My days (and nights) as an English teacher

It would be a good starting point to admit that the roughly 10-12 years I have taught GCE English at Future School, I have had moments when I wanted to take a break or try out something else. Some of those moments translated into taking up part-time work (co-editing N&N from 2006-2012, for instance) while continuing with reduced teaching responsibilities at the high school.

Reasons for wanting to quit included dealing with sixteen year olds’ moods and attitudinal problems, grading essays with the same recurring mistakes, preparing for classes at night while my kid(s) waited to be put to bed, feeling run-down with exam preparation, etc.

However, when I look back at the journey I have made, navigating all kinds of hurdles, I feel on the whole that I have contributed something towards widening specific communications skills and making higher education options available for at least some children in Auroville. The occasional optimistic emails that come from ex-students sharing their academic progress at university make the effort seem worthwhile. Two recent FS students who enhanced the classroom experience for me with their high levels of commitment to the course were Sonja Helena, a guest from Germany, and Chandra D, from Samriddhi. Whether these students got A-stars in their English Cambridge exams or not is beside the point. To me they were A-star students through the year.

In 2002-2003, the year I was in the process of joining Auroville, Centre for Further Learning (CFL) was transforming into Future School. A new location, a new building, and a new impetus accompanied this change. Chali, with whom I had first connected when I came to Auroville in the mid-nineties, asked if I would like teach English Lit. since that was what I had been doing - teaching at university for 6 years - prior to joining Auroville.

My answer was not an immediate, gratified ‘yes’. After all, like everyone else, one of the reasons I came to Auroville was to try to unlearn aspects of my socially constructed identity and discover capabilities other than those I had been conditioned to accept. I wanted to be free and start afresh.

In the summer of 2002 I joined Aurofuture and helped write informative pamphlets and brochures. The Asia Urbs project was happening in Italy that summer and fundraising needed to be done. Later, fuelled by my need to continue writing about Auroville - the work being done and the people who were doing it - I joined the team at AV Today and became a reporter, writer, editor for about a year.
Finally in 2003 July, in response to an urgent call for Advanced English teachers, I found myself facing my first group of A-level students in FS. The group was not big but it consisted of highly motivated individuals. Philip, Peter, Suryamayi, and Killol were part of this first batch, set to graduate from high school in 2004. Jackie from UK, the then teacher whose children were also in the graduating class, had just staged the enormously successful drama “The Importance of Being Earnest” at Visitors Centre. She was, however, keen on leaving to join another activity in Auroville.

I grimly noted the tasks ahead of me: to rapidly familiarize myself with the specific Cambridge curriculum and prepare these students in discerning speech features in spoken language scripts and their adaptations in drama texts. Plus to train them in analyzing prose fiction and in the ability to write meaningful 500-600 word essays within the space of an hour by the end of the academic year when three unit exams awaited them.

The students were up for it, the energy was wonderful. We studied James Joyce’s Dubliners, Somerset Maugham’s short stories and Oscar Wilde’s drama. Every week we had student seminars, and in addition the students had to write two assignments - one for speech analysis and the other for literary analysis. Over subsequent years, as batch after batch rolled in, I couldn’t help comparing the enthusiasm and dedication of that first group of students who saw me through not only my first year of teaching in Auroville but also my first pregnancy. When I could no longer commute to school after the seventh month, they came all the way to Utility for classes. My first child was born on June 8th 2004, two weeks after we stopped classes.

Overall, my time at Future School has been a positive one. High school teaching is demanding and requires out-of-class study time, energy, and commitment from both the teacher and the student. When students are of varying abilities and backgrounds it is the teacher’s job to set the standard on the higher rather than the lower end so that all students benefit from the challenge. When I ask myself how I lasted so long at teaching here, it is because I get energised by classroom interaction and find it enjoyable. And, also because the GCE syllabus does not remain the same year after year. On the contrary it makes space for new components (such as creative/research oriented coursework in place of an exam unit), newer contemporary authors as well as the chance of revisiting classic ones.

Along with Swati, another English language teacher, I’m looking forward to the new specification for July 2015 when I get to teach some of my favourite prose authors as well as a range of modern and contemporary dramatists.

Abha P.