

Building Supportive Culture in Classrooms

~ Pritha Chakrabarti



Our education system has long been a site of celebration of “merit”, where from the pre-primary stage to the highest degree, we pit students against each other in standardized competitive examinations that judge and decide who gets in and who remains outside the system. There is not much that can be done – for to do that, a systemic change is needed that is outside the purview of teachers who are struggling to juggle between playing the role of the ‘perfect teacher’ and the ‘perfect employee’. What can be done, rather, is bring about a small change in the classrooms, where alongside the unavoidable standardized tests that the institution or system demands, a more supportive as opposed to a competitive culture can be built. Teachers can create a classroom environment where every student feels valued, irrespective of the marks or grade they are awarded by the institution. Surely teachers have heard this before, albeit in theory, and no one knows it better than them how difficult a feat this could be, especially in this pandemic ridden world. But what if you were told that there is a way this could be achieved by giving agency to your students to figure out things for themselves? Before you ask, this is not a way to shirk away from your duties but an opportunity for you to bond with your students, having them bond with each other and for them to connect with the subject you are teaching.



Many of our boards and their syllabus makers have come up with measures to achieve just that, a case in point being the allocation of marks to projects. It is however easy to lose sight of the intentions behind such policies, and often, in the process of translation in a real classroom situation, the intentions are lost in implementation or worse, converted to yet another routine task. What if we paused for a moment to think of the purpose of such initiatives? Can they help us build a more supportive classroom environment? It can be argued that this is indeed possible if we rescued project work from being a site of aesthetic judgement and treated them more as a collaborative tool of learning. This is not a new method and those of you who teach in pre-primary or primary levels are surely aware of the perks of group activity. Unfortunately, by the time our students enter middle school and start engaging with subject-specific knowledge, the competitive system pushes them to become increasingly reclusive and result-oriented. In other words, exams become the holy grail of judging their merit. It is not a new sight in classrooms where many students are seen to employ all possible trickery to prevent any classmate from looking into their work during tests. Is it simply to prevent cheating? One must agree, it also has its root in a competitive culture where students begin to care less and less about learning and more on achieving the top score in class. We often see students making this a habit even outside the examination scenario, thus pointing to a behavioural change that continues well into their college days as well as workplaces where they find it difficult to work as a team player.



It would be interesting to investigate the reasons for such behaviours. Peter Elbow in his seminal work on assessments, [Ranking, Evaluating, Liking](#), has pointed out the pitfalls of “constant evaluation”. He says:

Students fall into a kind of defensive or on-guard stance toward the teacher: a desire to hide what they don't understand and try to impress. This stance gets in the way of learning. (Elbow 1994: 9)

The culture of evaluation that we build in our classrooms—where students feel monitored and judged for every action, where not only are aberrations punished but conformity is widely recognized and celebrated—produces this “on-guard stance” born out of the desire to “impress” the teacher. As Elbow rightly points out, this often leads to a situation where a student tries to hide what they have not understood by resorting to rote learning, rather than accepting their inability. Elbow further points out that such an atmosphere “makes students reluctant to take the risks that are needed for good learning—to try out hunches and trust their own judgment.” Thus, a competitive classroom culture, apart from the mental stress and anxiety it invariably produces, also creates two immediate problems that could have long term effects: first, it hinders the process of learning by not encouraging students to acknowledge their weakness. Second, it breeds a culture of extreme conformity where the students do not learn to take risks and make decisions for themselves. The solution to both these problems lies in awarding agency to learners through the production of a supportive classroom culture.

Such a supportive classroom culture encourages students to learn to support one another and acquire new knowledge together, rather than looking up to the teacher to hand out ready-made solutions. As a step away from the competitive environment that usually pervades our classrooms, this would help inculcate in students the much-needed problem-solving skills as well as breed a sense of responsibility towards the self as well as others. The first step towards producing a supportive classroom culture is to produce an environment where students feel confident to own up to their mistakes and inabilities, and to enable the teacher to intervene as required. Exercises that help students learn to collaborate with each other and engage with a text together, rather than in isolation is the next step. It would not only improve the quality of learning, but also address issues such as the importance of mental wellbeing and the act of care, which are otherwise ignored.

There are two simultaneous ways in which such an environment can be produced. On one hand, by bringing about a proactive change in the teaching-learning methodology, and on the other, challenging the widely recognized “good behaviour” and the definition of a “good student”.

For instance, the first chapter from [Landmark](#) (Book 7), “When, Where and How” (pp. 13-21) aims to introduce students to the sources for writing history. A commendable effort from the authors as this helps students to recognize the difference between mythical narratives and history early on in their lives, learning the importance of evidence in history writing. One common way a



teacher might teach this section is to make students read from the text and later hold a quiz to recognize those who have managed to memorize it all! This, unfortunately, defeats the purpose of the section and does not in any way help students make any connection with their real lives. In a supportive classroom, a chapter like this could be divided up among groups of students with separate

SOURCES OF HISTORY

We know that historians use information from different sources such as literature, coins, paintings, inscriptions, etc., to write about the history of a country. There are plenty of literary and archaeological sources for the study of Medieval India. Some oral sources for this period are also available.

*Landmark - Integrated Social Sciences
(Book 7)*

worksheets to engage with the different sections. For example, the section “court chronicles” under literary sources, could have three to four students research on the various examples given under the section to prepare a chart (or a Jamboard¹ if working online) with little snippets from these texts (all available online), and if and when available, images of the kings and kingdoms. The last part of this section points out to two problems about using court chronicles as sources: they tend to glorify the patron kings and do not provide any insight to the lives of

the common people of the times. It could be interesting to now have the team reflect on how the media today reflects the government and the people. The teacher could point out that today’s media documents are testimony to today’s times and would possibly be sources for history writing about the present in the future. This reflection exercise could be in the form of an in-class team discussion, an asynchronous exercise for students to talk, record, and share on a common classroom portal, or even a writing exercise. Similarly, the rest of the sections could be divided up among various teams, with the commonality of producing a chart and having a reflection exercise, the topics of which would vary depending on the section being assigned.

Such an exercise could be followed up in another class with each group sharing their work with each other, thereby awarding them agency to think with and think through the text. As mentioned earlier, this takes the syllabus forward without you having to teach the students individually, as well as takes off the constant pressure from a student to do better than the rest of the class. It gives everyone an opportunity to learn from and learn with each other, see the relevance of their learning in real life, and memorize the source without having to rote learn it from the textbook. This brings us to my second point about challenging existing definitions of good and bad classroom behaviour. One of the primary ways to do this is to do away with the “best performance” award. Rather reward the team with the “best collaboration”, where they could manage to iron out internal conflicts by themselves without any intervention from their

¹ Jamboard is a digital interactive whiteboard developed by Google to work with Google Workspace.



teacher. A student who has been exceptionally helpful to their own group and went out of their way to help other groups in their projects, through volunteering of course, could be recognized as the “best performer”. Sharing knowledge with other teams could be in the form of sharing relevant information, insight or experience, which is acknowledged by the other team in the classroom. Recognition and appreciation of such acknowledgement of help by students (whether from another student, as in this exercise, or even from a family member) would produce a positive culture. This would also prepare them for higher education where the only way to avoid plagiarism is to acknowledge sources. This also makes sure that the students are no longer afraid to show that they do not already know everything and have received help to learn from others.

Such an atmosphere of support would only improve the quality of learning in a student and also build a culture where “helping” is awarded while “snitching” is strongly discouraged. This would naturally mean laying down ground rules by the teacher about appreciating each other’s contribution, not belittling anyone and incorporating or acknowledging suggestions from every member of the class. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that the success of such an exercise would presume that the teacher is well aware of the strength and weakness of each student. A group with a student who has a strong personality should also have one who is struggling in the class with one or two more students who maintain an average performance. Trying to allot one kind and helpful student to each group is a great strategy but may not always be possible. However, the aim of such exercises is to recognize compassion as a value and to discourage any behaviour which might come across as bullying. It is thus important for teachers to stay alert and intervene as soon as something like that comes to light, irrespective of the fact that the perpetrator could be the top scorer. This could mean more work for the teachers at one level, but it would certainly help us achieve the highest standard of learning and character building that school education aspires to achieve.

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Lesson Plan: Building Supportive Cultures in Classroom

Based on the earlier discussion in the main article regarding the need to create a classroom environment that is supportive and inclusive, here is a sample lesson plan that gives an idea of how to build a supportive classroom.

Lesson: Chapter on *Sources of History* from [Landmark](#) (Book 7). This chapter introduces students to various sources that are used to write history.

Lesson Objectives:

- Foster team spirit and collaborative work
- Improve recall value of content
- Initiate debates and discussions
- Help make connections to real life experiences
- Be kind, empathetic and responsible
- Learn to ask for and acknowledge help



Divide the class into groups and assign each group various sections from the chapter, *Sources of History*. Prepare a worksheet for each source, with three tasks:

1. Making a chart
2. Peer Review note
3. A reflection-based discussion exercise on the question given

SAMPLE WORKSHEET – COURT CHRONICLES

Divide the class to form six groups who will work on various tasks you assign on the section on Court Chronicles as a source of history.

Ask for volunteers from each group to take up any one of the following tasks.

- i. Conducting research for text online/offline
- ii. Collecting images with authentic sources
- iii. Preparing chart/Jamboard/PowerPoint presentation/collage (choose someone who is interested in art or can handle the required technology)



You may further ask one member from each group to draw chits from a bowl. The group will work on the chronicle that their representative picks.

- i. Minhaj-us-Siraj's *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*
- ii. Isami's *Futuh-us-Salatin*
- iii. Ziauddin Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*
- iv. Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnama*
- v. Badauni's *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*
- vi. *Padshahnama* and *Alamgirnama*

Give clear instructions to students with pointers on how to create the charts and the information they should carry. You may also share some materials (handouts) for each of these chronicles.

Once you have divided the class into groups and assigned them the various tasks that they will fulfil to complete the assignments, introduce the activities.

Activity 1: *Make a chart which will give an overview of the court chronicle you have picked. Your chart must have the following:*

- i. The exact time of history that the court chronicle refers to.
- ii. All the information you have found about the court chronicle assigned to the team (if from the internet, give sources).

You may also include (although not compulsory), images/paintings of the chroniclers, texts (if taken from the internet, mention correct sources).

Activity 2: *Each member of the group needs to write a small note (3-5 sentences) thanking every member of your team, evaluating their contribution. You will need to provide two points about how each member has helped in this project. Feel free to add one suggestion about how one or more members could have worked differently to make the project better. This will be submitted to the teacher directly.*

Activity 3: *The authors of your textbook note that there are two problems with court chronicles as sources of history. Please list them below:*

- i. _____
- ii. _____

Activity 4: *The court chronicles captured the reality of the time in which they were written. That is why they are sources which help us understand that time. In today's world, the media plays an important role in capturing our reality. For historians of tomorrow, they may become sources to write the history of today. In the light of this, please hold a discussion for 15 minutes on:*

How does today's media reflect the government and the people?

This can be arranged in the form of a classroom discussion which you may moderate.

Students in each group will be graded for the following:

1. Successful completion of Activity 1 within time. (5 points awarded to all members of the group)
2. Solving problems within the group rather than asking the teacher to intervene. (3 points awarded to all members of the group)
3. Review by their team members (Activity 2), on the basis of which the students will be individually graded for 2 points.

The notes you will collect as part of Activity 2 will be your key to understand the group dynamics. You may review and retain them for future reference. It may be a good idea to refrain from using any quantitative scale, to allow fair evaluation.

Similar exercises can be repeated for other sources of history. You can also choose to do this simultaneously, where multiple groups work on multiple sources of history, depending on the size of the class.

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Equipoise



Pronunciation: /'ɛkwɪpɔɪz/

Meaning: Balance of forces or interests (noun); Balance or counterbalance [something] (verb)

Origin and additional information: The term originated in the mid seventeenth century from the word “equi” (meaning equal) + the noun “poise”, replacing the phrase “equal poise”.

Word section: Equipoise is also a concept that has a clinical reference. To put it very simply, it is an assumption based on which a randomized controlled trial is designed. The assumption is that “there is not one ‘better’ intervention present (for either the control or experimental group)”¹. It is believed that a true state of equipoise exists when one has no reason to choose or be biased towards one or the other option. Personal equipoise is also something similar to clinical equipoise. It exists when the person involved in the research has either no preference or does not have whole clarity about the overall advantage that a bias could generate. This state of uncertainty is considered the central ethical

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3172958/> -- “Clinical equipoise and personal equipoise: two necessary ingredients for reducing bias in manual therapy trials”, *National Library of Medicine* by Chad Cook and Charles Sheets (February 2011).



principle based on which human experimentations function. It is for this reason clinical equipoise is hence also known as “principle of equipoise”. The term was first used in 1987 by Benjamin Freedman, although earlier references by one Dr Edward Jenner dates back to as early as 1798.

Usage:

1. *The flying off and curling of the drapery by the wind serves as an equipoise to balance the projection of the Triton's elbow.*
(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/equipoise>)
2. *It is simply the case that a position equipoised between two errors is unlikely to be true.*
(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/equipoise>)
3. *In other words, our behaviour must be balanced or equipoised between grief and glee.*
(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/equipoise>)