A Student’s Lament - “How does this help me?” Dr. Shashank R. Atre

Every teacher has heard these sometimes annoying and frustrating words from one or many students in their class. If they did not say it … then believe it, they are thinking about it. Today’s student is seeking value in their education, value of their tuition money that is. Pursuit of a college degree purely to seek knowledge and pursue academic excellence is not the main goal of most of the college students today. Since they are paying a lot of money to get a degree, the students want to ensure that ‘money spent = subject matter learned sufficient to get a job.’ Thus, for today’s college professor to become wistful and nostalgic about the “good old days” when there was “real education” in the classroom is unrealistic, myopic, and may be even unfair.

Walk into any faculty lounge and you may overhear a conversation between two or more faculty about how today’s student has everything when it comes to resources – computers, internet, and all other technology, which the faculty did not have. The “old-timers” lament that these kids have it so easy. The complaint is that today’s students do not read, or think for themselves, or how everything has to be explained to them. Even though there may be an element of the truth to that, is not that the complaint of every previous generation?

My recollection of my college years now may be through rose-colored glasses. In reality, the professors were really not teachers, or instructors, or guides, or mentors, but they were lecture-givers. Or in my college they were “writing the lecture on the board with their back to us-ers.” We had to learn most of the concepts on our own; it was a hard and time-consuming process. I wonder how many concepts were never learned because the professors never took time to explain or at least show the way. Let us face it …. bad teachers have been around longer than bad students.

Evolution is not just merely a Scientific Law that applies to Life Sciences, it applies to life in general and every day things. We the teachers also have to evolve and adapt to the modern students, to the technology, and the ever-changing world. We cannot be the “academic dinosaurs” of the past. Those old-style professors who stubbornly refuse to adapt are slowly becoming “extinct.”

There should be no place for academic snobbishness in the classrooms. The plate of today’s cyber-student is more than full. The technology has raised the degree of difficulty in the classroom. The quantity and the quality of tasks a modern student has to perform is an order of magnitude more than the previous generations. Which one of us old-timers remembers taking so many quizzes and exams? Who remembers doing a lot of group activities, projects, and writing a lot of research papers? I certainly don’t!

Throughout history, all great teachers have been great communicators. They made ideas relevant, comprehensible, and most importantly accessible. Students are open to learning new things if they can see the relevance. That is why we need to start small. We need to show them how a particular concept is applicable in the real world. One small discovery may lead to a life of continued learning.

So, the next time a flustered and exasperated student asks you, “How does this help me?” - Show them.