



REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



SCIENCE FOR MONKS

Science for Monks and Nuns
Teacher Fellowship
Findings and Observations at the Teacher
Fellowship Meeting

Pondicherry, 2020

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Reports From the Field:

Inverness Research supports the Science For Monks program through a process of “groundtruthing” where we help the program articulate its theory and intentions, and then make site visits to the field to check the congruence of theory and field realities. This report is part of a series of Reports From the Field where we ask senior researchers to write about their site visits sharing what they learn from their in-depth interviews, observations and discussions with monks and faculty. The reports are intended to maintain an informal tone and reflect the researcher’s impressions as well as the data they have gathered.

Background on this report

This report contains observations and interview statements that Kapil Bisht, a freelance writer and researcher based in Kathmandu, recorded during a meeting of the Teacher Fellowship held in Pondicherry, India, in January 2020. This report presents the eight participants’ experiences of teaching since attending the first meeting of the fellowship program in August 2019. The report contains the participants’ retrospective views on their teaching and represents an early check-in, six months into the launch of the new program. The fellows share their change in perspectives – on the profession of teaching, on themselves, and their students – and the benefits of this change. The benefits of the new pedagogical approaches are also discussed.

Background on the Teacher Fellows program

There are eight fellows in the program. Three of them are monks, the rest are laity. There is only one woman in the group. Four of them are in their late 20s, three are in their early 30s, and one is just over 40. All of them are Tibetans, save one, who is from Bhutan. All the fellows teach at monasteries, except one, who teaches at a nunnery. Seven of the fellows teach science; physics is the most common. Some teach one or more subjects along with science: math, English, Tibetan. Teaching experiences range from one and a half years to six years. Most of them teach adults (between 20 and 50) but some also teach children as young as seven, and others have teenagers (13–15) in their classes.

I met the fellows at a meeting held over three days in January 2020 in Pondicherry, India. During those days I was able to sit in on sessions during which the fellows shared their experiences of teaching after attending the first fellowship meeting. They related the specific methods they had tried and which of those had proved effective and which had not. They also shared the methods they hoped to use in the future. The fellows also asked each other questions about the methods they had used so far. Another day, the fellows presented their opinions on an article on the long-term effects of praising students. There was also a session where each fellow responded to questions like *Are you more confident since starting the fellowship program? Do you personally enjoy teaching more, being in the classroom more, since you joined the fellowship program? Do you think of yourself a teacher more now? Do you feel*

more connected to the profession of teaching than you did before? The fellows' responses were positive overall, though some also admitted that it was still too early to speak of changes with certainty. However, everyone reported feeling more confident and being happier since learning a different pedagogical approach. Another insightful activity was getting the fellows to talk about the challenges they faced where they taught.

Perhaps the clearest displays of the camaraderie, openness, solicitousness and genuine interest in each other's teaching that exists between the fellows came during a session of watching videos of them teaching. At the end of every video the fellows gave feedback to the one whose video they had just seen. Inquiries were made about why one technique had been preferred to the other, about the class size, the subject matter, the students. Small discussions began. Sometimes there were short debates. Above all, it was the spirit in which feedback was given and taken. There was a genuine interest to improve and help improve.

Besides these revelatory group discussions, I was also able to interview the fellows individually. I explored some of the same topics they had engaged in during the meetings, but the interviews afforded the luxury to probe them at length (45 – 60 minutes). Individual interviews also gave me more time to learn about each interviewee's unique circumstances, experiences, perspectives and challenges related to teaching.

The participants of the teacher fellowship were new to the type of teaching that the program encouraged them to do. The fellows, none of whom had had long careers as teachers, had never been to a teacher training. Their teaching style was an imitation of their past teachers', a style that was all about the teacher. In that teaching philosophy, the best synonym for 'teacher' was 'talker.'

Through the fellowship, this idea of teaching was challenged. The fellowship presented a new view of teaching, one where students were active participants, not passive listeners. As the fellows took in this new approach, and learned methods to implement it in class, they simultaneously began realizing the follies of their old ways. The fellowship program was not a straightforward act of abandoning the old and embracing the new. Its impact was much deeper. It encouraged the fellows to take up the habit of assessing their actions as teachers as well as the consequences of those actions on their students. One way, it suggested, of doing this was to give up the old habit of taking center stage in the classroom. It can be summed up best by what one of the fellows told me: *"One of the teachers who works at the monastery was curious about what we had learned at the fellowship. So I told him that we learned many techniques to make our students talk more than us."*

Major Findings

1) The fellows are beginning to use new the teaching methods they have learned, and report positive impacts of these methods on their students. The fellows report seeing changes in their students – active participation, joy, excitement, collaboration, openness – that they had not seen when they taught with a teacher-centric approach. The new techniques also give the teachers the ability to see the benefits of new teaching styles. Such insights are helping the teachers to pinpoint opportunities to improve their teaching.

The teachers who participated in the fellowship program had never had any teacher training. Their teaching methods were the same ones their teachers had used in school. Those were the methods the teachers were using before they attended the fellowship. It was a teaching style in which the teacher is the focal point. A teacher came to class to dispense knowledge. Students attended lessons to absorb that knowledge. Teachers talked, students listened. A teacher's and a student's roles were fixed.

Most fellows described the pedagogy introduced at the fellowship meeting as a revelation. They came to know that there were other ways to teach than the one they had always known; in fact, there were several. Though there were numerous techniques, they were based on a central belief: teaching should keep the student at the center. The novelty (and the excitement that comes from it) for the fellows was the teaching methods they learned. But the biggest change that the training wrought was internal: teaching needs to be student-centric. This change in perspective changed the way they taught.

The fellows returned from their first meeting to their classrooms transformed. And they came back with the skills to transform their classrooms. For the first time, the fellows knew of ways to make their classes more interactive. Using methods like 'Flipping the Classroom' and 'Think-Pair-Share,' the teachers took the focus away from themselves and put it onto their students. They abandoned the student as passive recipient model in favor of the more interesting, mutually rewarding and effective model of student as active participant. As one fellow pointed out, it began to dawn on them that the 'how' of teaching was more important than the 'what' of teaching.

The fellowship program has helped them reflect on the role of student morale, satisfaction, participation and interaction. And it equipped them with strategies to boost these in students. With an increase in confidence, students tended to participate more, which ultimately made learning a more joyful experience. And this joy found its way to the teacher too, as they witnessed their student blossom emotionally, socially and intellectually.

A useful trick the teachers got from the fellowship is adapting to the moment. Approaching classroom issues with a set of teaching tools has helped them find alternatives in situations that were previously overwhelming. One problem some of them had was teaching right after the lunch break. They had to cope with sleepy students. They requested the administration to move their class to a different time, so that their students weren't sleepy. But that never

happened, leaving the teachers feeling helpless. Now, instead of despairing they improvise. They designed lessons that were activity-laden so that students were too occupied to doze off.

The fellows have also learned to let go of control—or at least loosen the notoriously tight grip teachers traditionally maintained over the classroom. One fellow, who teaches physics, had started using group work whenever he felt that the students were unwilling to accept a scientific fact that opposed a Buddhist tenet. In such cases, instead of the teacher stressing the veracity of science, he found letting the students debate the topic amongst themselves far more useful. The familiar act of debating loosened them up. They became open to new ideas. And teaching wasn't authoritative; it was in the hands of the students.

“None of us had any prior teacher trainings, so we were doing what we thought was the right way to teach. Most of the time, that way was to transfer knowledge orally. That is how we were taught when we were small. Naturally, we tend to teach in the same way. From the fellowship we got so many new ideas to teach differently.”

“I did think-pair-share many, many times. It really worked. It helped them share and discuss things with each other. I also tried project based learning. I made them build a birdhouse. They presented their group's work. They had to work a lot, go outside, measure and cut things.”

“I think the question box is very good, both for the students as well as me. It had never been used at my school before I used it. The first time I placed a question box in my class and explained about it, my students put many questions in the box. I was very surprised.”

“I use some of the methods we learned when teaching school kids, classes 1 and 2. I use flipping the classroom, think-pair-share, and voting card. I really like think-pair-share but it didn't work. For it to work, students have to take some responsibility. But small kids can't do that, so it doesn't work for them. I think voting card works best with kids. It's like a game for them. I think I'm going to have some science classes in the future. I'm going to use think-pair-share then. The students will be adults over 20. Think-pair-share ensures good participation from students. Traditionally in Tibetan society, people feel very shy to stand in front of others and speak. So this method is especially good for them. I will try to use it at the science center.”

“I tried random name generator. I didn't want to see who was talented but to foster courage and confidence that is needed to stand on a stage.”

“After I started using the strategies I learned at the fellowship, I saw more interaction between students. The students were more involved in the lessons.”

“I was already teaching English, math and physics (as a substitute teacher) before I attended the fellowship program. Before, my classes were the same as what other classes in the monastic community are: the teacher teaching for 30 to 40 minutes, followed by questions from the students. There were no special teaching methods. I

didn't know any other way to teach. After the fellowship program I got some new teaching methods. Scott also sent me links to videos and articles. With those in mind, I got some very interesting methods for teaching—methods that make students active and engaged, not just passive listeners. My classes became more interactive. One of the things we learned at the fellowship program was flipping the classroom. And there was think-pair-share, where the students have to come up with their own answers, discuss with them with another student, then finally share it with the entire class. This raises the morale of the students and builds confidence to speak in front of others. Through this, I also got a good idea about how well the students had grasped what I had taught. I saw where I needed to focus my efforts.”

“I want to try and be myself more. And make my classes fun. Try to teach in interesting ways. For example, asking in class: What is two bananas plus two apples?”

“After I began teaching with my students’ needs in mind, the atmosphere of the classroom is more open. The students are more active, and there is more interaction. The atmosphere of a class is down to the teacher, how he acts and thinks. After the fellowship I have become more open and interactive. Because of this there is a bit of chaos in my classroom, but it’s a positive kind of chaos. There is more fun in my classroom.”

“I am going to try to create an environment in my classroom where students like to interact with each other. I can try teaching multiplication through soccer statistics.”

“Lecturing is really boring. I can feel this when I am talking too much. Imagine you have to teach on a hot, humid day. It’s about eleven in the morning. And you begin to lecture. You can see your students getting bored, becoming sleepy. You notice they are looking at their phones. When I taught after the fellowship program, using the methods I had learned there, the students weren’t looking at their phones. They were busy debating and sharing. They are involved. You look at your students, and you think, Hmm, this is fun. It’s a very nice feeling when you see students engaged, busy talking and discussing—and not just one or two but the whole class! It makes you, the teacher, comfortable when you see your students enjoying themselves.”

“Sometimes my students [Buddhist monks with training in Buddhist studies that are the equivalent of a bachelors or masters degree] can’t relate with the topics. It’s completely new. They also can’t accept things, like scientific theories. One time a monk just wouldn’t accept that heat passes from hot to cold. When we reach such an impasse, I let them discuss, because debating is what they are trained in and comfortable with.”

2) The fellows have shifted away from their traditional teacher-centric approach towards a student-centric approach.

Through the fellowship the teachers learned to prioritize the student. As soon as they zoomed in on the students, who had previously been in the margins of their mental periphery, they began to see that teaching was less about the teacher and more about the community of students. Their definition of good teaching went from ‘a job done well’ to ‘a job that benefited students.’ During interviews, the adjective the fellows used most often when talking about their monk and nun students was ‘comfortable.’ From their frequent usage of this word it was evident that making monastic students comfortable was one of their – if not their biggest – concern.

Looking back on their old ways of teaching, the fellows recalled a list that teachers everywhere who teach with a top-down model will be familiar with: mental fatigue, frustration, monotony, lack of ideas, lethargic students, enthusiasm draining away. These negative feelings piled on considerable pressure on them—something they had brought onto themselves by choosing to do all the work in the classroom. In short, to take center stage and relegate students to the role of mute spectators who were expected to absorb the performance.

Many of the teachers confessed feeling a sense of guilt at looking at teaching as a way of earning money and nothing more. The teacher-centric model had reduced them to a machine that stepped into the classroom, emitted a lecture, and walked out. There was no sense of achievement, joy or pride in what they did for a living.

The teachers found that putting the student at the center had another wonderful effect: it afforded them a respite from the onus of a teacher-centric teaching approach. Changing the way they taught was the only way to make teaching more fulfilling both for themselves and their students.

“Now my teaching strategy is all about putting the student in the center. I basically facilitate. My students think and reflect. I simply build on what they already know. For example, when I am teaching a new topic in class, I don’t begin by giving them definitions or outlining what we will be doing in class that day. Instead, I just mention the topic and let the students think about it. Then I ask them to express their understanding of the concept. I even ask them to think of that concept in relation to real life, that is, contextualize it. This is my approach most of the times. I try to ensure that whatever I teach makes sense to them. That is crucial. I have been trying hard to get my students to see the essence of what they are doing. For example, I ask my students to turn off the faucet when they are brushing. I explain to them that there are repercussions of their actions.”

“Before I didn’t know the teaching methods I do now, so the only thing I did was lecture. When I made lesson plans, I thought: I want to teach this; I want to teach like this; I will do this, do that. It was just ‘I’, ‘I’, ‘I’. now, I think: I’ll do this, the students will do that, we will do that. There is more interaction. I use techniques like think-pair-share and popsicle sticks for active participation of the students. I’m trying to teach

them to fish instead of handing out fish. And this makes me more active in the teaching process, and I learn more. When I lecture, I don't learn. If I listen, I learn. Good teaching helps both students and the teacher learn."

"I prepared a very short lesson on heat and heat transfer. It was a simple lesson. I could have finished the lesson in 10 minutes if I taught in the usual way. And it would have been very easy to do that. But I made them discuss in pairs. I asked them to discuss about heat from the Buddhist perspective. Then I made them share with the class. I boarded their answers. I was learning from them because I didn't know much about Buddhism. It was fun to see this kind of engagement, watching them discussing with each other. What I noticed after the class was that the students were still discussing the topic. I was standing on a balcony and I saw the students walking away, discussing amongst themselves. That was so lovely! That had never happened to me before."

"My students are more excited when the lessons are participatory. They are excited to respond to questions. They enjoy. I see smiles while they are talking to one another. And it doesn't bother them that their answers might not be correct."

"I think that it would be nice to discuss with students before starting to teach anything. What do they want to learn? What do they expect to learn? Or what do they want to improve upon? If the teacher and students discuss, they can then make a syllabus based on what the students want to learn, not what the teacher wants to teach."

"When I first started teaching, I did all the talking in class. I really felt teaching was an exhausting profession. I used to teach a total of four hours a day, so that entailed a lot of talking. That was exhausting. Before I came to this program I didn't think much about student interaction and assessment at all. I had barely used them before participating in this program. After joining this program I have tried these more. In the future, I want my lessons to be more participatory. I want the students to be more involved. I want my students to be more active."

3) The fellows feel more confident. The new ideas that they got from the fellowship are proving guiding lights as they try out new things in their teaching. Some of them confessed that they are still finding their feet as teachers, but the methods they got from the fellowship has made them less nervous, if not more confident, than before.

The majority of the participants of the fellowship program had taught for between 2 to 3 years before they came to the fellowship. They were – are – still finding their way in the profession. Naturally, many shared that they felt their teaching lacked something vital. That missing link had proved elusive. Though palpable, it remained unknown, mostly because they continued teaching the way they always had. It didn't help either that the teachers were not trained. Without professional knowhow, they didn't have the knack for identifying holes in their own teaching. All they could do was keep doing what they were doing, even if it didn't feel right.

That feeling of something amiss gnawed at their fragile confidence, leading in some cases to teaching becoming a hollow experience, just a *job*.

After attending the fellowship the teachers felt more confident. One obvious reason for this is that post-fellowship the teachers feel equipped with new teaching techniques. Their repertoire has grown. They know many more ways to teach. Ideas on teaching are more plentiful. There are opportunities for experimentation. Their classrooms are charged with energy and enthusiasm—amongst students, and through them, to the teachers. Since their new teaching approach involves the active participation of both teacher and students, some of the apprehensions that emerged when their teaching was repetitive and teacher-dominated have subsided. Perhaps the right word to use would be ‘comfort’ instead of ‘confidence,’ although comfort is usually a precursor to confidence. Immersion in their profession is building the teachers’ confidence, one class at a time.

“I see myself as a teacher more and more. Earlier, I had fewer ideas about teaching. What ideas I had about teaching weren’t interactive. The ideas that I have got from the fellowship program, and the values and partnerships, will help me become a better teacher.”

“I am more confident about teaching now because I have started to love teaching. It’s no longer a burden but an interesting thing to do. The kids love me, I love them. We laugh a lot in class. That makes me more confident. Every teacher has a unique personality. If you stay true to your personality, you feel more confident. For example, I am very energetic in class. I’m always running around. Also, preparation makes a big difference. Lesson planning is important. If you are prepared for a lesson, you feel more confident. Lesson plans allow you to come to class fresh and happy. If you are happy, there is a high chance that you will make your students happy.”

“I had never had teacher training before this, so I feel more comfortable now. I had never known strategies like the ones we learned here. I had no idea that there were teaching methods like these.”

“Before I joined this program, whenever I needed help with something, I relied on Google. But the information on Google is not always reliable. You can only rely on the Internet to a certain extent. Now, with this pool of teachers, I always have the confidence that I can go to my friends for help. I learn from the dilemmas that they share. There is a platform for us to express doubts and challenges, classroom issues, the teaching process. In that way, it certainly helps to build confidence.”

“There’s a lot of technical and professional support from the fellowship program. That helps us build confidence in what we are doing.”

“I feel less nervous than before because of the many ideas that they taught us at the fellowship to try in class. Sometimes, one emotion suppresses another. There is excitement as we try those new ideas. That excitement suppresses the nervousness.”

“I feel I am a more authentic teacher now. I feel like I am trying harder to be a good teacher. And that makes me more confident.”

4) The fellows enjoy the teaching experience more than they did before. The many ideas for teaching they got from the fellowship are helping them teach in ways that are more fulfilling. Altering their teaching style and trying out new things in class excites the teachers. Students, too, have begun to enjoy their new roles as participants in the learning process. The fellows are finding this new, equal approach joyful.

Many of the fellows reported having a feeling of something lacking in their profession before they came to the fellowship program. Teaching was a job, and one that was getting increasingly boring. It didn't occur to them that what was missing in their teaching was joy.

Part of the thrill also came from the unprecedented roles they found themselves in while teaching with a new approach. They no longer dominated classes. This loosening of the grip on the classroom freed space for innovations. Students were given opportunities to take the initiative. All this took a big load off of the teachers, who had been worn down by the exhausting kind of teaching they had done in the past.

For teachers who had relied solely on lecturing as a teaching method, every technique that involved their taking a back seat was taking a step away from their comfort zone. The learning curve that the teachers have been on since attending the fellowship has brought them much happiness and excitement. This positive energy is proving the fuel for further experimentations and innovations in their teaching style.

“Personally, what I noticed after joining this fellowship is a newfound excitement. That is the biggest change. Before, teaching was merely a job for me, something I had to do. After the fellowship, I felt like trying something new. I began thinking about new methods to try in class. I found myself wondering how my students would respond to a new method. I started questioning my every move.”

“When I see my students actively participating in class, smiling, excited, having fun, it makes me happy. I feel I am doing something meaningful.”

“Before coming to the fellowship teaching had begun to feel like a tedious job to me. The reason it felt like that was because after doing the same thing for a while it begins to feel normal. It becomes very monotonous: you wake up, come to teach, do your job, go home. You don't go out of your comfort zone. You tend to avoid doing anything new. It becomes a job. You stop trying to improve. There is no excitement, no fun.”

“I enjoy teaching more than before. Earlier, I think I was overburdening myself in terms of preparing teaching materials and addressing the classroom. But now I feel that there is shared responsibility between the students and me. It's still a work in progress. I think ultimately these new student-centric teaching techniques will build my confidence as well as make students take more responsibility of their learning. Ultimately, there will be equal responsibility between the teacher and students.”

“Right now, I am not able to say for certain that I enjoy teaching. But through the fellowship program I have become more comfortable with teaching. I am a bit more confident than before. I enjoy eating more when I am hungry. I will say that right now I am hungry for teaching.”

5) The fellows’ sense of responsibility has sharpened. They scrutinize their lessons more than before. Introspection and reflection are more common.

The fellows have begun to analyze their own style and methods in terms of its impact on their students—something they hadn’t done before. They are making sincere efforts to understand their students’ needs, and to identify issues that inhibit students and limit their learning experience. Teachers have begun to take into account factors such as the age group of their students, their expectations, abilities and shortcomings while planning and executing lessons.

The new approaches to teaching that the fellows gained gave them insights into teaching they hadn’t had before. Consequently, they began to reflect on their own teaching. One of the things that the fellows realized was that even while they were wearing themselves out to teach better, they had never given so much as a thought to their students. They worried about not being happy themselves, but they had never paused to see if their students enjoyed the lessons. They teachers realized that they had neglected their students’ needs. They had been self-centered. They had not been responsible. This humbling realization had the effect of sharpening their sense of responsibility.

The result of this change in perspective was an increase in the teachers’ drive to improve their teaching. To do that, they had come to see, you needed to make the classroom a place where students flourished. And that was only possible through careful observation and understanding of one’s students, a process that necessitated the teacher taking an interest in his students. That meant finding out what the students liked, wanted, were comfortable with, what worked and what failed. It also entailed a continuous process of self-evaluation and self-improvement. Being a responsible teacher meant understanding that whatever you do as a teacher should be for the students’ benefit.

“Now I realize the responsibility of a teacher. That’s very important, realizing your responsibilities as a teacher. Teaching and learning are not a one-way process; it’s mutual. Everyone involved learns as well as teaches. It’s interdependent. It was through the fellowship that I came to this understanding of the profession. It broadened my perspective of teaching and learning.”

“I feel more like a teacher after the fellowship. I feel a greater sense of responsibility towards the students.”

“If you make a mistake while teaching, it’s your responsibility to correct it in your next class. You need to have a reflection process when you are not with your students.”

“As a teacher, you can be happy even when you think selfishly. But if you put your students’ happiness first, your students will love you more, interact with you more.”

When students are happy to come to class that is half the job done. Then what you want to teach will be successful."

"I'm going to take time to find out what is most exciting for my students. I will try to make the classes valuable for the students."

"I will try never to give up my goal of becoming a better teacher."

"If you don't continually learn, then that's the most harmful thing you can do as a teacher. Teachers need to learn as they go along. We also need to learn while we teach. Teachers can also get complacent when they start getting used to a syllabus. What is easy to teach can become monotonous. Then there is no creativity, no engagement from the students. You need to constantly identify what is missing from your teaching: I need to learn that; I need to establish a relationship with my students."

"Teachers need to be creative otherwise their lessons quickly become boring. A syllabus looks perfect when seen from one perspective, mainly because it's working. But seen from another angle – the way it feels – it is boring. There is no excitement. There is no fun. It doesn't give you any positive feeling when you are teaching. Many times a lesson works because it's easy."

6) The fellows are starting to realize the importance of rapport between teachers and students. This has been one of the biggest revelations for the fellows.

In the introspection that followed after beginning the fellowship, the teachers began to see weak points in their teaching. The most prominent of this – a gaping hole in their pedagogy – was the absence of a relationship between them and their students. There was no connection. In fact, none of the teachers had ever tried to establish a connection with their students. Teaching was done within an unequal social framework. In this hierarchical and detached system, trying to know your students better was not, so to speak, part of the script. Growing up in a culture that taught them to revere teachers as authorities that couldn't be questioned, the fellows also taught with this image of the teacher in mind.

The fellows reported that this unequal relationship was a recipe for failure. As they applied the new methods of teaching, with their emphasis on student participation, the importance of the social aspects of teaching became clear. One epiphanal episode was when they were asked to recall their favorite teacher from school. When they reflected on their school days, it emerged, almost as a shock, that their favorite teacher hadn't been the most erudite one or the one whose teaching style stood out. Their favorite teacher was invariably the one who had had the most affectionate relationship with the student. The best teacher, in their own eyes, was the teacher who cared about their students. To care for your students, you needed to know your students. And for that, you needed to connect with them on a human level.

The fellows have started working on building bonds with their students. They don't want to be aloof, distant figures who come into the classroom to dictate and dispense. They wish to be

approachable people. They want to be listeners. They are working hard to make students feel comfortable. They are striving to ensure education is an exchange between teacher and student. They want to be friends with their students.

“Before the fellowship, I used to walk into a classroom, teach, and walk out. There was no interaction with students. I also had many assumptions about what students need to learn. Then I came to the fellowship and realized the importance of interaction between teacher and student. I never had any relationship with my students. That was because of my ego. After this program I began to take interest in my students, to form relationships with them. I am a more open and interactive person after the fellowship, and I am happier.”

“What I realized after coming to this fellowship is that I had never, ever established a relationship with my students. I just came to class, taught, and left. I didn’t know their names, their likes, dislikes. There was no connection. I didn’t learn anything about them. If the teacher doesn’t learn anything about the students, then there is no point.”

“I never knew that having a connection with students was very important for a teacher. I had always felt that something was missing in my teaching. But I could never pinpoint the missing link. During the fellowship program it was repeatedly mentioned that connection between teacher and students is very important. That made me look back on all the classes I had taught, all the things I had done in class, and it dawned on me that I had never had a connection with my students. And that is the challenge for a teacher. With the things I have learned here, I will be able to connect more with my students.”

“Taking an interest in your students is important because you need to understand them. You need to know their interests. That is how you can teach them more effectively.”

“My connection with teaching has deepened because my relationship with my students has deepened. I have started to love my students after the fellowship. They return the love, which makes me happy. They in turn are happy. When students are happy, they learn better.”

“Learning is an exchange between teacher and student. So if I don’t have a connection, then what I say is meaningless. That is why I’m trying to establish a real relationship with my students.”

“My connection with students is becoming more like a friendship. It’s fun to go into a classroom where students feel more comfortable approaching teachers with their problems. It’s very important for teachers to be approachable.”

7) For the members of the fellowship, their mini community is a platform from which they can seek advice in dealing with their problems. It is a refuge from the travails of the teaching life and all the frustrations and problems the profession brings. Knowing that they have someone to share their challenges, dilemmas, successes and failures with takes away the loneliness and frustrations they sometimes feel as teachers.

The majority of the teachers who participated in the fellowship work in environments that are far from congenial for the kind of teaching they are striving to do. Although there is no direct objection to their methodology, there is no support either. Administrations have their own priorities, and innovation in pedagogy is rarely among them. Some even got pushback from students, who are used to and wish to learn in the traditional way, that is, with the teacher spoon-feeding them knowledge. The teachers find themselves alone, especially when they need to express their feelings and ideas in relation to their teaching.

For each of them, the other fellows make up for the social and professional support that they lack in their work environment. Problems and dilemmas are also shared with the group, and each member offers advice on ways to deal with them. Fellows look to the group for support, and receive it amply in the form of feedback, understanding, assurance, motivation. But above all, the members find in the group a calming influence, which comes from knowing that there is someone who will listen.

“This fellowship is a nice platform, because when you keep your problems within yourself, you might not find solutions to it. Others might have ideas that can help you. But if you don’t tell them your dilemma, you will never know whether they could help you or not. You won’t know their perspective on the issue. If they know about your situation then they can offer ideas about solving the problem. You have more options to solve your problem.”

“You have someone to go to for help when you have a problem. It’s a group with which I can share my experiences and learn from the experiences of others.”

“I think communication between us fellowship members results in exchanges of very simple, doable techniques and tools that contribute to our professionalism.”

“Sometimes, when you run out of ideas, you wish there was someone who could share their ideas with you. When you work together with others, the chance of things working out is higher. Working alone is difficult. There is a lot of sharing in our fellowship group. For example, we share the dilemmas we have on a monthly basis. One of us shares an issue that he is facing and the rest of us present our views on how to address that issue. You get ideas about how to solve a particular problem. There is no perfect solution but at least you get different approaches to solving it.”

“One of the problems we teachers face while teaching at monasteries is that we don’t really talk about our problems with our colleagues. Even when you do share with them, you often get a very dry response. They tend to be reluctant to try new things, mostly because they don’t want to risk upsetting the administration. They are very

uncomfortable with change. Since most of us here are lay people, we understand this problem. We face the same dilemma. We talk about it. If you face similar problems, it becomes easier to share it with others. One person shares his problem, another responds by relating her ordeals. Then there is comfort in sharing.”

“It’s very easy to share something with the fellowship group. And it’s more comfortable to share and open up. If you don’t like something, you can just say it. Your peers understand that. They are more accommodating to your individuality. Feedback is given and accepted with this understanding, in a positive manner.”

8) Fellows report a feeling that their work as teachers is a low priority for the senior monastic administrations that determine the monastic schedule. This makes it difficult to have continuity in their classroom. Furthermore, the monastery administrations are not always receptive to the innovative teaching methods the teachers want to try.

Most of the fellows work at monasteries. Their classes are but a small part of the much larger monastic schedule. Since the subjects that the teachers teach – science, English, math – are not among the monasteries’ major academic priorities, they are the ones who have to compromise. Classes are cancelled at short notice. Students are suddenly ordered by the monastery’s administration to tend to other duties at the cost of the lessons. In short, the fellows report that when a choice has to be made between the classes taught by them or some event related to the monastery’s other activities – ceremonies, festivals, chores – the monastery’s interests prevail.

Such unexpected yet routine interruptions to classes can set any teacher back. But the frustration is more intense for the fellows because they are beginning to use teaching methods which rely on continuous effort before they can bear fruit. For example, the teachers have learned about the need for rapport-building with students. Imagine their despair when after spending months understanding their students, winning their trust, and assessing their abilities and needs, an administrator sends the entire batch of students to work in places like the monastery’s kitchen. Such intrusions on their prerogatives as teachers would be more bearable and manageable if they were one-off instances. Unfortunately, they are almost a fixture of the academic life of a monastery. The cumulative effect of such disturbances undermines a teacher’s planning and damages morale.

Creativity is a crucial component of the new teaching methods that the teachers are trying out. Thinking outside the box, experimenting, reversing roles and process are all part of this pedagogy. Traditional monastic rules and taboos prove formidable obstacles to such aspirations. While singing is a great way to learn, it’s impossible to do so at a monastery, where it is prohibited in a classroom. For teachers who are just beginning to see the wonderful things that thinking outside a box can do, a monastery can often prove to be a place where they feel boxed in.

“The main dilemma I have faced so far is going up against the administrators, and not being able to teach classes regularly. We have to follow the monastery’s schedule. I don’t have a problem with that. Compromising occasionally with the monastic routine

is alright, but there is no compromise at all. This inflexibility is the biggest challenge we teachers are facing. There is no room for improvisation. Whenever something comes up at the monastery, we have to cancel the classes. The will to teach weakens you know. We feel more and more discouraged with every such interruption."

"For the monastery, we are like a stepchild, an afterthought."

"We lose our rhythm."

"One challenge that I face at my monastery is that monks have to take turns at different duties, like working in the kitchen or at the monastery's restaurant. They usually work for three months in a place. As a result, for three months I have one group of students coming to class, and after three months a new group of students. So I can't move forward with my teaching methods. I have to start from scratch with the new students. It's like starting a new academic session every three months. So teaching for six months is actually teaching two three-month sessions. And those three months have holidays in them."

"I wanted to take my students on field trips. It doesn't have to be related to what I teach. Trips are experiences that help build knowledge. That is important for individuals in the process of building their personalities. Also, singing is an effective way of learning, especially when memorizing something. But monastic rules forbid singing. There are many restrictions that come from monastic rules."