

Reflection: Classroom Under a Tree

Dr. Gira Bhatt

As a child growing up in Mumbai, India, I recall being absolutely fascinated by the description of [Shantiniketan](#), a unique learning campus in India near Kolkatta (formerly known as Calcutta). It was founded by [Rabindranath Tagore](#) (1861-1946), a renaissance man who inspired Mahatma Gandhi, wrote the national anthem for India, and became the first Asian to win a Nobel Prize in literature. What captured my fancy was the image of a classroom on the campus of *Shantiniketan* that Tagore had founded. Our 2nd grade teacher told us that, at *Shantiniketan*, students sit under a tree along with their Guru who imparted learning. Now, to a 7-year old girl sitting in a hot, stuffy, cramped classroom, wearing a thick cotton school uniform, and uncomfortable mandatory leather shoes and socks, this image was a breath of fresh air. My admiration for Gurudev¹ Tagore, a reformist educator, was instantaneous, and I became envious of the students who got to study at *Shantiniketan*.

Now after being submerged in my academic career in the Western world for almost two decades, I often find myself reflecting on the image of the “classroom under a tree”. I think I am beginning to comprehend the deeper meaning of Gurudev Tagore’s rebellious ways of education.

True learning does not begin or end inside an enclosed classroom. Learners of all ages bring with them a wealth of knowledge to classrooms where this knowledge gets shaped, sharpened, and articulated through dialectics. A connection with the natural, the outside, and the “real world” is continually fostered in an environment such as Gurudev’s Tagore’s “classroom under a tree”. With much more added to broaden and deepen the knowledge base, the learners leave such a classroom only to keep growing continually. YET, the transition must be smooth; it must be natural. The world to which the learner moves must seem like a natural extension of the classroom where the learning was rooted.

These meaningful thoughts became particularly salient last summer as I undertook the supervision of my 4th year undergraduate students’ practicum training in applied psychology. My fourteen practicum students spent between 180 to 220 hours working in a wide range of employment settings during their last summer term. I visited all the practicum sites and watched my students with an awe – I could not get over how dedicated they were, how immersed they were and, importantly, how happy they were! And they were not even getting paid!

These students were registered in a class of Psychology 4000, but they were not inside a classroom! It was a natural, real world, and they were thriving! I talked to their employers/supervisors; each of whom had nothing but the highest praise for our

¹ Gurudev is the honorable prefix meaning the divine or supreme teacher

students. The following are few of the comments I received from the employers about my students:

- “an amazingly fast learner- much faster than I expected anyone would be!”
- “a great asset to the company. She has excellent work ethics”
- “has well-developed interpersonal & communications skills”
- “is committed, hardworking- and has a great future”
- “I wish I were this good at her age!”
- He brought both knowledge and enthusiasm to the work he was doing”
- “She is going to be world-famous!!”

Indeed, the Kwantlen applied psychology practicum program, which was launched in 2002, has been a success story. To date, over 62 employment agencies have participated in this program by hiring and training a total of 106 students. The goal of this program is to apply knowledge from the psychology degree program to an employment setting and relate the practicum experience to future career choices. The program has been a win-win program for the students and the employers.

The classroom along with the students has moved outside to the natural, real world. As one of my students described her practicum experience of playing in the park with a special needs child, I imagined her running around a tree with a happy giggly child. I couldn't help but reflect once again on my childhood image of a “classroom under a tree”.



Note:

Please also read:

[Outside School, Inside the “Real World”](#) by Malia Pawson

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabindranath Tagore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabindranath_Tagore)

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