Truth Seekers

By Ravinder Grewal

What is my personal quest?
What am I teaching for?
What vision do I have for my students?

In the words of Lev Vgotsky, ' Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.'

These oft quoted words are indeed thought provoking. On one hand, they imply that individuals are always in a state of flux, of growth, of evolution - wholly responsive to the world around them, to their environment. On the other hand, with this awareness comes the responsibility for the teacher to create an intellectual environment for them to 'grow into'. What a responsibility for the educator!

If we are to accept this responsibility, we need first to unpack the meaning of the word' intellectual'. Does it mean to be curious? to be truth seekers? to be reflective? For individuals to 'grow' intellectually, emotionally and philosophically, they need to be all three. I want my students to be problem solvers, self- reliant and responsive to the world they live in - be it the 21st century or beyond. As the world evolves, so should they grow, change, transform and adapt. To my way of thinking, in order to do so, they need to be, above all, truth seekers.

Transform and adapt.

Do I really want only that for my students? Do I want them to merely adapt to the changing world like a chameleon? I realised that I want my students to be much more than that! I do not want my students to be mere chameleons that take on the colour of the world around them, but to be the artists who create the colours of the world, that is to be creators, not adapters! How then can this be achieved? The first step is to understand the complexity that exists within our present world. Our present world consists of 2 elements: the natural phenomena, the mysterious patterns of actions and reactions that our

scientists have been unravelling for the past centuries, and the human element, whose interaction with the natural phenomena triggers new patterns both positive, and negative. Hence it tis the human hand that is the catalyst of change, of transformation, the hand and the mind that can create new colours that a chameleon would respond to. The burning question for me is: *How can this hand, this mind be nurtured? How can an intellectual environment be created that would allow the individuals to grow into these artists and creators of knowledge?*

By this stage in my career as a secondary English teacher, I have narrowed down my goals and pinpointed three dispositions that I wanted to nurture in my classes, that will ultimately allow my students to emerge as the creators of the world's 'colours': truth seeking, curiosity, reflection. This is how I forged a connection between the three. Without curiosity students will not feel the need to seek the truth. The curious mind will only arrive at the truth through reflection. By breeding curiosity in students one fuels their desire to explore, to investigate and get to the bottom of their question/ issue/ concern. Once that thirst is ignited, truth seeking becomes a quest which is self-driven. During this mental state of students, reflection is an unconscious, subconscious and conscious mental move that is occurring, where the mind is making 'connections', transferring knowledge from one context to another, encountering obstacles and manoeuvring its way around, like a waft of smoke spreading and diffusing itself within a forest or jungle.

To my way of thinking, reflection fosters curiosity and enables one to arrive at the truth. By the same token, curiosity breeds reflection which also points towards truth seeking. This then is the inter-relationship between the three: all three need to be fostered simultaneously in order to create a learning disposition that implies not just 'learning' but self-directed learning that implies responsibility, independence, risk taking and confidence.

How do I put this into practice?

I am convinced that this is what I need to make time for in my classes. Being a VCE teacher of English, there is always the challenge of completing the set syllabus in a limited time span and preparing students for their Victorian Education Board Examination that provides the much desired 'ATAR' score that determines entry into tertiary courses. However, it was becoming increasingly obvious that I need to make time in my class for what I am convinced is important for our students, and for our and their future.

Once that decision was made, numerous questions sprang to life: How is this goal to be pursued? Where are my students at this time? What kind of learners are they? How do they perceive themselves?

- Do they lack curiosity?
- Are they truth seekers?
- Are they reflective?

Do they understand the importance of these dispositions? Do they see the links between them - How they emerge from each other and foster each other? Do they see how these three lead to learning?

But above all, at this stage, the key questions are: What do they see as learning? Truth seeking? Textual data? Prescribed syllabus?

I need to first establish this in my classes. But how do I do that? Do I bring these dispositions into the conversation? Somehow I need to make these visible to them - allow them to see that there is an 'agenda' behind my approach.

Introducing THROUGHLINES to foster truth seeking

I had to first impart my big question to them: What am I teaching for? As a teacher of English, I see literature as the lens, the aperture that allows students to glimpse the 'truth' that lies in the human world. Each literary text, I see as a fragment of reality; it represents moments of insight and conveys one individual's understanding of the world and all its underlying complexity. I have often heard students at different year levels voice their disdain at the value of novels, plays and other literary texts. They often see the study of literature as a compulsory part of the curriculum, but do not understand what its relevance is to their lives. I want to address this perception. I want to 'bump up' their relationship with the literary texts. I want my students to see the texts as something much more than just an entertaining narrative, a mere construct, that they may or may not find exciting. I want them to see literary texts as the key to the maze that is the world with all its contradictions, puzzles and mysteries.

I want them to see the texts as a recreation of the world in which they live. I want them to explore why the writer wanted to share this experience with others, to reflect on the message that was being conveyed and to seek to unravel the truth behind the story. Through its exploration, I want my students to seek the truth about themselves and come to understand their place in the world. I want them to question: What am I learning for? This should be the other side of the coin to my question: What am I teaching for?

This shift in their perception I tried to achieve through the throughlines, which I put up in my class (figure 1):
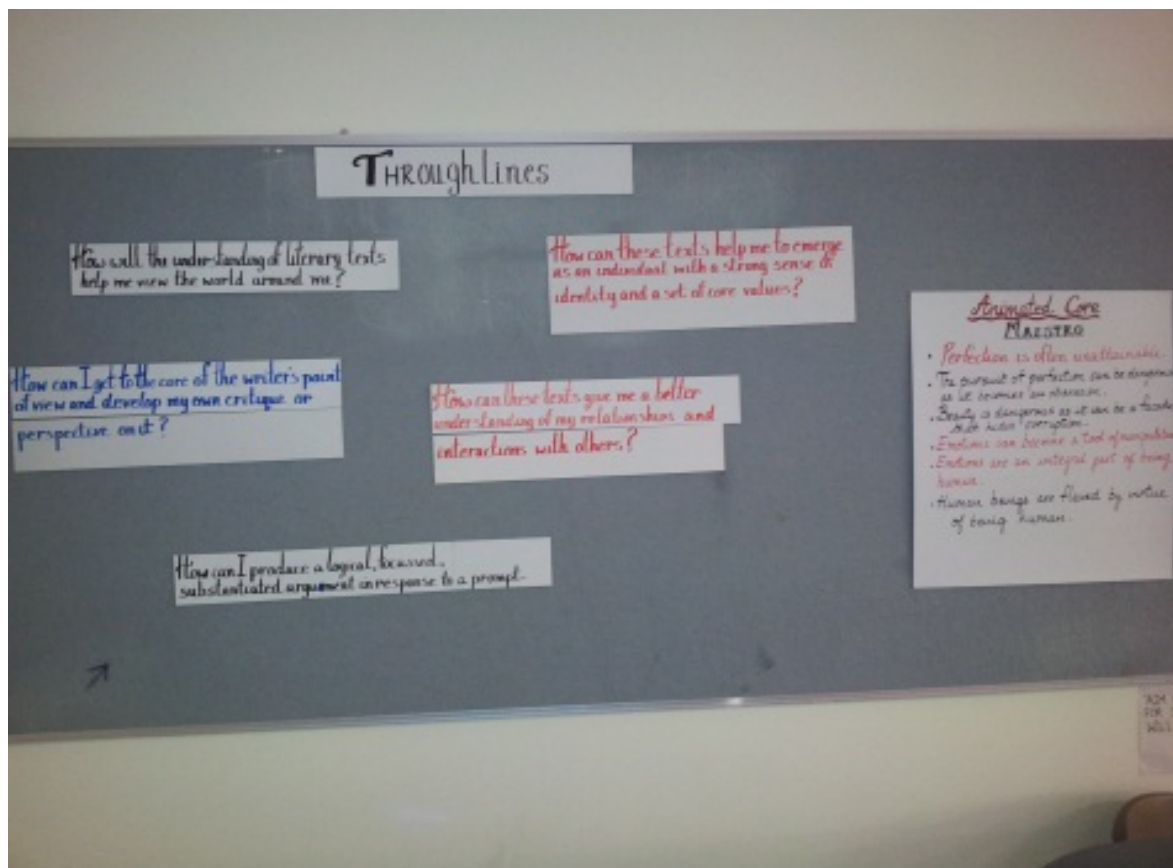

Figure 1: Throughlines

- How can the study of the literary texts help me to view the world around me?
- How can I get to the core of the writer's point of view and develop my own critique or perspective on it?
- How can these texts help me to emerge as an individual with an identity and a set of core values?
- How can I produce a logical, focussed, substantiated argument in response to a prompt?
- How can these texts give me a better understanding of why I behave the way I do?   The nature of my interactions and relationships?

At the start of the year, I spent time unpacking the throughlines. Students began to understand that the texts were not to be explored in isolation, but constantly seen through their own personal lens. After some weeks they began to see the textual issues as pertaining to themselves, which led to a 'bump up' in their reflection. This not only gave relevance to the study of literature, but served to ignite curiosity as well, as the writer's intention and perception often became a debatable issue when

they did not align with the student's individual perception. This is exactly what I wanted them to understand.

To unlock students' curiosity, questioning would become our chief tool. My classroom became a place where questions were considered more important than answers. We began each session by creating a bank of questions. The questions provided us with a line of investigation to follow during the session: their questions, their enquiry, their learning. And we ended each session with a question that arose from their inquiry. At first the questions generated by the students were mere 'fact finders'.Eg:

- What happened to Keller in Vienna?
- What does Keller feel guilty about?
- What did Paul experience in the Library?
- Why did Paul go to Vienna?

Gradually, however, the questions became more thought provoking and ones that could ignite one's curiosity and generate discussion as several points of view would emerge. Eg.

- Why do we pursue perfection if it is unattainable?
- Does music heal wounds or just cover them up?
- Were Keller's lessons too personal? Is that the reason for Paul's lack of success?
- How accurate can one's perception of their past be?

I could see the development of their thirst for exploration, a desire to understand issues that were relevant to our world, not just confined to the text. I was convinced that questions were indeed powerful tools to feed one's curiosity and create an inclination to seek answers – to become truth seekers.

This was very different from my approach in the past. I could remember a time where I wanted every student to have their questions answered before they left class - to make them feel comfortable and safe. How limiting that was! As I heard it said once: Dissonance is an essential state for learning to occur. I was convinced now that students need to leave class with a question in their mind, in a state of unrest, as that would keep them reflecting, for unless you have a question, you won't seek to find answers.

What was the reaction from the students?

This is not to say that the transition was easy! Students wanted answers! They wanted information, data, wanted to be able to go home and 'learn' the gathered data and be ready to regurgitate when essay topics were given. It was a couple of months before their frustration gave way to acceptance

which gradually translated itself into an enjoyment of questions - I knew I had 'got' them when the students began recording each other's questions instead of points gained through discussions. That was a moment of such joy for me that I wish now I had recorded it!!
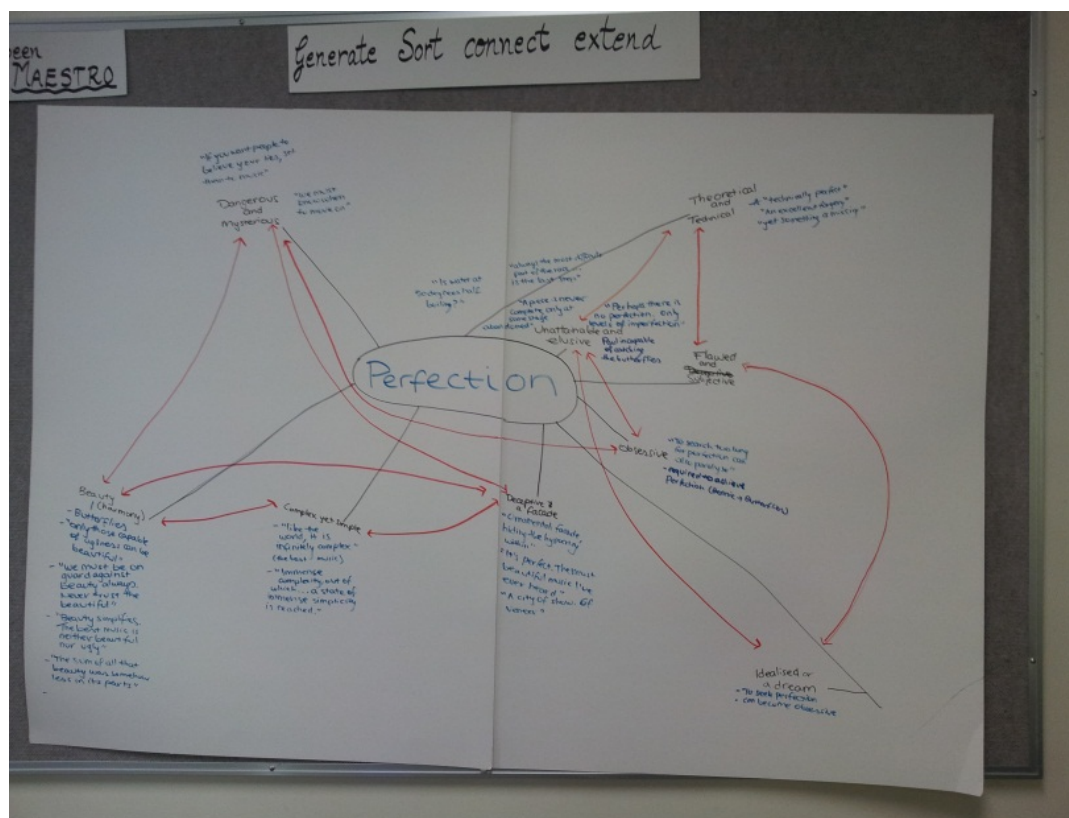
Later in the year, when I was getting informal feedback from my students about the way we learn in our classes, one of my students commented, 'it's interesting how we always have to learn through questions. At first I was really confused, but then I began to enjoy the discussions'.

Another issue was the lack of a 'correct' answer. There were some complaints about how they need 'spoon feeding' to get high scores. As one student commented, 'Discussions and questions may work for some students, but the other method of spoon feeding works for all'. Some wanted me to intervene when a discussion became a heated debate between two individuals or groups, to give them what they said was the 'right' answer. This took longer to overcome. The students were willing to learn through questions as long as eventually they got the right answer!! When there was no right or wrong answer, they felt cheated! For example, one of the key issues being debated was whether Paul, the protagonist of Peter Goldsworthy's novel, Maestro, regretted his past and lived a life of regrets or whether he was finally able to accept past mistakes and still be able to look back at his childhood and 'love it endlessly, effortlessly', which is indicative of the fact that he was able to move on. There is no 'correct' answer. As long as they can endorse what standpoint they adopt by responding effectively to 'What makes you say that?' all is well.

Students, at this stage, are obviously not used to the idea of living with uncertainty. They want absolute answers. Often there is a degree of complexity that prevents a complete understanding and blurs clarity. This is so different from what the students are used to that accepting and feeling comfortable with uncertainty would involve a significant mind shift. Although the students may have perceived the world through the lens of certainty, the real world is very different. It is mysterious, subtle and very complex.

But by the second half of the year, the students were comfortable with the idea that multiple responses could be legitimate as long as they could be endorsed with a reason, evidence and own reflection - in a word, make their process of thinking visible to others. That is when I began to see their self-reliance and confidence beginning to emerge. The questions had been able to feed their curiosity and they persevered till they were able to arrive at what they perceived was the 'truth' in this context.

Using Thinking Routines

Coupled with the strategy of using questions as tools of investigation, I harnessed selected thinking routines. My favourite is the Generate, Sort, Connect, Extend (GSCE). We used this to explore the different themes in the texts we were reading, their connection to each other and their relative importance (see Figure 2). I built in the corollary of arriving at a unanimous decision when the group was attempting to 'sort' the ideas according to their relative importance. This stage always generates discussion, arguments, endorsing, reflection, persuasion and searching for clues and evidence. This creates a perfect scenario for truth seeking. I felt that if I could make this routine a part of their mental repertoire, a disposition, then my purpose would be served. When we were reading 'Maestro' we placed a key theme of 'perfection' at the core and generated other important themes in the novel: beauty, deception, music, obsession, guilt and redemption (see Figure 1). We created individual maps and then a common class concept map. The individual maps had allowed each student to clarify their own viewpoints, and so when they had to reach a unanimous decision during the creation of a class map, there were already 17 different viewpoints. By this stage, the students were used to learning through discussions, questions and felt safe to air their views and back up their assertions.

Figure 2: Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate

Chalk walk – a routine that allows for a silent discourse to take place on paper where students respond to the trigger question and to other students responses, was another strategy I used often. A provocation in the form of a question often generated thoughtful comments and questions. At times I used 'What if…' as a provocation in the middle of discussing a concept and the students responded by creating hypothetical situations that again produced reflection and uncovered complexity (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Chalk Walk: No rules in wartime?

Ron Ritchhart in one of his plenary sessions at Harvard Graduate School of Education posed the question: How can you make students take each other's' ideas seriously? I think this group of students had begun to do that. We often used questions as provocations that encouraged the students to share ideas, and respond to each other's questions/wonderings as with the 'What if…?' questions posed during the chalk walk. They valued each other's ideas which they often challenged, explored and reflected on - before they made a decision to either accept or reject them. This shows more respect than mere mindless acceptance. As a result, I think this group had developed a culture of 'intellectualism' as opposed to a culture of anti-intellectualism where it is' not cool to have ideas'.

Figure 4: Chalk Walk: What if…
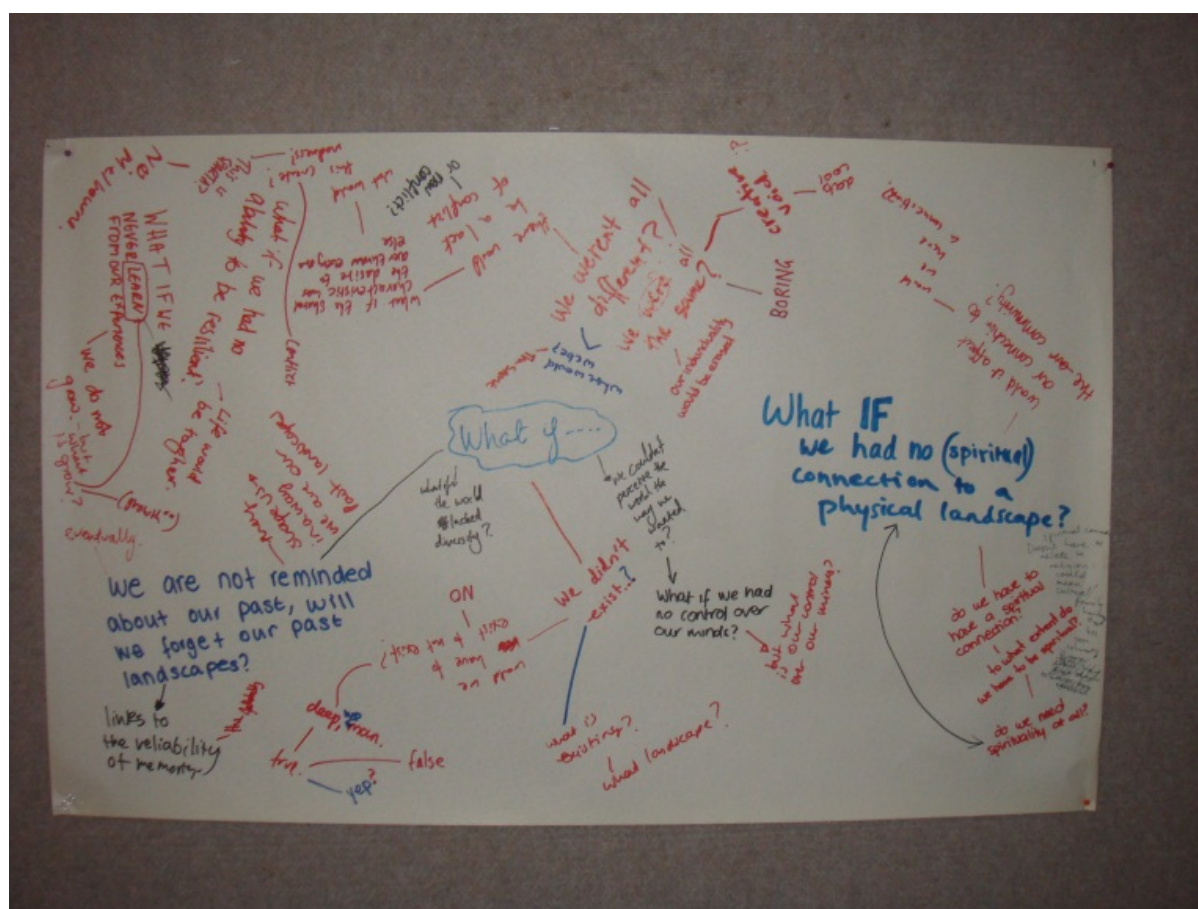
Taking risks and becoming more adventurous

Now that students were displaying a degree of self-confidence and an ability to be curious and reflect, I wanted them to begin to take risks, be adventurous and see the world around them as a living entity – only then would they be able to interact with the inanimate world with a sense of equality and mutual respect. This I thought would take them one step closer to being the artists that create the colours of the universe, to uncover its mysteries. In the novel <u>Maestro</u>, music is a key element. In order to see it as a living force, I asked students to use the 'Step Inside' thinking routine from the point of view of music. They adopted the persona of music and responded in the first person to the questions 'What do I see? What do I value?' Some of the responses I have listed below.

    I see/know that…

- I am the world's voice for self-expression
- I know people look to me during hard times for guidance
- I inspire change in the world
- I am living

- Everyone interprets me in different ways
- I enhance emotion
- I create emotion
- I inspire emotion
- I empower people
- I am an universal language
- I am a tool of exploitation/ of manipulation

I value:
- the pursuit for excellence
- Form and structure
- Emotion- people playing me with passion
- Rhythm

We as a group reflected on this routine of 'Stepping Inside' an 'idea'. Following are some comments students made when I asked them how they had felt about the experience.

- 'I was uncomfortable at the start – and that made me think'
- 'Forced me to think outside the box'
- 'Made me realise how music is a living force in the novel'
- 'I began to actually sympathise with music – see it's point of view'
- 'I understand music better and through that Paul and Keller'

I could see that the students were becoming more aware of the world around them – that they were beginning to 'humanise' it. So I used this routine in other contexts: Students 'Stepped Inside' war during their exploration of <u>Dear America – letters Home from Vietnam</u> (a non-fiction text), and they also 'Stepped Inside' land during our exploration of 'Imaginative Landscapes' (a writing in context unit, where students explore the connection that individuals have with their physical world). Each experience proved to be very effective! Their willingness to step outside their 'roles' and into another, their readiness to see the world from another perspective, their curiosity and the depth of reflection revealed in their responses were a clear indication to me that, indeed, they had the inclination to search for 'truth' whatever it may be, by adopting a range of strategies. How far this had become an instinctive part of their 'disposition' I could not be sure of, but the hope was that they certainly would in time.

Learning with and from my students

Another understanding that I arrived at during these stages of observing how the group learned and interacted with each other, was the importance of

collaboration. Often during a debrief session, students would comment that 'I had not thought of this in such a way. I always thought of it in a different way'. It was being brought home to me that the students were becoming flexible in their thinking - something that is a natural outcome of reflection - one of my threefold criterion for learning. Reflection it is said removes clutter. Hence the change in perception and understanding.

This was often the case with me. I went into class with a particular concept in mind. But I left it with a totally different perception of it. The students came with questions or observations based on the previous day's question exits (questions that the students generated at the end of every session), and that set the tone for that day's exploration. I think I will never again have a clear cut well defined opinion of morality and how it plays out during a war situation. I am torn between the different viewpoints presented by the others and this awareness has led to a change in my own values. The issue is very complex and it is this very complexity that makes it a living issue – not one that is out-dated and closed. One of the students commented: 'I don't think I can look at war and patriotism in the same light as before. I know too much of the cost involved and the damage to our humanity'. I know I had taken away the students' innocence and idealism, but that is often the cost of truth seeking.

How do I know that I have been successful and made a change?

Informal feedback from students is one way. At the end of the first semester, I invited students to have an informal discussion on how learning takes place in our class. I asked two questions:

- How does learning take place in our class?
- What forces facilitate understanding?

It was meant to be an informal discussion and not teacher directed at all. I trusted my students to be honest and not worry about how I might respond. I videoed their discussion. There were some very illuminating comments. Some of them were:

- The questions make me uncomfortable but then when I am put on the spot it forces me to think
- The discussions are great.
- Seminar discussions – the collaboration, sharing of ideas, helped us to delve deeper.
- But I do miss the spoon feeding!
- We should have questions at the start of the lesson as well as at the end.

- I loved the mind maps!
- I really felt comfortable that there were no absolute answers
- I like the way the teacher always challenged the challenger! It really made us look for evidence!
- We have a really wide understanding of the text and we can just use this when I get the essay topic.
- We could never afford to miss class, because we always learnt through the discussion!

As they clarified to me later, the discussion was never about what happened in the text, but about the range of opinion, interpretations, questions and wonderings that different people in class offered for discussion. It was this element of the discussion that lured them into the class every day, as they did not want to miss out on the rich discourse that was becoming the norm in our class.

One comment, in particular, that caused me to reflect was the one about spoon feeding, 'I do miss the spoon feeding' and again, 'Discussions and questions may work for some students, but the other method of spoon feeding works for all'. I wondered whether I was disadvantaging the students in any way. Was I taking away their opportunity to secure high grades? Was I 'playing' with their lives'? But although this concern lingered in my mind at all times, I was reasonably sure that my approach would bear more fruit – that once they learned to reflect and become independent 'seekers', spoon feeding would become superfluous. So I persisted.

Other evidence came in the form of the range of contentions that students formed in response to a given prompt. To me, these responses showed they were becoming self–reliant and confident. They felt they had arrived at the 'truth' in that context and had the courage of their conviction to pursue it. They were creating their own colours!

In their end of year 'thank you' cards, these are some of the comments students made:

- I will never look at the world in the same way.
- I know myself better now – I really 'see' the world.
- You made me look at English in a different way. It has become meaningful. I know I will never be the same again!

Reflection

I feel I have made a difference to some extent. I often wonder whether it was this particular group of students that made it possible or whether it was the changed approach. I plan to continue this approach and fine tune it for next year, when I will have a fresh batch of students. I am sure the experience will be different – perhaps better, perhaps not! That's a line of inquiry I plan to follow – if the response is the same, obviously for the moment, this approach is effective. If it does not work then perhaps I need to explore whether it is the dynamic of a particular group that determines the success or failure of a particular approach. However, I have a hypothesis and I will test it next year.

Conclusion

As long as we have an image of the child/learner as one who is a creator of knowledge, a producer of his own knowledge, is competent, active and wholly inclined, we can be assured of nurturing them into truth seekers – curious and reflective. In the words of Socrates, 'I cannot teach anyone anything, I can only make them think.'