

Commentary

Teaching And Learning Process in Social Sciences at Tribhuvan University: A Need to Move From A Boot-Camp To A Bazaar Model

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The history of teaching social sciences at Tribhuvan University in Nepal at the graduate (MA) and undergraduate levels (IA and BA) spans thirty-seven years.¹ Tribhuvan University still monopolizes undergraduate and graduate education in social sciences in Nepal.² There are over two dozen departments under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The main social science departments are Economics, English, Geography, History, Home Science, Nepali, Nepalese History, Culture and Archeology, Philosophy, Political Science, Population Education, Psychology and, Sociology and Anthropology. Central departments of most of these disciplines are located at Kirtipur in Kathmandu. Some selected campuses in the Kathmandu Valley and in other major urban centers, such as Pokhara, Biratnagar, Birgunj and Janakpur, offer graduate degree programs in selected social science fields. Over eighty campuses within the Tribhuvan University system, scattered in various parts of the country, offer undergraduate courses in social sciences as well. Except the Department of Population Education which is financially supported by the United Nation's Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), all other departments in the social sciences suffer financially and academically from insufficient resources to run their programs.

Many problems currently facing the departments have roots in a “boot camp” model of teaching and learning process that has been evolving

1 This article is a revised version of a section of a paper, “Sociological and Anthropological Teaching and Research in Nepal: Western Adaptation versus Indigenization”, presented in a national seminar on Social Sciences in Nepal organized by the Research Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) with support from UNESCO, Kathmandu, Nepal, September 13-15,1995. For details about the issues in social science teaching see Sharma (1974), Lohani (1984) and CNAS (1995).

2 In the fields of science and management the recently opened Kathmandu University already excels over Tribhuvan University.

since the establishment of Tribhuvan University in 1959. The Ad Hoc Review Committee (1988:9) of the Department of Sociology of the University of California at Berkeley, chaired by Professor Charlan Nemeth, defines the term “boot camp model” thus:

Every student follows essentially the same routine from beginning to end, from courses to examinations to written work and dissertation. Specialization occurs late.³

By a “boot camp model” I, however, mean a teaching and learning system wherein neither faculty members nor students have any significant say in the management of the teaching and learning process, including admissions, design of and choices in courses, assignments, exams and grading systems. Tribhuvan University made significant efforts to shift from the “boot camp” model to a more liberal one by implementing the New Education Plan in the early seventies. It was a positive step towards increasing the quality of teaching and learning at the university but the university abandoned it a few years later due to political reasons.

For good or bad, both graduate and undergraduate departments attract a large number of students every year due to a lack of other options in Nepal. Many graduates in sociology and anthropology, in economics, and in population education work with various national and international non-governmental organizations that are actively engaged in rural poverty alleviation programs. Furthermore, many faculty members serve in high level political, diplomatic, and bureaucratic positions, and almost all of them are engaged in research work as well as teaching. Some of these disciplines, therefore, have become very glamorous.

Problems

Many departments are poised to provide quality education in social sciences comparable to that of any prestigious schools in the West but the problems discussed below prevent this potential from being realized. Both graduate and undergraduate departments and their programs and activities are heavily regimented in the Tribhuvan University system. Hiring/firing, promotion and tenuring of faculty members are highly regimented. Distribution of office space and family housing for faculty members is regimented. Moreover, admission of students, examinations and grading

³ The University of Chicago may be taken as an example that tends toward the “boot camp” model.

methods, allocation of class rooms, and even curricula are highly regimented.

All these critical areas of decision-making are remote-controlled from “above” by the Education Minister, Vice-Chancellor, Rector, Registrar, Dean, and Principal. In the current regimented education system neither faculty members nor students have a voice or choice in the matters of their common concern. There was and is an iron curtain between the higher authorities and the department heads, between a department head and faculty members, and between faculty members and students.

The university should demolish the long-standing “boot camp” model to adopt a “bazaar model”. The Ad Hoc Review Committee of the Department of Sociology at Berkeley (1988:9-10) defined the term “bazaar model” thus:

In consultation with faculty and peers, students choose individualized courses from a wide array of alternate sequences. There are few required courses and even these are often specified as a choice within a limited set. Examinations and other proofs of competence are employed with considerable variation from student to student in the precise form of these proofs. Specialization occurs relatively early.⁴

By a “bazaar model” I, however, mean a teaching and learning system where both faculty members and students have a significant say in making decisions about curriculum, faculty recruitment, assignments, exams, and grading. It is only in a “bazaar model” that both faculty members and students can contribute their best in enhancing the quality of education in the departments, and ultimately, in making some contribution to overcome the current situation of underdevelopment of the country.

Many problems now facing the departments are due to weak academic, institutional and financial leadership in most of the departments. Weak leadership, further crippled by the bureaucratic and political maze has been responsible for a slow growth of the departments' programs and activities. Uncontrolled student admissions in popular departments (such as in sociology and anthropology), frozen promotions for “over eligible” senior faculty members, stagnant curriculum, lack of infrastructure and audio-visual equipment, non-availability of reading materials (or “readers”) for the students, non-use of departmental

⁴ The University of California at Berkeley is an example of this model.

libraries, frequent absence of some teachers from their classes, and minimal benefits from affiliated international programs are some of the indicators of weak leadership. Departmental policies related to faculty visits abroad, leave, temporary faculty hiring, faculty seminars and workshops, and dissertation management are non-existent. Sporadic faculty meetings and continuing “blockades in communication”, along with the absence of policies on these basic matters have done more damage to faculty members’ and students’ efforts to raise the quality of education in the departments.

Consequences of the “Boot Camp” Model

One of the major worrisome consequences of the continuing “boot camp” model of teaching and learning process at the Tribhuvan University is a rapidly decaying academic environment. After the successful People's Movement of 1990 and the subsequent re-establishment of a multi-party political system in Nepal, the leadership of the University has become very much politicized. Changes in the government force changes in the University authorities even though, in theory, the university is an autonomous institution.

Departments can neither attract very bright faculty members nor hold a few such faculty members as they prefer to graze in green pastures elsewhere. Both undergraduate and graduate students do not get adequate opportunities to learn new skills and ideas in their disciplines. This is one of the reasons why only a few students show up regularly in the class rooms though the number of enrolled students may be ten times more. The teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom has little to do with practical applications in the real world. It is no surprise, then, that many Tribhuvan University graduates show poor performance during interviews for various positions in governmental and non-governmental organizations. Only a few graduates succeed academically and professionally solely because of their genius and efforts.

Any change in the teaching and learning process in such a “boot camp” model has to trickle down from the top. Any efforts made by sincere faculty members and students are frustrated when the “Tribhuvan University elephant” refuses to move even an inch. Class room activities are very dull in terms of creative thinking, and capable faculty members get heavily involved in consulting research work for various international and national development organizations. There are three main reasons for this situation: i) to make a living; ii) to sharpen their theoretical and

methodological skills; and iii) to maintain a balance between teaching and research.

Neither are students prepared to learn the most from their teachers nor does the university system allow faculty to utilize research and consulting experience in a fruitful way in their interactions with students. The main activity of any department within the Tribhuvan University framework is teaching, not research. In contrast, social research is the only activity of researchers working with two of the four research centres, namely, the Research Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), and the Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA). Members of these centres do not have to teach at all. The organization of Research Centres and departments within the university, and the separation of research and teaching activities of the faculty, thus prevent integration of research experience into the curriculum. It is certain that the quality of higher education in the social sciences will not get better under the existing “boot camp” model of teaching and learning in Tribhuvan University. There is a need to move away from this to a “bazaar model.”

What Should Be Done?

The departments and higher university authorities should take up many short term and long term measures to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the social sciences. There is no doubt whatsoever that the university should replace the current “boot camp” model by a “bazaar” model. The student unions should exert pressure on the university authorities to do so. Below I set out some recommendations that I believe would allow Tribhuvan University to begin to realize its potential as the primary purveyor of social science teaching and as a center for social science research that would address the needs of the country.

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

- The university should scrap current regimented system of eight courses in two years, allowing students to study for a minimum of two to a maximum of five or six years.
- The current practice of five-day-a-week, four-hour-a-day lecture based classes should be replaced by more innovative and practicable interactive and creative teaching and learning methods.
- The vice-chancellor, rector and registrar, if any of them is a social scientist, should teach at the undergraduate level.

- Leadership of the university and the departments should be taken by persons who can bring money to run the departments' teaching and research programs.
- It is now high time to demolish the traditional single department system by restructuring inter-disciplinary departments in accordance with the needs and demands of the country. Then only graduates would be able to contribute significantly in their professional works. Following the lead of Population Studies, conventional departments, such as History, Economics, Political Science and Sociology and Anthropology, should be reorganized into interdisciplinary departments, such as departments of Natural Resource Management, Human Resource Development, Rural Development, and Ethnic Studies.

Departments

- Both graduate and undergraduate departments should be given full authority to run their teaching and research programs in their own way, offering courses in accordance to student demands as well as faculty interests and expertise.
- The departments should have control over hiring of faculty members.
- Single departments should not monopolize class rooms. When class rooms are not in use any needy department should have a right to use them.
- Departments should aggressively forge external linkage with concerned Ministries of His Majesty's Government of Nepal (such as the Ministry of Local Development), Commissions (such as the National Planning Commission), and International Non-Governmental Organizations and donors (such as GTZ, USAID, HELVETAS, and SNV), to develop a meaningful exchange relationship in research and internships.
- Each department should be reviewed every five years by an independent panel of reputed social scientists who are not associated with the department to be reviewed. Their recommendations about the strengths and weaknesses of the department should be seriously taken by concerned authorities.

Student

- Orientation about admission policies, program, exams, funding, research proposal writing, dissertation, publications, and teaching as well as research careers should be given to students.

- Students, especially graduate students, should be allowed to take courses of their interest in any department if they have completed their minimum course requirements set by the departments, and if they have completed pre-requisites for specific courses they are interested in.
- Graduate students should be encouraged to develop experimental courses on contemporary issues independently and to organize seminars by themselves. Later, popular courses should be elevated to a regular course of the department.
- Faculty and students should have a chance to work together in a research project and to co-author articles for seminars and publications.

Faculty

- A job-talk should be mandatory for any candidate for a faculty position.
- Preparation of reading lists and course readers should be mandatory for all faculty members.
- Departments should introduce student evaluation of teachers and the results should be made available to students and faculty members.
- Development of a mentoring program could enhance the teaching and research capabilities of junior faculty members. The departments should organize workshops about teaching techniques and strategies, and research findings at the faculty level.
- Faculty promotions should be based on the quality of published academic books and articles.
- Faculty salaries should be at least 50% of, if not equivalent to, the market rate of social scientists. Salaries of social scientists in the market range from ten to twenty times more than the current Tribhuvan University pay scale.

Conclusion

Higher education in the social sciences in Nepal should not be a luxury commodity. Instead it should help to develop human resources necessary for alleviating poverty in the twenty-first century. Nepal should not reproduce poverty in the coming century. Social scientists can contribute significantly in achieving the goal of poverty alleviation, but this potential may be realized only if Tribhuvan University is ready to move from the existing “boot camp” to a “bazaar model” of teaching and learning in the social sciences.

I have written this article as a participant-observer of Tribhuvan University, both as a student during the seventies and as a faculty member since the eighties. I sincerely hope that it will generate a healthy and rational debate among faculty, students, and parents. We can make a difference if we think rationally and act passionately. It is never too late to start.

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