

Cultivating Social Transformation: Expanding Pedagogical Boundaries

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Abstract:

The University of Dayton (USA) provides an educational program for the Society of Mary in India. This program began in 1997 and delivers a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree to diverse Indian students, many of whom come from tribal cultures. This article explores the rich challenges that this program poses for the faculty and students. Faculty are pushed to cross the pedagogical boundaries created by the different academic and cultural traditions. Indian faculty learns to practice and appreciate active and connected learning. American faculty learns to appreciate the role of language and narrative in the learning process. Tribal culture is used as a positive educational resource. Everyone involved in the program is moved to reflect on the role of education for social transformation.

Deepahalli, the Hindi word for “village of light,” is the home for the University of Dayton’s Bangalore Program. Deepahalli is about 26 kilometers southeast of the city center of Bangalore, which is referred to as the “Silicon Valley” of India because of the high tech development which has taken place there. Bangalore is also referred to as the “Garden City” because of the great variety of foliage which grows there throughout the year due to its moderate climate. Deepahalli embodies both of these characteristics. It is a place of lush natural foliage with high tech computers and internet access, classrooms, and a library. The symbol for Deepahalli is a burning oil lamp. For the students who come to Deepahalli to develop academically, this is the light of learning.

The University of Dayton’s Bangalore Program first accepted students in 1997. It has provided an opportunity for Indian students and professors as well as for American professors to expand the boundaries of their worlds, cultures, and learning experiences. Both authors are faculty of the University of Dayton (Ohio, USA), and have been actively involved with the establishment and development of this Program. One author, from the

Department of Philosophy, has been involved since the very conception of the Program, serving as the University of Dayton's liaison and coordinator and teaching philosophy in the June term. The other author, from the School of Education, has served for six years as the Executive Director of the Bangalore Program while teaching a range of courses including sociology of education. This article develops from our reflections upon our experiences and years of collaborative work. It is our sharing of the expanding of boundaries of our own learning and development as professional educators, "to derive meaning from [our] experience" (p. 322) as Garson has shared her experience of teaching at an undergraduate school of business in Egypt (2005). We first explain the history of the Program and then reflect on the manner in which the Program has helped us and others to expand beyond our traditional boundaries, learning new pedagogies and discerning more clearly the role of education in social transformation.

History and goals of the program

The Society of Mary (Marianists) is an international religious congregation of priests, brothers, and sisters within the Roman Catholic Church. It originated in France in 1817, founded by William Joseph Chaminade. The Marianists from the United States arrived in India in 1980 to work among the tribals of northern India. Soon after their arrival, young Indian men joined their ranks. Their present ministries include working with street children and rag pickers, elementary and secondary schools, and adult education.

The University of Dayton, a Catholic comprehensive university, was established by the Marianists in 1850, shortly after their arrival in the United States, and has become one of the major Catholic institutions of higher education in the USA. Marianist universities in the USA besides the University of Dayton are Chaminade University in Honolulu, Hawaii, and St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Marianists in the USA and in several countries throughout the world are also involved in elementary and secondary schools, parishes, retreat centers, and social ministries.

In 1997, the University of Dayton initiated an undergraduate program for the Society of Mary in Bangalore, India as a key component of the scholastic formation of the young Marianist brothers of the Region of India. This program offers a complete undergraduate degree, a B. A. with a major in philosophy.

Prior to the initiation of this Program, most Marianist brothers in India combined a course of study in philosophy with an Indian B.A. earned by correspondence. This was judged unsatisfactory for several reasons. The result was a split focus, an excessive academic load, and a lack of integration. The students were forced to lead a fragmented academic existence, pursuing the study of western philosophy and culture on the one hand, and working for a recognized B.A. degree by correspondence on the other. In addition, degrees achieved by correspondence seemed of doubtful quality. Moreover, this approach did not relate the materials studied to lived experience, nor did it facilitate the development of reflective judgment.

The Marianists wanted a program that would provide students with an educational foundation that enables them to have an integrated world vision anchored in a confluence of the Indian cultural heritage and the Christian cultural heritage. They wanted students to be able to think critically on the basis of this integrated world vision. Moreover, they wanted students to obtain a recognized educational degree that can serve as a basis for post-graduate work in India or abroad, either in master's level programs or professional courses of study. The degree needed to prepare students to carry out effective ministry in the contexts of a worldwide church and an international religious community which functions in a multi-faceted cultural setting. This preparation had to emphasize fluency in speaking, writing, reading, and understanding English. Moreover, the program needed to work with an understanding of the tribal identity of many of the students, recognizing that many of these students would return to teach in tribal areas (Toppo, 1995; Anamalai, 1999; Areeparampil, 1999; Raj (n.d.); Kispotta and Abraham, 2002).

The curriculum offered by the University of Dayton, a Marianist university, seemed particularly suited to meet these goals. The mission statement of the University of

Dayton states that it is a “diverse community committed, in the Marianist tradition, to educating the whole person and to linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service.” The University’s curriculum is guided by Marianist principles of education which emphasize educating for formation in faith; educating the whole person; educating for adaptation and change; educating for service, peace, and justice; and educating in a family spirit. This education is carried out in the context of an explicated understanding of the Catholic dimension of Christian faith. Students are encouraged to reflect on their faith commitments in the context of a world that is both pluralistic and ecumenical. Courses in philosophy and religious studies are particularly important to this process of discernment. The curriculum provides an excellent education that develops competencies and sets high standards; it connects theory with practice; and it educates both the mind and the heart. The importance of critical analysis and the value of the constant critique of society are emphasized as is the importance of a life of service. Individuals and groups are encouraged to work for peace and justice, recognizing the importance of counter-cultural positions. This education values experiential and service learning. Marianist education recognizes that the best education takes place in the context of the recognition of the explicit bonds and commitments that unite learners. It recognizes that each person has unique talents and liabilities and treats each person as an individual while emphasizing the importance of equality. It develops structures that support individual capabilities and differences (*Characteristics of Marianist Universities*, 1999).

The goals of the Indian Marianists and the principles that guide the University were of fundamental importance in developing the Bangalore Program. The primary purpose of this extension program is to teach students who are already committed to the tasks of serving the poor in India through education and social work. The previous formation of the Bangalore students emphasizes spiritual and psychological maturation leading to an initial commitment and experience in service of India’s poor. For such students, further education must aim not merely at the imparting of information but, above all, at providing means to integrate knowledge gained from a variety of disciplines into a meaningful and viable synthesis. The program emphasizes studies that deal with problems of fundamental human concern and so help already motivated students

understand these problems in a deeper and more comprehensive way. The program aims to prepare students for their future work as well as for higher, more specialized studies in the various professions (education, social work, Christian ministry) through which they will translate their commitment into action. The students in this program are part of the international Marianist community, which is committed to active participation in the quest for a more just and humane society. The Program is intended to prepare students to work effectively in the contexts of a worldwide church and an international religious community with the aim of having a positive impact on society.

In implementing this Program, the boundaries of the University of Dayton have been expanded, as have the educational experiences of those involved in the Program. Each person who has experienced the program, either as student or professor, has expanded his or her boundaries of what it means to teach and learn. Faculty have been pushed to cross the pedagogical boundaries created by the two academic and cultural traditions. Indian faculty learned to practice and appreciate active and connected learning. American faculty learned to appreciate the role of language and narrative in the learning process. Everyone involved in the program has been moved to reflect on the role of education for social transformation. As Ambrose Pinto (2004) notes in *Higher Education, Ideology and Politics*, while it is often claimed that education is the most powerful tool for social transformation, it is usually the elite who have access to education. Providing access to education for tribals has required development of cultural understanding for all involved in the Program.

Retaining rigor, developing active and connected learning

Most of the faculty employed to teach in the Bangalore Program have been educated in and have taught in the Indian system of higher education. Higher education in India emphasizes lecture, memorization, the prescribed textbook, and examinations (V. Raina & Dhand, 2000; M. Raina & Srivastava, 2000). This serves students well in terms of transmitting a body of knowledge, but it does not provide them with skills in practical reasoning (Alexander, 2001). The Indian faculty is well versed in communicating the

canon of knowledge of both western and Indian philosophy. Indeed, philosophy graduates from the Dayton campus who have volunteered time as tutors in India consistently praise the knowledge of the philosophy faculty. This faculty is rigorous in their demands of students to be able to explain the positions and conceptual frameworks of various philosophers. However, as Ambrose Pinto (2004) notes, Indian education “is a dual system, encouraged by the state, for strengthening and perpetuating the unjust exploitation of the have-nots by the haves” (p. 53). In the Bangalore Program, most of the students come from tribal areas and so have not had access to the best of Indian education. Educating tribal students requires faculty to understand that “There is no culture of individual performance among tribal people” (Toppo, 1995, p. 109). Faculty need to move this understanding into pedagogical practice, developing skills in cooperative learning. A major challenge that Indian faculty face in teaching in the Bangalore Program is to retain their rigorous standards while helping students connect their education in philosophy to other disciplines and to a practical life of service.

Other aspects of the pedagogy of the University of Dayton are also quite different from that of most Indian colleges and universities (*University of Dayton Bulletin*). The whole program, like most universities in the USA, is based upon semester credit hours and one’s accumulative grade point average (GPA). Several universities in India are beginning to adopt this system and switch from the yearly examination system of the British university. To a certain extent, each term functions on its own, with its own set of courses for a specific year level and with a week for examinations related to what was taught and learned during the semester. Students receive a mark sheet for each term, which includes a mark for each course taken that term. There is a GPA for that term and a cumulative GPA. The marking scheme is also different from most Indian and Asian universities with marks taking on different percentages. For example, passing is 60% or better, with an A being 95% or better. The marks utilize letters ranging from A to F (A (95-100), A- (90-94), B+ (87-89), B (84-86), B- (80-83), C+ (77-79), C (74-76), C- (70 - 73), D (60 -69) and F (59 and below). The marks are not solely based on one examination but are indicative of the student’s work throughout the term and include more than performance on examinations throughout the term. Assessment is also

determined by how well a student participates throughout the term in the course through discussions, presentations, and written assignments which often include a research paper. Both students and Indian professors need to adjust to a different language of marks and assessment from that to which they are accustomed. Many students and Indian professors refer to this as “the UD system” of teaching and marking, but in actuality, it is typical of most universities in the USA.

Connecting learning in the various disciplines of the liberal arts is a vital part of the University of Dayton pedagogy. This curriculum helps students understand how knowledge in one discipline relates to knowledge in another. The University of Dayton also requires that a student majoring in a discipline of the arts be exposed to courses in science and quantitative reasoning. Students do not study only in the disciplines of their major and minor. For example, the students at Deepahalli not only take courses in their major of philosophy and in their minor of religious studies, but also take courses in the areas of the social sciences, arts, sciences, and literature. In addition to requiring a breadth of courses, the curriculum provides students with the experience of integrating and connecting specific courses. For example, in the first year of study at the University of Dayton, all students complete a humanities base. This is a set of courses in English, history, philosophy, and religious studies that are connected by means of common texts and that all include a set of common themes that enable students to address the question, “What does it mean to be human?” Faculty teaching in these courses model an integrated approach to learning that recognizes the contributions of many disciplines.

Faculty and students in the Bangalore Program addressed these new pedagogical demands in creative and thoughtful ways. Many examples of the Deepahalli experience illustrate the richness of their pedagogical development reflective of Alexander’s (2001) understanding of pedagogy: “Pedagogy, then, encompasses both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates, for example, the character of culture and society, the purposes of education, the nature of childhood and learning and the structure of knowledge...there can be no teaching without pedagogy or pedagogy without teaching” (p. 513).

Mathew Areeparampil (1999) suggests that tribal culture can be used as a positive educational resource. He refers to studies by Manmatha Kundu (1994) which identify qualities such as cooperation, peer and group learning, humour, and independence and responsibility. Faculty built on these qualities in developing seminar days as an annual event. Originally this was a one-day program but evolved into a two-day program. The seminar days are based upon a topic of concern, identified several months before the day itself, such as, “Conversions in India,” “Hinduvata,” “Fundamentalism,” and “India’s Experience of Globalization.” These days usually include a presentation by a guest speaker, a series of presentations and papers prepared by the students followed by a time for discussion, and brief responses to the speakers by the faculty. The papers are prepared with the assistance of the faculty and may also be utilized as an assignment within some courses, such as writing courses or a philosophy or religious studies course. Students, who do not deliver a paper, are usually requested to write an essay about the symposium in an English course. This day is planned and prepared for cooperatively by the faculty and the students and both look forward to this day as a unique connected learning experience. These events celebrate the qualities of the tribal culture and integrate them into a full education.

Addressing differences in grading and curriculum required a different approach. Students were quick to learn and embrace both the system of grading and the emphasis on connecting courses. Faculty was pressed to provide the expected learning experiences. In order to facilitate these experiences, faculty hold regular lunch meetings one day a week to focus upon information items and share what is happening within their courses, reporting how things are developing with the students. These meetings provide faculty with the opportunity to connect with each other as the facilitators and guides of the Deepahalli learning community. Many times, faculty members focus upon vocabulary within their disciplines which need to become more familiar with usage by the students in various contexts. A vocabulary word list might be developed for the next few weeks and faculty members within their different courses use these words as often as possible and in different contexts. Faculty also agrees to read papers from each other’s classes and discuss how they would evaluate and comment on the papers. They discuss the progress

of individual students and of specific groups and share ideas for helping students progress. As new faculty is hired, the experienced faculty explains the grading system and the curriculum and work to encourage new faculty to experiment with different ways of teaching and learning.

As faculty became comfortable in these discussions, they began to do more to integrate courses and materials from a wide range of disciplines. For instance, the introductory literature course is integrated with two basic communication courses which are part of the competency skill requirement of the University. A course on modern fiction utilizes novels which represent some recent and contemporary philosophies. Students apply philosophical reasoning and the theories they have studied as they journal their own experiences intersecting with those in a novel that is being read and studied, such as *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. During a term, it often happens that a written assignment done in one course is expanded into a written assignment for another course. For example, utilizing the skills for doing a research paper on a specific philosopher is taught both from the grammatical perspective of the Modern Language Association writing style and with a focus on methods for doing philosophical research about what is addressed in the 20th century philosophy course.

The philosophy courses also include connected learning each term between Asian philosophies and Western philosophies. For example, while studying Darshanas or the Rig Veda, students are also studying Western perspectives and traditions concerning metaphysics and epistemology. Some class sessions are combined for debate and discussion on topics, such as, the nature of being and nothingness, the origins of knowledge, understanding reality, and the notion of spirit or soul. The philosophy professors in the University of Dayton's Bangalore Program are Indians and from different backgrounds themselves. One male professor is a Catholic Christian with many years of teaching experience at various Christian educational institutes and the other two are women, one Hindu and the other Muslim, with several years experience of teaching at Bangalore University and other educational institutions, including Christian ones. All three professors are involved with the students meeting for discussions on an array of

topics while the students are studying other philosophical subjects, such as, the philosophy of religion or ethics. Some philosophy courses are taught by professors from the University of Dayton and during these terms, some class sessions are given to integrating and connecting with the other philosophy professors and topics. At times, the professors sit in on each other's classes and participate both with teaching and participating in students' questions and concerns.

The final philosophy paper provides a culminating experience in the Program's approach to learning. The paper requires students to integrate Western and Indian philosophy on a specific point, issue, or topic of the students' choice. They must also integrate a perspective on this topic from another discipline area to which they have been exposed during the Program, such as sociology, religious studies, science, or literature. This paper demonstrates the student's skills for doing research and writing, while synthesizing and analyzing various disciplinary approaches to and perspectives on a specific topic. Some of the topics have included various questions dealing with social rights and responsibilities, justice, reality, telos and causation, human nature and the ideal society.

Connected learning is experienced many times within any given term as students are given assignments in various courses in which they must reflect upon their own experiences and relate these to a theory or academic perspective. For example, in the sociology of education course, students write their autobiography of schooling experiences and reflect upon these from Paulo Freire's theory of education for critical consciousness and rejection of the banking method (1989; 1990), and also utilizing Krishna Kumar's social critiques of Indian educational practices (1994). Likewise, in English courses, essays are assigned on topics of their own experiences, for example, a descriptive essay of their home state or the cause and effects of different social problems in local culture and society. In the sociology courses, the focus is on social concerns and issues for India and from their experiences, for instance, the role of women in India, education of tribals, the plight of street children, and migration to urban centers. These

courses are an integration of several courses including anthropology, modern problems of sociology and sociology of religion.

In the University of Dayton's Bangalore Program, connectedness exists not only in a variety of learning experiences but also in the total learning community. Faculty and students connect together in understanding knowledge and new ways of communicating and learning about knowledge, society and culture. This connectedness affirms "teaching [as] an intentional and moral activity: it is undertaken for a purpose and is validated by reference to educational goals and social principles as well as to operational efficacy". Furthermore, this connectedness of learning "in any culture...requires attention to a range of considerations and imperatives: pragmatic, certainly, but also empirical, ethical and conceptual" (Alexander, 2001, p. 517). In this educational process, Indian faculty and students affirm an academic rigor that informs moral and social action.

Language and narrative in the learning process

Faculty accustomed to teaching at the University of Dayton have developed many skills that promote active and connected learning and that enable students to integrate their education with their daily lives and career choices. However, they assume an approach to learning that emphasizes abstract concepts and the importance of an essay style of writing. Teaching in the Indian context, and especially teaching students from tribal backgrounds in India, has resulted in a deepened appreciation for the subtleties of language and the role of narrative in the learning process and for the rich function narrative can serve in educating for a life of service and reflection.

The students who enter into the University of Dayton's Bangalore Program have satisfactorily completed the equivalent of upper level secondary education as demonstrated on the appropriate examinations held in their home states, passing with either distinction, first or second class. Some students who only earned a third class result on the examinations are conditionally accepted into the program and are assured

the necessary tutoring assistance which they might need to acquire at least a C- average to continue studying in the program.

The earlier schooling experiences of the students are varied. Few have been schooled in English medium and most of them have been schooled in their own local languages or Hindi. Some students have been schooled in residential schools while others have studied in local day schools. Some students have attended government schools and others either private Catholic or Hindu schools. Likewise, some students are from states, which have a high level of literacy and good schools, such as, Tamilnadu, Andra Pradesh, and Kerala. Other students are tribals and mainly come from states which have low levels of literacy and a schooling system which is in need of much development, such as, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Orissa. In point of fact, the majority of the students who have completed the program and the present students are tribals from the north of India.

Some of the students had no previous exposure to English language either as a formal course or usage until they joined the Marianists. As aspirants to the Marianists, they experienced a year of English courses at various levels, primarily beginning and intermediate. To amend for this limited usage of English, within the Bangalore Program, a term is spent on English grammar, written and oral usage, before taking the university level English courses of composition and literature. Throughout each year of the program, English courses of composition and/or literature are required of the students. Thus, each student gains a body of knowledge about English and uses it daily and throughout all of the courses each term. English is the medium of all of the courses of the program, both for instruction and assessment. Some of these courses are offered by Indian English professors and some by American English professors. At times, there is a conflict between these two modes of the English language, but the Indian English usage is respected and given the preference. This demands some adjustment on the part of the American professors and contributes to moments of humor in classes as language is negotiated.

A more difficult challenge for both Indian and American faculty, but especially for American faculty, is finding ways of helping students gain abilities in abstract thinking and writing when their cultural backgrounds and educational experiences have not emphasized this approach and have often worked in ways that are counter-productive for the development of such thinking. As Toppo (1995) notes, tribal children receive an education that uses textbooks with examples that are unrelated to their lives. He writes, “The sad consequence of these unintelligible textbooks is that children sit in the class hour after hour, day after day, month after month, without gaining anything. This becomes again a habit” (p. 108). What tribal students do bring to a classroom is a rich narrative imagination which, if called upon, can help them move into more abstract ways of thinking, while recognizing the practical implications of the abstractions.

The common reading used by all first-year philosophy classes in the humanities base is Plato’s *Apology*. In using this text, faculty in Dayton ask students to reflect on the meaning of the examined and the unexamined life. In beginning with this text, there is a certain agreement with Martha Nussbaum (1997) that “the unexamined life threatens the health of democratic freedoms, and the examined life produces vigor in the nation and freedom in the mind” (p. 49). Students are often asked to write a short essay on the claim that the unexamined life is not a human life. In teaching this text in the Bangalore Program, it became immediately clear that many students could simply repeat Socrates’ words or the words of the faculty member, but they were not grappling with the implications of the claim for their own lives and their own country.

With the recognition that tribal culture is full of songs and stories that are told together, a meaningful way of approaching the issue raised by the *Apology* was developed. Rather than asking students to explain what Socrates said, they are asked to write a narrative that helps them think about what it means to examine their lives. They are asked to make up a story or tell one that they have learned. Most students select the second approach. They tell a story that is familiar to them from their own culture. These stories often emphasize the importance of people working together and being responsible for each other and usually involve a community, rather than an individual, engaged in

self-examination. Students spend time perfecting the story, often telling it to the faculty member and then going away to write something more clearly. The stories are shared in the classroom and students help each other perfect the telling of the story. Only then are students asked to make an abstract move. They think about what the narrative shows them about what an examined life is. They move from narrative to definition. Then they formulate a definition and develop an introduction to their narrative that proposes a definition of an examined life and uses the narrative to illustrate that definition. As they read other philosophers in the course of the term, they return to the narratives and asked if a specific philosopher means the same thing or something different by “examination.” Using the narrative approach allows students to develop skills in abstraction, but it also greatly enriches the conversations about the examined life.

American faculty learned that the narrative imaginations that the tribal students brought to their education allowed them to enter into penetrating moral thinking. By telling stories, they approach the question of the nature of virtue and how virtues can be developed and destroyed. Beginning with a story enables them to empathize with others and to be open to differing opinions on what constitutes virtue and what the virtues are. There is a commitment to responsibility and a desire to identify what really can advance the common good. All of this enables them to begin to articulate in more abstract terms what they already grasp in narrative form. They and the faculty recognize that the abstract grasp is not a better understanding. Both forms are helpful, and the two together are richer than either alone. A one-credit class on friendship during a term was a particularly rich experience of the contributions of narrative imagination to the learning experience. While the course was only one-credit out of twelve or fifteen that each student was taking, the richness of their accounts of friendship led to discussions at meals and in many other classes. Students pulled in Aristotle, Cicero, and many other thinkers as they told stories of friendships and pondered over the advantages and disadvantages of friendship for life in a community. Faculty and students engaged in conversations that resulted in deep discernment and enriched lives for all involved.

Opening boundaries, transforming learning together

The examples provided illustrate the many opportunities that the Program presents to “redefine the teacher-student relationship in ways that allow students to draw upon their own experiences as real knowledge” (Giroux, 1992, p.136). Social transformation has taken place within the Bangalore Program. In deliberating together about the meaning and process of education, faculty members and students have come to appreciate the wealth of human potential in each other. Actualizing human potential and developing individual capabilities has required that each person move beyond his or her own initial presuppositions about learning and share the insights, experiences, and approaches of others. In opening the capabilities that others bring to the educational experience, each one has become a better educator. Perhaps, most importantly, the students from the program who have themselves begun to teach have become better educators.

Graduates who are now teaching utilize some of the pedagogies which they have experienced in their own learning process. They have reflected upon their experiences within the Bangalore Program and upon how they learned, and now share these methods and approaches with elementary and secondary students of schools for tribals in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa. Some now serve as the principals of these schools and have their teachers reflect upon the characteristics of Marianist education. They provide opportunities for connected learning and a variety of learning experiences in these schools so that students do more than simply memorize and sit examinations. Workshops and meetings for teachers assist this process for ongoing learners and educators. Two students who completed the University of Dayton’s Bangalore Program have succeeded in doing graduate studies at other universities in the USA and have adjusted to the demands and environment of studying in another country and culture. So the process of cultivating social transformation and expanding pedagogical boundaries does not cease after leaving Deepahalli. Students and faculty continue in their own transformation and are transformers of education as they move to new locations and return to former locations, both in Asia and in the USA.

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