Paths to knowledge are ways to learning

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... if the price of finding oneself in the world is that of losing the
world in oneself, then the price is more than one can afford

—Witkin 1974: 2

A.R. Vasavi's 'Pluralising the Sociology of India' (this issue) is an
impressive and ambitious wish list of much that needs to be democratised
in the discipline, ranging from institutional contexts to theories, methods,
syllabi, pedagogies and audiences. I not only support these suggestions
but would also like to buttress the case for them by drawing on my own
experiences as a teacher. I am located in a state university, an institution
that has for long been much maligned and more often treated as the very
cause of falling standards not just in sociology but in India's higher
education as a whole.[1] My remarks are not exclusive to sociology but
relevant to other disciplines too. Further, I do not make a distinction be-
tween the Bachelors and Masters or, for that matter, Doctoral programmes.
Differences seem far more pronounced across institutions and much less
across the level of the degree.

With the democratisation of higher education, sociology has missed
it and lost it. While new social groups have moved into the sociology
classroom, sociology has not adjusted and not made itself relevant to its
new learners. In a sense we misrecognise and mislabel our new learners

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[1] The introduction of a new set of central universities is further affirmation of low per-
ceptions about the characteristics of the state universities.

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as those with a set of alleged 'deficiencies' in language, social background, etc. We privilege and reify the traditional content of the syllabus over the learner, the learning and the process, and the English language or a state language over a dialect (oral or written) within the region. Sometimes we rationalise this distribution of degrees to the 'less proficient' as the redistribution of social or cultural capital or credentials. This may also be patronising to those considered 'less gifted' (researchers, students or teachers) who need to be offered 'the soft and easy' syllabus or assessment norms.[2] We missed it because we fail to see that a new learner with different profiles and identities, multilingual capacities and skills has now come into the classroom. Those that were the subjects of research now sit opposite us in class. These new learners are silenced and sometimes shamed (similar attitudes to what state universities may invite) because what they have does not count and what they lack is what matters. So the very bearers of difference with multifarious experiences (including the increasing number of women, those from a tribal or rural background, those with an experience of struggle and discrimination) do not find a voice in the classroom. I wonder if this could be the reason that sociology remains rather irrelevant and more often uninteresting. This lack of relevance is visible in public debates as well. Citing hotly contested social and cultural issues in the public sphere, Deshpande et al. observe, 'The eighties and nineties should have belonged to sociology and anthropology. They should have, but we know that they did not, not really' (2008: 12). Satish Deshpande, who is more sensitive to these conditions, suggests that once the new entrants choose social research as a paid vocation 'one can perhaps expect a shift in the intellectual agendas and research projects as the new incumbents deploy their mix of acquired and inherited skills' (2008: 27). What do we do until then?

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[2] On the contrary such practices accentuate inequities. There is 'indeed abundant evidence that, in advanced societies where women have achieved normative educational parity with men, gendered literacy practices in schools as evidenced in language construction, discourse norms, and texts, are implicated in women's limited access to positions of power and authority' (Corson 1993, as cited in Egbo 2004: 244–45). A student Freda Tavares, in an unpublished term paper, has called this the 'pinking of higher education'. Others 'less gifted' either due to caste or being from rural regions, earn their lower access to power through 'easy' credentials, and while they do see through this at times, they can do little about it. For instance they find it difficult to argue against why their variety of a spoken vernacular should be held against them.

If we turn and look at the new learners as 'differently-abled', an entirely new set of practices and outcomes emerges. Sharmila Rege's (2011) critical practice takes the concerns listed by Vasavi head-on. Rege brings into the classroom the identities that the new learners carry along with their complex multilingual skills and aspirations that challenge both the hierarchy and the taken-for-granted liberating potential of English or standardised literary 'high regional languages' and the written form itself. Rege has co-created with her students a video on the culture of mobile phones, shot on mobiles.[3]

Priyanka Velip, a tribal woman in my class, wrote a dissertation on how her tribe was constructed and 'othered' in local literature. Her dissertation provided a critique of the literature as well as the process by which writers collected data on tribal culture when they entered the field. She insisted on writing in her non-standard English rather than trying to write in her own language because she thought that writing in a language other than in English would keep her confined in the ghetto of the 'other'. This rather simple dissertation was a transformative experience for Priyanka and she now explores possibilities in the academic field.

Such knowledge artefacts are not only new knowledge products but far more significant in the pedagogic process that leads to their creation. Rege's practice is a reminder of critical pedagogy as she brings to surface the hidden curricula in the classroom, demonstrating that to be sensitive is not to be neutral, but essential for 'understanding and disrupting power imbalances that are present in educational settings' especially those connected to issues of identity in caste, gender and language.[4] One can also read two important contemporary pedagogic perspectives through such work: (i) Constructionism: which suggests that learning is 'most effective when people are also active in making tangible objects in the real world',[5] and (ii) Howard Gardner's (2000) multiple intelligence theory which invites us to bring into the classroom visual, musical, interpersonal and

[3] 'The products of student works within this pedagogical framework are termed identity texts insofar as students invest their identities in these texts (written, spoken, visual, musical, or combinations in multimodal form) that then hold a mirror up to the students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive way' (Cummins 2009: 68).

[4] Kurt Love, 'Critical Pedagogy', http://www.slideshare.net/drloveccsu/critical-pedagogy-1659560. Accessed on 8 May 2011.

[5] Constructionism. (learning theory). At http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructionist_learning. Accessed on 7 May 2011.

intrapersonal skills as part of the learning experience (i.e. skills other than linguistic, logical and mathematical). Masters students at Goa University are offered an option to learn Digital Storytelling[6] as part of their credit requirement, though its use in class assignments has been limited thus far. The students say that they enjoy the experience but that 'it takes too much time' to prepare a digital assignment. Despite the distress we feel about what is happening in the classroom, the attention that the syllabus and the process of syllabus-making gets is quite in contrast to discussions on pedagogy or class activity. Pedagogy and teaching and learning strategy is what teachers should be interested in but rarely are. I have caught myself on more than one occasion saying with embarrassment that one of my interests is 'teaching' sociology as if this were not quite a legitimate area of interest.

The classroom must engage students in locating themselves in the social history of the region, the nation and the globe and reflecting on the presence and absence of their social positions (e.g., gender) in intellectual and social production. This involves a reflexive and critical appreciation of sociological thought, its contemporary practice including its core concepts of modernity, change, the nation, and so on. Students must feel invited to look at the utility (or inability) of theories and concepts in order to understand and grapple with contemporary global and local processes. In a course on Development Theories, students are first required to understand the opposition to Goa's Regional Plan 2010 and then see if this opposition can be understood within a 'deconstruction of development discourse' perspective.[7] That is, students are encouraged to understand theory by simultaneously reflecting on the experience of its gendered, disembodied, ethnic, racial and other biases, rather than only through an appreciation of its historical emergence. As regards theories and concepts, 'not only does an idea get reinterpreted during use, but it may even need to be used before it can acquire any significant meaning for the user' (Eraut 1994: 51). Such classroom activities customise the programme to amplify the voice and different sensitivities of students,

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[6] Digital Storytelling is the use of digital tools to let ordinary people tell their own real-life stories by weaving together still images, music, narrative and voice.

[7] See 'Deconstructing Development: Arturo Escobar and Ashis Nandy'. At http://goalnet.unigoa.ac.in:8090/file.php/424/Deconstructing_Development.pdf. Accessed on 18 June 2011.

their talents and creativity. The class will provide participants with an environment where they can express and discover their voices, using code-shifting multilingualism[8] and multimodality at the cost of the standard language. 'Language (always defined as multilinguality) is at once a site and medium for the construction of knowledge; it is not just a means of communication; it is an experience that historically constructs us and socio-politically models our collectives....' (Agnihotri 2006: 81). We are constituted as plurilingual beings:

> If language as multilinguality is constitutive of being human, languages associated with power can no longer be allowed to exploit the speakers of languages that are spoken by the underprivileged. It is possible that most significant inroads into the gulf that separated the small elite from the suffering masses will also be made through a programme of action that has language at its centre. It is important to realise in this context that, more than any other factor, it is the English language that has perpetuated that gulf. Multilinguality will have to become a basis of all future curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, and classroom trans- action planning, initiating the implementation of a sociological vision.... (Agnihotri 2006: 80)

In doing so students will begin a shift from being consumers of 'declarative knowledge' (knowing something about something or some- one) to 'procedural and causal knowledge (related to skills and attitudes: tacit, hard to code) that is obtained through practical experience and from solving real problems' (Zack 1999). This itself is the solid basis of pluralising our practice both in terms of generation (methods, theories etc.) and the consumption of sociology's output. It is these students who can bring the 'vicinity' into the classroom to intellectually engage and explore its nuances. The class becomes a locus for the co-production of knowledge and brings back the joy of learning. The joy of learning is either infantilised (relegated to primary schools) or exoticised for the advanced researcher. The greatest aspiration of students is self recovery

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[8] In a critique of the silences generated by the use of English in research, Wallerstein says that multilingualism will thrive if it gets organisationally and intellectually legiti- mated, through the use of multiple languages in pedagogy and scientific meetings (Wallerstein 1997).

and self discovery. Such a perspective emphasises the strengths rather than deficiencies of new entrants. It stimulates students to cease experiencing knowledge as something sterile, weighty and archaic—something that needs to be memorised and regurgitated at an exam—but to view knowledge as that which needs to be applied and used, presenting them with ways of seeing and being and creating their world and their identity while acquiring their voice. Incidentally, experience shows that allowing for self-expression (i.e., voice) is a great motivator for developing standard language skills.

To suggest that students are incapable of writing or co-producing is to be rigidly fixated on the aesthetics of intellectual and academic production and fail to see that these distinctive tastes too, following Bourdieu (1984), are linked to social positions. It is to strike a blow against pluralism. Challenging this invites us to open up the possibilities to re-examine our norms. We must ask ourselves whether we are perhaps transferring onto the new entrant the blame for our own incapacity or inability to invent a different classroom. Arjun Appadurai suggests that, in a globalising world, the skills of research are necessary for everyone and anyone (Appadurai 2006) and this is evidenced by Barefoot Researchers created by his Mumbai institute (Editorial Collective PUKAR 2008).

A. Sreekumar, following practices in management education, suggests that the requirements for transforming knowledge practices in the university are discontinuing both the lecture method as a mode of classroom learning and closed-book examinations in a system of complete internal assessment.[9] A number of pedagogic methods seek to (i) shift the burden of learning on the student, and (ii) blur the distinction between learning and assessment.[10] It is the short-term-memory-based, closed-book invigilated examination that acts as the driver for student-passive classroom

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[9] This prohibition on lecture-based teaching and closed-book examination has been sanctioned and codified in the Common Ordinances Governing Management Programmes of Goa University. 'Ordinances of Goa University' at http://www.unigoa.ac.in/downloads/GUOrdinance.pdf. Accessed on 8 May 2011.

[10] 'Student-centred' is one in a package of many buzz-words which include 'active', 'project based', 'collaborative', 'problem-based' and 'self-directed' learning, each having its own distinctive feature. Important to us here is the emphasis, which is not on what is taught but how the learning outcomes are different. If theory is being learnt are the students expected to reproduce some summary of the theory from memory or are they required to apply the theory to a situation and check the fit?

activity (dictation of notes by the teacher is common in the lectures) and syllabus construction. The demand for a 'soft and easy' syllabus (Jose 2003; Rodrigues 2011) stems from the needs of a very specific type of written examination (with very specific types of questions). Given the new learners and the inability of the system to adjust to their language and culture, what is considered 'soft and easy' by the traditional standard is difficult enough and, sadly, meaningless enough too. We need to shift from syllabi-centred to objectives-driven course designs. We need to spell that activities in the classroom (or at home) that a student is able and expected to perform, and that will facilitate learning.

What are the prospects of such shifts in the classroom in universities, particularly in state universities where bureaucratisation and routinisation are dominant and power lies in administrative rather than academic investment? Can such a shift occur in contexts where 'the material and non–material reward structure is very heavily biased against teaching' (Deshpande 1994: 575)? I am inclined to think that the low priority given to teaching is more than just a coincidence. A system that rests on the teacher's autonomy is going to invite official resistance[11] particularly because control over the class room shifts to the teacher. There is fear that freedom will only bring abuse and anarchy. But incremental changes are not effective when fundamental changes are needed; radical change works better though it is messy. Considering that the current state of higher education is seen as extremely dysfunctional, there is little to lose. There is considerable irony in the demand for change and innovation in classroom practices on the one hand, and the unwillingness to take risks on the part of the bureaucracy, some teachers and students on the other. The existing system is also strengthened by the emphasis on the confidentiality of the closed-book exam and its scripts.

On the other hand, Sharmila Rege's and other such practices suggest that there is room for innovation. One would need considerable effort and ingenuity (and, at times, resources) to work through the system and be prepared to face occasional frustrations. As Veena Das (1993) has observed, we are more likely to see changes from experiments coming

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[11] Referring to the dialogic culture used by Avijit Pathak in the classroom, Chaudhuri (2011: 168, 178) suggests that the innovation was possible only because, unlike other institutions, 'teacher's autonomy' is considered especially important at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

from below rather than the University Grants Commission's one-size-fits-all omnibus recommendations for raising the bar. Compliance with bureaucratic procedures and norms is privileged over competence. Very often, the central universities are far more liberal than state universities in the interpretation and implementation of such rules, and that freedom goes a long way in providing better possibilities and conditions for work. So even while teachers in different locations may find their hands tied behind their backs when they are urged to innovate, they must be willing to take risks to bring about the transformations necessary. A.R. Vasavi's call for pluralising is overdue and I hope that working out its dynamic possibilities in concrete situations of practice becomes central to the agenda of sociology in India today, impossible as it may sometimes seem.

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