

HL: It starts in the classroom

SL: Campuses have long been hotbeds for student movements like environmental awareness and why students should be encouraged to initiate more movements – consumerism, globalization etc.

Student movements have had a long history of political and social involvement that have often been the catalyst for change, as well as addressing concurrent issues and challenges faced by society. Being large reservoirs of articulate voices, bright talents and future trail-blazers that weave societies together, universities are quite naturally where these howling carrion-calls emanate. It is therefore of little wonder that such movements have often been so important in heralding socio-political change.

The Free Speech Movement that engulfed Berkeley in the 1960s affirmed the rights of students to voice their concerns and involvement in extramural affairs as a part of academic freedom. Universities have for long been considered hallowed grounds that facilitated the free flow of ideas and thought, beyond the gnarled reach of policy-makers. Institutions for most part do protect these voices, while the more liberal even encourage the questioning of authority as part of academic prerogative. This includes urging student involvement in concerns within or even beyond their shores.

It was the 1960s, in its modern incarnation, that the yelp of student activism was heard and reverberates today. It was then that waves of protests precipitated by university students inundated several nations across a smaller world. Issues that ranged from anger of the looming Cold War, US involvement in Vietnam, democratization, the rights of African-Americans to fear of a nuclear fall-out. Rising tuition costs, curriculum and academic freedom were also prevailing issues that organized millions. The French May, which had its origins in dissatisfaction with anachronistic government attitudes and the lack of employment, forced students to protest and eventually became a watershed moment in French history - shifting entrenched conservatism and embraced more left-leaning attitudes.

The 1960s upheaval has been attributed to the coming of age of the baby-boomers. In the United States, the sudden surge in the demographic created a cleavage in modern American society. They were the first generation to have grown up watching TV, giving them a glimpse of current affairs and cultures of another – without the mistrust, and perhaps even granting perspectives denied to an older generation. More liberal and left-leaning, they reacted against the conservatism of the previous generation. And when the March of Washington or the cruelty of the Vietnam War resonated with them, they quickly mobilized and rebelled. With a past that

included the Second World War and the treacherous cloud of the Cold War still looming, students began to challenge such primeval war-mongering and government interest.

We can perhaps thank pop culture for giving impetus to such movements. While *The Beatles* and *Hendrix* didn't exactly 'light the fire', they certainly galvanized it and brought counter-culture into every living room. Even now, these shining demi-gods stamp causes with their indelible marks - from Richard Gere and his Buddhist connections, Angelina Jolie with her adopted flock and various humanitarian causes, Bob Geldorf who was the brains behind Live Aid, to Bono and his involvement in getting governments to forgive African debt. What has this to do with college movements? With celebrities on the bandwagon, espousing causes through the media loudspeaker, it has acquired some mainstream acceptance. Such entrenched concern and participation is no longer viewed with suspicion as it would be in the Shire. Walking into a regular college dorm room, it is common enough to see walls adorned with Free Tibet, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr's posters.

It's hard to say if the youth are any less empathetic than back in the 1960s, but it would be erroneous to assume that they are apathetic. There is no lack of student involvement in socio-political issues these days. At the beginning of 2007, 575 schools across Canada and the United States organized events protesting against feeble government action in a growing climate crisis. Students around the world continue to organize themselves against international summits helmed by the World Bank or IMF – in response to the growing plight of those left behind in the globalization juggernaut.

In Iran, a country that has previously experienced the wrath of collective student action, disputed election results in 2009 has been the catalyst for recent student protests and a call for change. Students had their voices and votes heard when many rallied behind Barack Obama – having an unprecedented impact on an American presidential election and perhaps changing the course of history.

A Google search for student protests reveals no lack of these challenges to authority. Rallies against increasing fees, curriculum or domestic situations rarely make prime-time overseas. And as the world continues growing smaller and geographical boundaries no longer circumscribe, issues around the world can be a cause of concern for students and hold their imagination captive. From a movement to free Aung Sang Suu Kyi, liberate the ancient land of Tibet, climate change, globalization, end Africa's debt, poverty, Obama, Sudan, whaling, disarmament, HIV/AIDS – there is no end to the number of causes students can find themselves drawn to.

It's easy to see that the impetus to create change, right wrongs and participate in the greater dialogue is embedded amongst idealistic students. It seems that all that is required is a guarantee that their right to voice their discontent is enshrined – take that away and the soap-boxes may disappear.

Yet it's also a necessity that they are given the space to do so, since it's these banner brandishing rebels that will be carrying the torches of tomorrow. Circumscribing these voices is simply bad karma, resulting in a muted future for a country. Dismiss students as trouble-makers and you're breeding an apathetic generation, students who will find elsewhere to express themselves and in severe cases, violence.

According to Kiran Bin Sethi who started the groundbreaking RiverSide School which she calls a 'lab' for its experiential educational style - all it takes is an 'I can' lesson for students to become harbingers of positive change. But most of us probably already knew that. Now, it's really up to schools to clear the grounds and watch the pickets go up.

Participation can be a college student's education in becoming a more civil-minded and worldly person, who can readily look beyond himself. Or would you rather self-absorbed and insular zombies? There are probably some Chomskys.

There's no reason why students movements can't complement our studies. The hands-on experience is so much more than what the four walls of a classroom can offer. Leading a cause, reaching out to their peers, generating research and fund-raising are all valuable skills. Traits like tenacity, moral rectitude, empathy, altruism all make for a.... person.