

Debate for Social Change: Secondary Schools and Madrassahs in Bangladesh

WORKING FOR BETTER LIFE

Creative outlets for students do not exist in the vast majority of Bangladeshi schools, where the curriculum fails to stimulate their imagination or interest. Neither textbooks nor teachers give much attention to the pressing social and economic development issues that Bangladesh faces. Students are not encouraged to think about the future of their country, to analyze the issues that affect Bangladesh as a developing nation, or to question government policies. Nor do the academic institutions encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences between schools and the general public. This isolationism has become a detriment to both groups and has cultivated resentment and mistrust. To add to these problems, the culture has lost the traditions that develop listening skills and rational discourse. The ensuing frustration makes youth easy prey for the sparring political parties which have relied upon passionate and volatile supporters throughout the first three decades since Bangladesh's independence in 1971 from the then west Pakistan.

Because of the separation between students' daily realities and their formal classroom education—which values test-taking and memorization skills at the cost of critical thinking and creativity—a sense of confusion and apathy is pervasive in the country. A badly managed European system of education designed for the elite is worsening this situation. The promotion of an obedient citizen is being imposed on a culture for whom it has little relevance or meaning. Drug use has become the favored route to escape the youth's sense of disillusionment and irrelevant education while many resorted to gang fight and street terrorism. Shiblee, the founder of Working for Better Life (WBL),

dreamed of making a difference, of changing the current model of education. The tool he knew best was his gift for debate, which had won him many prizes.

Working for Better Life

Working for Better Life (WBL), a small Bangladeshi organization was born in the mid-nineties by its founding executive director, Mostafa Shiblee. As a student, Shiblee was not happy with what was happening around him. The healthy academic atmosphere, the friendly environment, the logical discussion on

various issues or dealing with subjects outside the syllabus, were lacking so much in his own school days that he was desperately looking for a change. He wanted a change that ensured the availability of all these missing elements. He wanted students to know about their problems, and the problems being faced by the society in different spheres. He dreamt students would engage themselves in various development activities, and acquire problem solving ability in order to become better equipped for bigger responsibility in the future.

The demoralizing scene in the society, the reign of terror, corruption, injustice, autocracy, and denial of various rights of the common people made him commit to work for the children in secondary schools who would be more conscious of these issues and grow up as better citizens than their predecessors to create a more just and equitable society. In 1995, he started the organization 'Working for Better Life' (WBL) with his friends after finishing his studies, which unnecessarily lingered due to political disturbances, in Dhaka University.

Parliamentary debate program

WBL has a parliamentary debate program that facilitates the learning among secondary school students of knowledge and skills in dealing with their country's problems. With such knowledge and skills obtained before getting into university, students can restore a constructive activism based on social responsibility and develop a new generation of leaders in a democratic society. Students also improve listening skills and independent thinking, the essence of quality education in the modern world. WBL sees schools as the leverage point for social transformation - the point where young people come together, where they develop their values and social behaviour. At the same time, WBL understands the effort embodied in bringing debate clubs into a school system which has no experience in organized extra-curricular activi-

ties. This challenge of social transformation is required to incorporate democratic skills in a country with so little democratic experience.

Shiblee's combination of determination and faith in people, not systems or institutions, kept him going in WBL.

WBL's program format sparks students' imaginations and taps into their natural enthusiasm and desire to change the world around them. The students benefit from its program both at the academic and personal levels. The program teaches them to identify and analyze a problem and develop creative, well-reasoned arguments; to learn about current issues and discuss them in a legitimate and constructive form, to learn new approaches to group dialogue and conflict resolution. After participating in WBL's program, students who previously did almost no reading outside their prescribed syllabus have begun to read by themselves and participate in their communities. They became interested in current events, and their knowledge of complex social issues increased dramatically. They developed a sense of self-worth and the realization that they have a democratic voice in the policy decisions that shape their lives. As a result, a sense of community involvement replaced the sense of detachment and alienation often felt by these adolescents. The debates bridge the gap between Bangladesh's academic communities and the general public, as WBL emphasizes a practical, constructive involvement in social issues rather than esoteric scholarly debate.

Activities

By introducing students to the art of debate, WBL provides them with a healthy, productive channel for their time, energy and creativity. Typically WBL's program begins by asking the students to identify a main topic on which to base the debate. The issue can be local, national, or international in scope, such as what to do about trash disposal problems in Dhaka, how to conduct mass voter registration in Ban-

gladesh, or how best to attract more foreign investment to the country. Within each topic, WBL identifies propositions such as, "Should drug users and dealers be punished equally?" or "Should parents be blamed for their children's addictions?"

When the topic has been selected, WBL invites a speaker, often a popular figure such as a movie star, to do "issue familiarization" with the students at a school. Usually five hundred to one thousand students attend such meetings, out of whom typically about a hundred are members of WBL's debate club. During "debate sessions," the WBL members and their teachers decide who among their peers would participate in the debate itself.

In their week-long preparation for the debate, WBL advises the students to learn about the problem firsthand by becoming more involved in their neighborhoods and communities and by interviewing people. This interaction helps bridge the gap between academic communities and the general public.

WBL invites influential members of the community who have a demonstrated interest in the issue to attend the debate. If the students are debating the issue of a public awareness campaign on HIV/AIDS in Dhaka, an ideal group of invitees would include members of the Ministries of Health and Education along with the directors or staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field. WBL believes that if these people attend the debate they will gain a fresh perspective on the issue and the students can work on making an impact on existing policies of the government.

Although there are only twenty final number of debaters, the parliamentary style of the debate allows for audience-members (including parents, teachers, administrators, and distinguished guests) to participate. The parliamentary procedure also educates students about the process of decision-making in their government, which has functioned as a democracy only since 1991. Students, especially girls, become noticeably empowered by the opportunity to "play" the role of

Prime Minister when they "introduce bills."

After the debate, the students from both teams discuss the valuable points that they and their opponents raised. WBL guides the students in crafting a strategy for publicizing and disseminating their suggestions to lawmakers and influential members of society. With the help of WBL, a brief policy document, called "Message for the Elderly Society," circulated to thousands of people at schools, colleges, and universities through a bulletin and other means. A debate concerning the state of garbage disposal in Dhaka generated a series of suggestions and ideas that students submitted to the City Council, several of which have been implemented.

Response of school authorities and teachers

The overall positive response of school authorities surprised Shiblee. "Most," he says, "instantly accepted our offer, readily encouraged us to work with the students. But there were some officials who exhibited a more covert form of resistance. They could not argue against the program's ethical or educational value. So they dragged their feet and blamed the bureaucracy. Teachers and headmasters 'forgot' or cancelled appointments. They told me they had more important things to do and that the students couldn't really afford the time." But Shiblee was persistent, and eventually WBL's spreading reputation brought a large number of requests to be included in the program from authorities, teachers and students in other schools.

One of WBL's most important lessons is about the teachers - how they are victimized and how to use the huge, untapped potential they carry. Though a number remained uninterested, teachers have the voluntary spirit and keen desire for social change within this low-paid profession. Shiblee observed, "They never refuse our requests for help; they always manage to arrange a debate class. They urge the students

to participate and have become more and more involved in helping them do research and discuss the issues. They actually thank us for taking this initiative and apologize for being unable to offer such a program on their own."

Link to the society

Broader societal links have been built into the program as judges for the final debate are drawn from government officials, school authorities and parental groups. Following the final debate, the students prepare and send legislative and policy proposals to the Parliament. WBL is enthusiastic about how spontaneously the students have taken hold of this component. For example, students debating on garbage management met with the Mayor of Dhaka with a proposal to privatize the street cleaning system.

A debate on drug addiction spawned a volley of proposals from students that included identification of drug addicts among their friends, counselling, and meetings with local police to curb the black market on drugs. A group of girls put forth a plan to set up a school garden nursery to generate income from renting out plants for parties, public events and holiday celebrations that would help pay for books and materials for the clubs.

A debate on women's rights sparked a movement in a school where students, especially girls, decided to send anonymous letters to fathers responsible for domestic violence and also sticking posters against domestic violence on the school walls to sensitize parents on Parent-Teachers' day in their school.

Students from the Gazipur district, inspired by their debate on corporal punishment, organized a meeting with the district education officials and undertook a number of activities on the subject. Initially, they organized a joint meeting of debate clubs from various schools and outlined a set of rules for students designed to make them avoid unruly atmosphere in the campuses. Later, they met the teachers and fo-

mulated a set of alternative disciplining methods which teachers can use to maintain order inside the classroom. The initiatives of the debaters eventually proved that the use of the cane was absolutely useless and meaningless.

After their secondary school final examinations, a group of students from Moinertek decided to open a children's shelter/home for working mothers. Poor mothers living in the shanties in the outskirts of Dhaka city were compelled to leave their infants in the hands of their siblings, who are often just a few years older than the infants. As a result, most of them were found playing in the dirt of the streets. Students, encouraged by their previous debates on child-rights-related topics, decided to act to support the fulfillment of the rights of the children instead of waiting for others to come and help. They opened a daycare center, first in one of their homes with six babies. Soon, four more centers opened with five to eight babies per center being given care while their mothers were at work.

Most students, after taking part in the anti-smoking-related debates, convinced their school authorities to declare the school campus smoke-free zones. Inspired by these little actions, the government later on declared all educational institutions smoke-free zones.

Many of the best debaters known as YCAs (young change agents) enrolled in a new subject recently opened in various universities, the Conflict Resolution & Peace Building subject. Inspired by the positive outcome of debate, former school debaters are now studying this interesting subject and looking forward to making contribution to the society as they get older.

Intervention in Madrassahs

The government appeared worried about the existing situation of madrassah (islamic religious school) education and often tried to change them by establishing reform committees. But these attempts were mostly incomplete

or unimplemented. Also, the government never fully implemented the recommendations of these committees. For instance, the decision to require each madrassah to recruit female teachers to constitute thirty percent of the total number of teachers was not enforced. Although a madrassah teacher training center has been established, it has not been functioning properly.

In the backdrop of this situation, from the year 2000, WBL decided to expand its activities to the madrassahs in Bangladesh. WBL observed that although it is part of their religious duties, social or madrassah leaders never use the religious sermons to preach child rights (or human rights for that matter) to the students.

Project on madrassah students

During the May 2004 to March 2005 period, WBL implemented a project with the rural youth in madrassahs and schools in the Kuakata area (a southern Bangladeshi resort island) under the Connecting Futures Program of The British Council, Bangladesh. After nine long years of working with schools and the madrassah students on debate around various social issues, the project provide for the first time for WBL to work with the youth from one small area of the country and focused on one issue in order to start a change in the mindset of the people within the community.

Initially, most of the youths, especially female participants, were discouraged at home and school to participate in WBL's three-day-long residential training program at its own training center in Kuakata. Parents or teachers thought a three-day-long residential training by an NGO would primarily aim at brainwashing their children and derailing them from Islam and various social values. While some teachers supported WBL from the beginning, WBL staffs in almost all the cases had to go to the houses of many parents to convince them to allow their children to join the training program. Many

parents remained skeptical. A number of the parents came along with their female children in order to watch the proceedings of the training and judge if it was a place for their kids to continue getting involved in and whether or not they could recommend the training to others.

Many said that letting male and female youths mix freely during the training should not be allowed and compelled some of the female participants to wear *borkha*, which covers the entire face, during their stay at the Kuakata training centre. In addition to the parents, at least two teachers in each training program did round-the-clock monitoring of the situation to make sure that their students do not participate in anything inappropriate as defined by the teachers, who were mostly male adults.

The training program seemed like a public examination where the youths were proving themselves worthy of their hard earned liberty. At the same time, it was an acid test for WBL on its bid to secure the approval of society in holding more activities of this sort in the future.

Before the beginning of the second day activities, parents and teachers began to feel easy and relaxed as the sessions quickly progressed. They found the proceedings interesting and innocuous, and allowed their children to participate freely in the sessions.

WBL staff knew that implementing a training program was difficult but they did not know how enormously difficult it would be until the program started. They also could not believe how smoothly the program implementation turned out from the second day in each of the fifteen different training programs organized at Kuakata with local youths. In each case, the third day was always difficult as most participants wanted to stay longer and became emotional during the farewell session.

Participating schools and students

WBL invited fifteen educational institutes within the distance of thirty kilometres east,

west and north from Kuakata to participate in a training program called 'Cultural Appreciation under the Connecting Futures Program at Kuakata.' After signing the memorandum of understanding with each institute, a local group of twenty-five members were formed in each place which would participate in future activities. Later each group was brought to WBL's training center at Kuakata to participate in a three-day training program called Cultural Appreciation or 'Poromot Shohishnuta' in Bangla. The topic was carefully selected to enable the youths to talk about serious issues of the time, such as religion, and how different religions such as Islam, Hinduism or Christianity could be appreciated. In a total of fifteen training programs, there were a total of four hundred youth participants and fifty teachers and parents present in these events. Out of the fifteen institutes, three were madrassahs, three were colleges up to intermediate level, and the remaining nine institutes were regular Bangla-medium schools.

The quality and background of the participants

Except for one neighboring madrassah, all fourteen other institutes sent mixed groups of boys and girls to the training. WBL took special care to ensure equal participation of both boys and girls in the trainings. Although many opposed sending mixed groups at the beginning, most eventually agreed to send girls as well. But one madrassah, known to be a stronghold of radical Islamists, came to the WBL training center ahead of their schedule and conveyed their decision that either they should be allowed to send only boys from their madrassah or be allowed to be dropped from the program. After long negotiation, they agreed that if the madrassah management found the training suitable for their girls as well, then girls would also be sent to this program in the future. WBL softened its position on the issue in order to create an enabling

environment for all and ran the training with only boys from that madrassah.

During the training, WBL interviewed most participants in smaller groups or individually in order to assess their situation. The interviews revealed a bizarre and utterly frustrating finding.

The academic quality of most of the participants from the area was extremely low in comparison to the participants from Dhaka. They were weak in language, spelling, writing, pronunciation and knowledge of subject content. Many could not spell the word 'poromot shohishnuta' in Bangla, although they were fifteen or sixteen years old. The level of English proficiency was frustratingly low, even many of the teachers could not write a sentence in English properly. The traditional rote learning system has been failing the majority of students every year in the schools. None ever participated in any extra-curricular activity such as debate, drama, etc. Conservatism, prejudice, religious bias, narrow outlook towards women, etc. have crept into the school environment in an alarming manner. Many girls were forced to wear *borkha*, a special version developed by society recently. Drama, music, etc. were considered un-islamic. Students were frequently told by some teachers that poets, musicians, cultural activists were enemies of Islam and the concept of women working in schools, NGOs, government offices was against the spirit of Islam. If a boy and a girl were found talking together in the school, the girl was punished. If a girl was eager to learn music or dance, she was brutally stopped both by the family and the school. Outside reading such as on contemporary prose, poetry, etc. was not encouraged. With this extraordinary situation prevailing in Kuakata, WBL took the initiative of working with the youths from local educational institutes in order to engage them in a rare opportunity of discussing critical issues called "cultural appreciation."

Setting and Session

The participants found the setting for the training unique. The training setting provides a vast space to the visiting youths, a dorm-style accommodation, plenty of space to work outdoor under specially-made umbrellas or huge trees, a pool for swimming during the breaks, and a long beach area exclusively for visitors.

From day one, after creating an easy and relaxing mood during the introductory session, the participants were kept busy from session to session. There were small workshops on several topics: what people understand by culture and how different cultures can be appreciated, what may happen if people in a society of mixed cultures lack mutual appreciation, how tolerance to other's opinion is useful in the society, etc. Each session had group work and presentation in the style of *adda* (informal gathering or discussion in a group), one-way lecturing was avoided and in a number of sessions, participants were sent outside the training center in groups to interview people in the nearby market or the visiting tourists in the sea beach to obtain their opinions.

The cultural appreciation theme was divided into three sub-topics, i.e., religious tolerance, social tolerance and political tolerance. The first day session covered religious tolerance. In the evening, participants engaged in extensive discussion on how religious tolerance was encouraged within all religions, especially in Islam. The participants were introduced to Quranic verses regarding the requirement to be respectful of those following different religions. At the end, participants were amazed to know that Islam itself meant peace and respect for others and how tolerance was upheld at critical junctures of history. The first day session ended at 8 o'clock in the evening followed by a one-hour cultural presentation.

The next day consisted of debate training and two debate exercises around the sub-topic of social tolerance. The debate training, using a participatory approach, was designed to learn

about the styles and rules of debate and the usefulness of debate in personal life. The debate exercises had teams debating in parliamentary style. Though the participants had never experienced any debate, they displayed superb quality of debate proving the finding of WBL that 'given the chance, every one can show talent'. In the evening, participants were asked to prepare a one-hour drama on the theme of cultural appreciation. For them, it was a first-ever experience of script writing, rehearsal and stage performance. They hurriedly composed drama scripts focused on various existing social practices such as deprivation of women's right to family property, dowry in marriages, misconception in society about bearing female child, etc. Girls and boys wearing colourfully decorated attires and extensively prepared sets made a wonderful public show on the second day of each of the training programs. This was the evening when villagers in Kuakata were free to enter and watch the show of the participants in the humble auditorium made of 'Chhon' leaves, a local plant.

The third day engaged the participants on the issue of politics, democracy and election and how political tolerance could be upheld in the society. Participants were given a small participatory lecture on various small issues of democracy, governance etc. It included discussions on holding an election, formation of a caretaker government and an elected government, and the operation of the three branches of the state, namely, executive branch headed by the Prime Minister, the judicial branch headed by the Chief Justice and the legislative branch headed by the Speaker. The participants were asked to form political parties such as the parties of the republicans and democrats in the USA, conservatives and progressives in the United Kingdom, or BNP and Awami League in the case of Bangladesh. They debated among each other as if they were holding election debates where the head of each "party" (candidates for Prime Minister) led the debate with others on various political or social issues. This was a

powerful demonstration of how politics should be dealt with at the national level. Each party in the debate campaigned for an election in an imaginary country called Kuakata and explained their election manifesto to their voters.

All agreed that had the politicians in their country acted like the way participants acted, Bangladesh would be much better off.

The participants wrote their evaluation of each day's proceedings including what they have learned. The comments obviously revealed how the training program turned out to be the participants' best experience and opportunity in their young life.

Here are some comments from some participants, teachers and parents:

1. Dhulashar High School - Bashar wrote, 'we are more courageous now.' Mujahid wrote, 'our shyness is gone.' Shumi wrote, fear in our mind is gone after this training. Arifa was worried as she said, 'I was wondering if there would be enough security for us as girls, but once I came here, I realized it is clean, beautiful and quite secured for us.' She also wrote in her evaluation for the second day that 'things that we never imagined have been discussed and taught in this training during the debate, *puthi* recital, the cultural program and side by side the walk in the beach, the late night chat with friends - all have been the best and most memorable events of my little life.' Ferdousi wrote, 'after these three days, I feel as if just one day has gone.' The head master wrote, 'my students have learned how to speak properly in correct pronunciation and they became more disciplined here.' Sohel wrote, 'I was feeling uneasy in the first hour, but later I was so involved that I realized that I have so much courage to talk in front of others, and especially realized why debate was so useful in life.' One teacher Siddiqur Rahman wrote, 'the parliament our children created during the debate was more disciplined than the original one in our country. Because of WBL's efficient facilitation, my students
2. Kuakata Islampur Dakhil Madrassah - Shahidul Islam wrote - 'If WBL works in more schools and madrassahs in our area, there will be no one left uneducated. All will be able to see new lights in life and there will be a much more positive environment created in the country. In the sphere of education, politics, religion, there will be tremendous progress. I wish a long life for this program'. Mizan wrote, 'if WBL works in all the schools and madrassahs of the country there be no more religious intolerance in Bangladesh.' Waliullah wrote, 'discussion on cultural appreciation helped us understand about people from outside world and create a positive attitude towards them.' Obaidul wrote, 'WBL can create a tolerant society by doing more of such training with us. I am proud to be a participant of this program which is funded by The British Council.'
3. Khanabad College - Mostafiz wrote, 'I realized that those nations who do not have cultural appreciation or tolerance for others will never become a great nation. Also I was very happy that ten girls also came with us to this training and we could share so many things together which we are never allowed to do elsewhere.' Shahinul Islam, a lecturer of this college wrote, 'if all the students of schools, madrassahs and colleges in Kuakata get similar opportunity to participate in this type of training, then Kuakata will become a great place in the country.' Tania wrote, 'everything that is done in this training is good and useful for us, nothing is bad as

was apprehended by our parents earlier.’ Raju wrote, ‘I have learned how to respect other’s opinion even if I do not agree with that. It is very important for me and for all of us in the society.’

Adda at Baitul Mamur Madrassah

On 22 September 2004, an *adda* was organized by WBL at Baitul Mamur Madrassah, Mirpur Dhaka. A visitor from the United Kingdom (UK) participated in this *adda* along with a British Council (Bangladesh office) official. Because of the presence of one foreign participant, the *adda* became a very lively place of interaction with the Bangladeshi youths. Lucy, who worked for *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK, asked the madrassah students what their opinion of UK was. The madrassah students answered:

1. The UK is a very powerful country in terms of money and weapons
2. Once they ruled the Indian subcontinent for two hundred years
3. They torture Muslims
4. It’s a Christian country.

Lucy then told them about the people living in the UK, that there are sixteen *lakhs* (1.5 million) Muslims, four *lakhs* (400,000) of Jewish people, and a majority of Christians. She said that the citizens in the UK have a lot of tolerance. She added that the UK government renamed the place where most of the Bangladeshis live as Bangla town. One of the Madrassah students asked: while we know that the UK government nowadays campaigns for cultural appreciation, it also takes part in the Iraq war and interferes in the internal affairs of many Muslim countries. So how much cultural appreciation is practiced by the UK government? Lucy answered that most of the UK people did not support the current government’s polity towards Iraq. They even protested while Iraq was attacked by United States (US) and UK governments.

Lucy then asked an interesting question to the students: what are the benefits of studying in a madrassah compared to a regular school? Arif, a madrassah student, said that basically, a Muslim student could get two benefits from a madrassah:

1. S/he can learn both Bangla and the English language and also Arabic, a total of three languages
2. S/he gets basic education on religion.

At the end of the *adda*, Lucy said that common UK people were much more tolerant nowadays and wanted to know more about Islam. UK government is creating a lot of opportunities for Muslims to live peacefully and practice their religion in the UK.

The *adda* was a great event according to all the students, as they had the chance to meet a woman from the UK during their discussion and had the chance to interact with her.

Adda at Aftabuddin School

Another *adda*, one of the key events of the ‘Cultural Appreciation’ project, was held in Aftabuddin School. WBL facilitators tried to explain to the students why the WBL team visited the school and what *adda* meant. They went on to explain that *adda* meant a number of people sitting around in an informal way to discuss one or several issues.

This *adda* started at 11 o’clock in the morning. As Mamun, the moderator, opened the dialogue and asked students to raise any issues and start the discussion, one student said that he wanted to talk and know about the unhappy incident of September 11 in New York. One said that it happened because of the foreign policy of the government of the US, which was driving the Muslims in Palestine and Kashmir crazy. This led one extremist, like Bin Laden, to hit the US. Another student said he does not like the US policy on Iraq and the way they have come to introduce the so-called democracy there by

killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people including children and women.

Mamun raised another issue at this point and asked the discussants what they understood of the word cultural appreciation. Ratna said that it is about respecting others' views and choices. Everybody agreed to this. Ratna asked, since there are four religions in Bangladesh, do they think that there is enough religious harmony between the followers of different religions? Shajib answered, no. He added that they often see bad treatment of Hindu minorities in the country especially of Hindu girls. Boys in the street often tease the Hindu girls on their way to school or elsewhere. Shajib thought the situation was so bad that at some point in the near future Hindu girls could not come out of their houses anymore. Then Shipu asked about the Muslim girls in India and if they face the same problem. Nobody could answer the question. Then Mamun said that in India, generally Muslims were living in safe and peaceful environment. But there were a lot of places where Muslims were subjected to similar harassment. Then he wanted he asked, if Muslims were subjected to harassment in India would the Bangladeshi Muslims harass the Hindus in the same way? Every body said NO.

The *adda* concluded after discussing a few more subjects.

Lessons learned

WBL's program implementation for the last twelve years (1995-2007) provided a number of lessons learned:

1. Having children teach children was perhaps the best strategy WBL has used to bring about fast change. It is easier for a child to relate to and absorb what another child is saying. It has also been observed that children come up with easier methods of expression to get a message across. This is the reason why WBL engages its YCA (young change agents) in various types of work across many

schools. From the beginning, some selected debaters from the clubs were entrusted to facilitate the debating activities at their own school, making it a children-led program while helping WBL focus its resource and strength to other schools that need them more. Since 2002, most of its school-based activities are conducted by graduate debaters from the same schools.

2. Using debate and drama to discuss social issues is a stroke of brilliance on WBL's part. They provide a safe and enjoyable way of addressing serious problems. Debate and drama both help the participants deal with social issues in a more serious manner that helps them understand the issue critically and remains in the minds of the youths as a lasting effect. Over the years WBL has organized thousands of short drama in schools and at its training center at Kuakata. Some of the regular themes used in the drama were religious tolerance, child marriage, and cultural appreciation. The participants and people in the audience in most occasions were highly moved by the drama and left the event with a lasting effect in their heart. After the debate on anti-smoking, many schools were influenced by the debate club members and declared the school campuses as smoke-free zones.
3. Bringing groups of students and teachers to the safe and beautiful residential training center, where they can focus all their attention on the issues at hand without any kind of interruption or restraint from the outside world has proved to be an important tool in bringing about positive change of thought. It is a place where one can safely express one's opinion without fear of being punished or judged. Participants feel so relaxed during the camp that events often run till the late hours of the night, arguing among each other on critical issues such as gender and diversity. Away from the angry eyes of their teachers, they can talk about critical taboo issues and generate huge interest and

positive thoughts on the issues.

4. Because changing the mindset of adults is difficult, a more effective way is the education of the youth, who are open to new ideas. Their education on the major issues of today set the stage for enlightened future generations.
5. With a strong belief that the teachers are the key to opening the minds of students to new ideas, WBL made the training of educators an integral part of its projects.

Based on these lessons learned, WBL changed its strategy and work in a new way including,

1. Organize debate camps at its Kuakata training center for the members of the school debate clubs instead of organizing school-based debates so that debaters can plan for their year long debate activities and learn various critical issues
2. Engage more and more youths in WBL facilitation program
3. Engage teachers and School Managing Committee (SMC) members while working for school children to make the program more sustainable

4. Involve the graduate debaters of YCAs from schools in various social activities and programs to utilize their experience from the debate activities while at school
5. Involve the YCAs in various internships with other NGOs.

WBL's long-cherished dream will come true the day the schools take over the program and the program becomes sustainable. WBL will only serve as a valuable resource institution supporting the program. Already a dozens new organizations have sprung up that popularize debate among school and college students in the country. Debate is already a regular event in most public and private universities and colleges in the cities. Many NGOs are using debate as a tool to spread awareness and knowledge among youths in the country. Television channels are organizing every now and then debate competition with youths. As more and more organizations, and groups, employ debate, there will soon be no need for WBL to focus its attention on debate. By then, WBL will be able to divert its resources to new issues and problems.

Shiblee can think of no greater reward than to put himself out of business.