

Unlocking every learner's potential



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This Teacher's Day (September 5), I was reflecting on what it means to be a teacher, and wondered if I could distil the essence of the profession into a single expression. Suddenly the word locksmith emerged. Within moments, my mind was inundated with similarities between teachers and key masters.

Students' minds are like locked doors which when opened, enable them to access the unlimited ocean of knowledge that exists in the world. However, years of exposure to factory-style education has caused many of the locks to become jammed, making it difficult for teachers to get their students interested in what they are teaching. The challenge for teachers, therefore, is to figure out which key to use to open students' minds. It's inadvisable for a teacher to teach a subject to all students in the same way, as her unique style of instruction will enthuse only certain types of students, just as a single key will fit certain locks, but not others. She needs to know the unique qualities of each learner, and how to adapt her approach so that she can get each one of them to open up.

While most teachers have at least a few instructional techniques (or keys) that work with some students, they struggle to unlock the doors of others. In a sense, the latter remain incarcerated, brimming with energy and capabilities, but unable to connect meaningfully with the curriculum. Unfortunately, teachers often abandon such learners, as they feel it requires too much time and effort to get through to them, and also because they believe their primary responsibility is to complete the syllabus. But more unfortunate than the ignored, are the ones who are forced to learn through excessive pressure, emotional abuse or physical punishment. Such impositions may bring short-term gains, but in the end, result in damaging students' self-esteem and their love of learning.

So what does a teacher need to do to liberate all types of learners? She must first consider the critical elements that constitute a learner's psychology, i.e. Multiple Intelligences (MIs) and Multiple Natures (MNs), which can be equated with pins found in pin tumbler locks. Just as lock pins differ in length, a student's MIs and MNs exist in differing degrees (e.g some have strong logical intelligence or adventurous natures, while others are weak in these aspects). And in the same way that the ridges of keys align with pins, the teacher must provide inputs and activities that match each learner's MIs and MNs.

For instance, rather than deliver chalk-and-talk lectures, teachers can involve students in cooperative learning activities that engage interpersonal intelligences. They could use mind-maps and graphic organisers to stimulate learners' visual intelligences and creative natures; they can provide options for homework and projects that let students represent their understanding of a topic through creating their own songs (linguistic and musical intelligence) or designing flowcharts (logical intelligence).

Still, there will always be difficult students who refuse to open up no matter what you do. Whether you use kindness, anger, jokes, sarcasm or even call their parents, nothing seems to stimulate or engage them. In such cases, locksmiths have only one choice — to pick the lock. They must find a wire or hairpin, and through one jugged or another, jiggle it around until it gets the pins to move and the plug to turn.

When I reminisce about difficult students, I am reminded of a teenage girl I once taught in Japan who came to my English class every day and sat in the back row chewing gum with her mouth open. Every attempt I made to get her interested in the subject ended in failure and frustration. Finally, one day, I handed her a stack of blank pages and said, "I don't care what you write on them, but you have to fill them up — and in English".

A few days went by, until one day she entered class, and dropped the stack of papers on my desk and returned to her seat. Every page was filled with colourful drawings, elaborate descriptions, and an array of photographs cut and pasted from magazines. "I like tattoos," began one page, which was passionately filled with examples of body art. Twenty pages, each bursting with vitality, scored the symphony of her life and revealed the kaleidoscope of her soul. Click!

Since that day, I have regarded all students differently — perhaps the way locksmiths view each lock — as a unique puzzle to be solved. And I have come to understand that the main challenge of teaching doesn't lie in covering the syllabus (though that will always be important), but more, in figuring out how to jimmy each student's distinct internal mechanisms so every one of them tunes into learning.

But, while it's meritorious for a teacher to acquire the skills to educate multitudes of students, she performs a disservice if she sees students merely as "locks to be opened". No doubt she has a duty to decipher each student's unique combination and help her engage with the curricular content. However, she also has the greater responsibility of getting learners to become aware of their unique individual characteristics so they can control their own locks. In fact, I believe that is the ultimate goal of education. For, once learners know how to do so, they'll find the keys to realise their full potential.

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