we acquire in a trimester of three months in a three credit course offered through a 30 contact hour course?"

Kamat, who normally used to sit silently at the last bench too joined the debate, "This little knowledge will be of very limited value, rather we should we studying something that we will be using more often like negotiation, writing skills, selling skills, interpersonal skills, etc. for which we have no course in our entire MBA programme."

"Both of you appear to have a merit in your argument. I think the right way to settle this debate will be to get opinion of our super seniors, say who graduated more than five years ago from our institute", said Harsimarn who seemed to be looking to put an end to this debate going on for sometime. In no time, few text messages were posted on alumni group created on facebook and whatsapp.

To their utter surprise, immediate came the responses from their alumni ranging from: "I have never used any of legal knowledge till now" to "I hardly remember any law, what to say of any provision, clause or sub clause that we wasted so much time remembering that too with case citations". Some of the posts were even going a step further "Practical world is completely different from theory that is taught in the classroom".

In the meantime, Nishu dialed the number of their immediate senior, Jaideep, who was the topper of the batch and secured a campus placement with a leading bank at a good package. "Jaideep, Hi! We are having an interesting discussion in the class regarding the application of learning that we derive from the courses like Legal

Aspects of Business. What are your views on it, as now you have been there in the field for more than six months? I am putting the phone on the speaker mode so that others can also hear you as well” “Nishu, and everybody, thank you for calling me and engaging me in this discussion. I not only miss you all but also the days that I spent with you all at the campus. Things are very different here, since morning to late night, I am meeting clients first to generate business for core banking and then do the cross selling. I have hardly used any conceptual knowledge from such like subjects. Rather, I feel I wasted my time on them. I should have used my time more on the extracurricular activities, projects, and reading quality books rather than those boring textbooks, which to my mind add very little value to what we are expected to do, at least during the initial years. Its not just my view, almost everybody that I am in touch with from my batch, echoes a similar sentiment. To sum it all, given a chance, I would do my MBA very differently from the way I did with the single minded focus on topping the batch and to have gold medalist written on my CV.” He put the phone the down with customary greetings.

Now, the theme of the debate became much broader then what it started with and Ruchika jumped into the discussion with over arching question, “How many of us are likely to use the models that we learnt in Operations Research and probability theorems of Quantitative Aptitude and how many of us will have to prepare books of accounting using the learning from our fearsome course of Financial Accounting?”

With good number of students of this MBA batch managing to barely pass these courses with very low grades in first and second trimester, this was an opportune moment to do the catharsis and vent their ire and agony. “Although I managed to get a pass grade in all these subjects, yet I can say with full confidence that I hardly learned anything that I can claim to be retaining after moving to third trimester”, remarked Satinder who was silent till now. “Yes, I agree with you. How can they expect us to learn these complex mathematical and intensive calculation based courses in short trimester of three months, its virtually impossible”, said Madhu who did her graduation with humanities before joining the MBA.

Mohit who by now was highly outnumbered both in the classroom as well as the responses received from the virtual world did not felt like quitting just like that tried giving one more argument “Then, why they have included it in our syllabus, there must be a strong reason behind it, they are well experienced professors and our Board of studies includes external experts from industry as well.”

“These so called updated and revised versions of syllabi at majority of MBA institutions are merely tinkered version of what has always been there for last 30-40 years. Yesterday, when I showed our scheme of first year to my dad, he said this is what it used to be when he was a student of MBA at the leading government university of our region”, said Ramakant with significant assertion and authority.

At this moment, when Ramakant and his supporting batch mates felt they have clinched the debate, the door opened and Dr. Neelkanth, Professor of Law at the school walked in and suddenly that customary silence, usually associated with respect engulfed the entire room. Professor, could sense the stark eeriness of the silence and thought of probing the class with the standard opening question, “What happened students?”

Students started looking at each other’s face as if asking, who will bell the cat? Ramakant who was feeling like a debate champion few seconds ago had lot to loose in terms of pride, if he continued with his silence. But, he was also likely to loose in

terms of grades and reputation in eyes of Prof, if he decided to continue in same spirit that he was leading the whole class few minutes ago. All gazes were on him as if asking, now say it, if you have guts. So, taking a cautious approach he softened his argument and said, "Sir, we were discussing the relevance of our MBA curriculum, to our professional careers".

"Very good, I am happy you are discussing such an important issue. Can I join the debate?" replied Prof. Neelkanth. This gave some confidence to the class to open up and present their argument. After a short pause, Nandini took the courage of asking, "Sir, what percentage of courses in our MBA programme we are likely to use in the kind of jobs that we are going to get after our MBA from our institute?"

Prof. Neelkanth could now clearly sense that he has stirred the hornet's nest and the message was loud and clear to him that this question pertains not only to curriculum in general but also to his subject. Very defensibly and carefully he started with his opening comments, "Students, the curriculum of MBA has evolved over the years, its not a recent development. All the courses are there because they are important for future managers."

"Sir, good percentage of our students last year got placed in Banking and Finance sector and another significant percentage got sales and marketing profiles. Few lucky ones got the HR and operation profile as well. How many of these would use any legal knowledge that you are going to impart to us this trimester?" said, Kamat who felt a decent encouragement while others were speaking.

Prof. Neelkanth felt the sand slipping below his feet and felt loss of words at the lack of some strong argument immediately coming to his mind. He never felt this would be the situation in his very second class this trimester. But, he suddenly felt a strong temptation to quickly end this debate and start with what he had planned for today's session. "Students, the knowledge of legal aspects, especially those related to business is very important for any manager. It will help you to be knowledgeable to not to err and then find yourself on the wrong side of the law of the land."

"Sir, I just want to know what percentage of legal knowledge of all that we need to know as manager, we will actually be acquiring this trimester?" asked Ramakanth thinking it to be his last question for the day. Prof Neelkanth who has studied law for five years (three years for LLB and two years for LLM) before earning his PhD rightfully replied, "Law is a vast and very deep discipline and in this short trimester you will get only basic understanding of some of the laws related to business, but not all of them."

"But, our evaluation in exam will be based on how well we remember articles, sub-articles, sections, clauses, sub-clauses and then cite proper case laws", asked Nandini and further added to it that "We are neither likely to remember them all after the final examinations nor to my perception, we gonna use them in our professional lives."

"Sir, I have no prior background in law related subjects and I doubt what all I can learn about various sections, clauses, sub clauses of different laws and important frequently cited cases in one trimester. I doubt what percentage of it I will be remembering till the time I might require to use it when I will become a mid-level or senior manager facing a situation that warrant the application of legal knowledge that I will acquire this trimester," politely asked Madhu with a false hope that his assertion might lead to change in the whole curriculum.

Prof. Neelkanth thought he had it enough. This was going too much out of his control and time has come to display his stamp of authority as he had only 30 sessions to complete a vast syllabus covering so many laws. Hence, he opted to give them all a strong narration with respect to the discipline and end this debate for once and all. "Law is a very specifically defined and delineated discipline; it has immaculately crafted body of knowledge, which is akin to science in itself for the manner in which it is defined by the constitution. Although its interpretation may vary, yet it's a technical subject where you are expected to thoroughly and precisely remember a lot in order to be right. You may ever use it or not, that's a separate question but law can be taught and evaluated only in a manner that it always have been. As we focus on academic rigour, I must make it point blank clear that you would be expected to give proper citations along with right sections and sub clauses in your answers." There was pin drop silence. The wishful thinking was completely replaced by the understanding of the challenge that they all were likely to face during the entire trimester.

Considering that battle has almost been won, Prof Neelkanth thought of reinforcing the message with what he felt would be right summary of the whole discussion, "Such like debates, will bring in no change as the scheme is now finalized for this batch and this course has to be taught whether anyone likes it or not". So, using his professorial authority Prof summed it up, "Students, you are all here by choice. Nobody compelled you to do MBA. The syllabuses across institutes and universities are almost the same. You may like it or not this course is a reality for your batch and is here to stay. So, its better that we focus our energy on learning fundamental aspects of law rather than wasting our time and energy on such like debates".

"I understand and empathize with your concern and I assure you that I will teach you this course in a such an interesting manner that you will remember it for a long time much beyond this trimester. Considering your concern that this course has no direct relationship with functional competencies and skill sets you would require for starting your career; I assure you that I will help you to prepare for your exams in a manner that does not take away too much time and you can secure good grades as well", were his closing comments to end the debate, which had already taken ten minutes from the allotted 60 minutes for the session.

"As per our course plan, we will today start with Company Law....." Asserted Prof. Neelkanth with full energy at his command and went towards the dais to open the power point file on the same topic for explaining the nuances of Company Law. Students by this time got to know at least one thing that it's in their short term pragmatic interest to not to say anything further but to open their notebooks and start taking notes as they have been religiously doing for different courses in the previous two trimesters. And the session on Introduction to Company Law soon picked up an accelerating pace in that herringbone style well designed classroom with students nodding their heads to the continuously flowing stream of sections, clauses and sub-clauses.

The class went quite smoothly and Prof. Neelkanth left the class at exact time as per the schedule and went back to his cabin thinking the students of this generation want to question everything and just want to get a degree and a job, that too preferably without stretching themselves. They want to put in minimum possible effort to learn and rarely go beyond what is expected to pass the exams.

The scene in the classroom was quite the opposite as murmuring started amongst the students. One could clearly feel that whatever they were saying the message was essentially the same: "It's of no use of giving feedback", "The things will remain as they were", "They teach us importance of being customer centric and see what they practice", "He is very stubborn.....he won't budge", "Don't worry I have notes of this course that I got from one of our senior",

Questions for analysis and discussion:

1. What is the core issue/problem to be solved in the case?
2. What are the associated issues/problems are depicted in this case?
3. If you were in the position of Prof. Neelkanth, how you would have handled the situation?
4. What general learning can we draw from this case situation that will help us to become better teachers?