

# Singapore Psychologist

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## EDIFYING EDUCATION

LIFELONG LEARNING | THRIVING IN UNIVERSITY AND BEYOND |  
CRITICAL THINKING | MULTISENSORY INTEGRATION | DIFFICULT  
DISCUSSIONS | PRIVATE TUITION AND MANY MORE

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

Education deals with instruction and learning; edification enlightens and informs education through a process of instruction and improvement. Human beings are natural learners and even more so during critical periods of development. During these phases, the connections between brain cells are open to influences from types of experience.

Early influences on learning affect behaviour across the lifespan, and educational psychologists often work to help address issues about learning and retaining knowledge and skills. However, learning is a process, so psychologists also play a role in helping to improve instructional processes and devising methods to address individual differences in learning.

Through this issue, our writers aim to edify our understanding of education (and its limitations) by exploring some of the specific experiences we encounter, such as undertaking private tuition, learning another language, cooperating with others, navigating the university years, and learning beyond the classroom. Beyond that, some of our writers explore and reflect on how we learn, including how we think about thinking and how we develop as critical thinkers. Finally, a set of items discusses the matter of difficulties leading to transformative experiences.

Taken together, this issue offers our readers both insights and invitations to think more deeply about what motivates us to learn, which strategies might help us to learn, and ways in which we might apply our learning experiences to help edify our own lives. Read on to explore.

**Dr Denise Dillon**  
Editor-in-Chief



# VICE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Education no longer ends in graduation. Rather, our subsequent learning becomes more informal, self-directed, and practical with a focus on problem-solving. The experiences that shape us during our formative years and the lens with which we view the world now impact what and how we choose to learn. This concept of *andragogy* (or adult learning) is not new, but has recently gained traction in Singapore in the last decade as we start to embrace the notion of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is economically sound. We need to enhance our skills—in breadth and in depth—to meet the demands of a rapidly-changing world. We require cross-functional competencies to solve urgent *wicked problems* through a multidisciplinary approach. Further, technology no longer merely aids the teacher, but replaces the role almost entirely. For example, *microlearning* is now a buzzword for the millennial workforce. In an increasingly tech-enabled space, education is now curated in bite-size content based on our individual profile and agility. Not feeling motivated to learn? Gamification concepts are now seamlessly added to pique our interests and sustain our engagement level with intuitive nudges.

But beyond staying ahead of the competition, lifelong learning is an attitude that we naturally possess. We communicate and collaborate with others to exchange ideas, read about the latest headlines to stay current, and go on vacations to learn about other cultures. Psychologically, we may differ in terms of learning mindsets—some people tend to view interests, talents, and intelligence as inherent (i.e., fixed mindset), while others lean towards the view that they can be developed (i.e., growth mindset). In picking up this magazine, you would have subscribed to a growth mindset and might perhaps be well on the path to lifelong learning.

Read on and get psyched!

**Mok Kai Chuen**  
Vice President (Outreach)

# Fearful of Being the Last?

## Cooperating is the Kiasu Thing to Do

*By George Jacobs & Eunice Tai*



In Singapore and in many other countries, we frequently hear words such as together, as in Trace Together, and team, as in Team Singapore. Check out the list of values, the mission, and the vision of any local school, and you are very likely to also find related words such as empathy (Evergreen Primary School) and caring (Bukit Merah Secondary School). And let us not forget community, as Singapore is dotted with community clubs, community centers, and community gardens. In the sciences, another cognate, social, has been blossoming; as seen in social neuroscience, sociobiology, and sociophysics, as well as the long-standing social psychology.



## Benefits of Collaborative Learning

With the Earth's population likely to reach eight billion by late 2022 and a host of the planet's problems demanding collective solutions, we do need to work together, show some teamwork, display empathy and caring, strive as a community, and appreciate the social in our lives. Furthermore, an extensive body of research suggests that together actually is better. For example, in a research report titled, "'Explain to your partner': Teachers' instructional practices and students' dialogue in small groups" in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Webb and colleagues (2009) explained that if students only give answers to classmates, neither the givers nor the receivers of the answers benefit. In contrast, if students explain to each other, both receivers and givers benefit.



Moreover, Webb and colleagues (2009) found that the big learning advantages come not on simple tasks, such as learning the spelling words for this week's quiz, but on more complicated tasks, such as tasks requiring complex thinking, the kinds of tasks that prepare students for careers in the professions and to become entrepreneurs tackling the climate crisis. Thus, it is no surprise that at least since the 1990s, Singapore schools have been encouraging students to learn in small groups. The names for these arrangements vary, which include cooperative learning, collaborative

learning, problem-based learning, and project work. Of course, since Independence and before, Singapore students had already been working with peers in uniform groups, dance troupes, bands, sports teams and more.

Theoretical support for cooperation between students and everyone else comes from Piaget, among many others. According to Piaget, hearing different views from others leads to cognitive development in a process called disequilibrium. Peer interaction can promote the conflict necessary to provoke disequilibrium. An example of disequilibrium as a tool for learning would be in this quote from James Watson who, on behalf of the team who won the Nobel Prize for the 1953 discovery of DNA, stated, "Our ... advantage was that we had evolved unstated but fruitful methods of collaboration ... If either of us suggested a new idea, the other, while taking it seriously, would attempt to demolish it in a candid but non-hostile manner" (Watson, 1968, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 2003, p. 52)

Closer to our current time and place, a Cantonese proverb also advises us that, "If we never fight, how can we ever get to know each other." Furthermore, a Malay proverb advises that this fighting must take place in the overall context of unity as, "A rope of three strands is not easily parted."



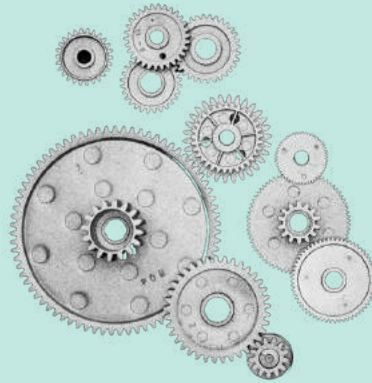
## Realities of Collaborative Learning

Yes, everything seems to be in place for cooperative learning and related methods of groupwork to thrive in Singapore schools. Sadly, the reality is: not so much. For example, George has a niece who just graduated in Psychology from NTU. One day, when she was in secondary school and George told her he was on his way to teach a workshop on cooperative learning to teachers, she replied, "Sorry, Uncle George, but I don't like learning in groups, because the others don't do their fair share." Eunice's experience suggests that even when students do work in groups, they do a watered-down version of cooperative learning in which students just divide up the work, with each doing their part, but with none of the "iron sharpens iron" interaction that Crick, Piaget, and the Cantonese proverb were speaking of. Myriad other concerns may arise when group activities are attempted: group activities take too much time compared to lectures, students lack the skills and motivation needed to cooperate, students seem unmotivated to cooperate with peers, and students teaching peers spreads ignorance, not light.



## How Should We Improve Collaborative Learning?

Despite the difficulties faced, the potential of cooperation is too great to surrender to the challenges. We must try; sometimes, we can succeed. One suggestion is that learning why and how to collaborate must be a lifelong adventure, starting in preschool and continuing into the workplace. For example, there are free courses listed on LinkedIn that include Being an Effective Team Member, Communication Within Teams, Improving Your Conflict Competence, and Confronting Bias: Thriving Across Our Differences.



groupmates, the "givers" may be the big receivers.

Fourth, academia is one more place where more can be merrier too, as a trend has arisen toward multi-authored papers—even with hundreds of authors (a.k.a., hyper-authorship). Indeed, the two of us are currently collaborating with two scholars from China on a study on precisely this topic of multi-authorship. Fifth, in classrooms, peer assessment has become more common; so, again the smart move is to be good to our group mates, since we want them to give us high scores, similar to the 365-degree assessment used in many companies in which staff rate their colleagues and even bosses, instead of just receiving top-down ratings from their bosses.

Last but definitely not least, promoting cooperation fits the current attention deservedly being given to mental health. Maslow's famous hierarchy values feelings of belonging, of being held in the esteem of others. How can we self-actualize without that? Group activities done with teacher guidance enable students to foster environments in which they nurture the mental health of all, environments which also need nurturing beyond schools.

Secondly, we don't need to convince students that helping others is just a kind move, a form of self-sacrifice. It might be easier to convince students to see cooperation as the smart move. Why? Many reasons. Helping others builds networks and brings strength from the network's members. Third, as Webb's research suggests, we learn by teaching others. Some students and their family members might think that teaching something to classmates is giving away our wealth of knowledge with no guarantee of any return. Not so, for "those who teach learn twice". Thus, when students give mini lessons to their





# What Does Lifelong Learning Mean to Me?

*By Janice See*

Study, learn, train, certify, re-certify. These are common things people are doing especially after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. Strict measures were imposed in Singapore during the Circuit Breaker from 7 April to 1 June 2020.



External threats including political situations, economic climate, social issues, technological advancement, legal regulations and environmental threats (PESTLE) are impacting everyone in the world. Uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and stress arise due to these threats as they are not within our locus of control.

One of the common ways to embrace or accommodate these changes is to gain as much knowledge as possible to keep ourselves relevant in this competitive, challenging and changing environment. This can involve learning new skills, unlearning skills that are no longer valid, and relearning skills that have been neglected. Regardless of age, learning is becoming critical for survival. We can either change or be changed. Time and tide wait for no one. Even if we do not move, things around us are changing and time just clicks away. Change is inevitable. Being agile is one of the necessary skill sets needed to survive in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

Life is a journey. We triumph when we achieve. Lifelong learning has also become a requirement in this century to keep up with the latest developments for survival as well as to enjoy our lives.

In Singapore, the "kiasu" (fear of missing out) and "kiasi" (being timid) mindsets refer to taking on more to avoid losing out, which makes people competitive. Covid-19 has elevated this competitiveness further. Due to this culture, success is the predominant result that is being sought after. Even though we are aware that failure is part and parcel of life, which is unavoidable, people are simply doing what it takes to be successful. Those who are prudent ensure that they are able to maintain their lifestyles and status by including contingency plans for their contingency plans. This could mean that people are taking on more than one's capability and bandwidth leading to higher stress, anxiety, frustrations and eventually affecting psychological wellbeing and quality of life.

To help organisations and residents in Singapore to pull through this critical period, the Government has provided a lot of learning opportunities encouraging citizens to upskill and reskill to increase employability and opportunities. In addition to low training costs, employers are entitled to some allowances for the hours their employees attend training. As a consequence, many employers took the opportunities to send their employees for training, especially during the circuit breaker.

With the attractive rebate in course fees and the building of backup plans, a number of people registered for a large amount of training with the hope that they will be recession-proof or be able to negotiate for higher packages. The kiasu culture has led some people to burnout, overwhelmed by training required by their organisations and/or individually. Instead of working towards progression in the organisations, there are a number of people working their way out of their organisations. The Straits Times reported on 10 August that a survey found that half of the workforce feel stressed every day and 1 in 3 employees is considering resigning within the next 6 months. These findings are attributed to mental health and fatigue woes.



A great resignation wave is happening in Singapore. Some are starting to take career breaks to attend training in preparation for career transitions. How realistic would it be to change to another career with a good salary after attaining some certifications? This is similar to cases whereby people expected promotions and salary increases after they attained their diploma and degrees even before the pandemic started. Albert Einstein indicated that "Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results."

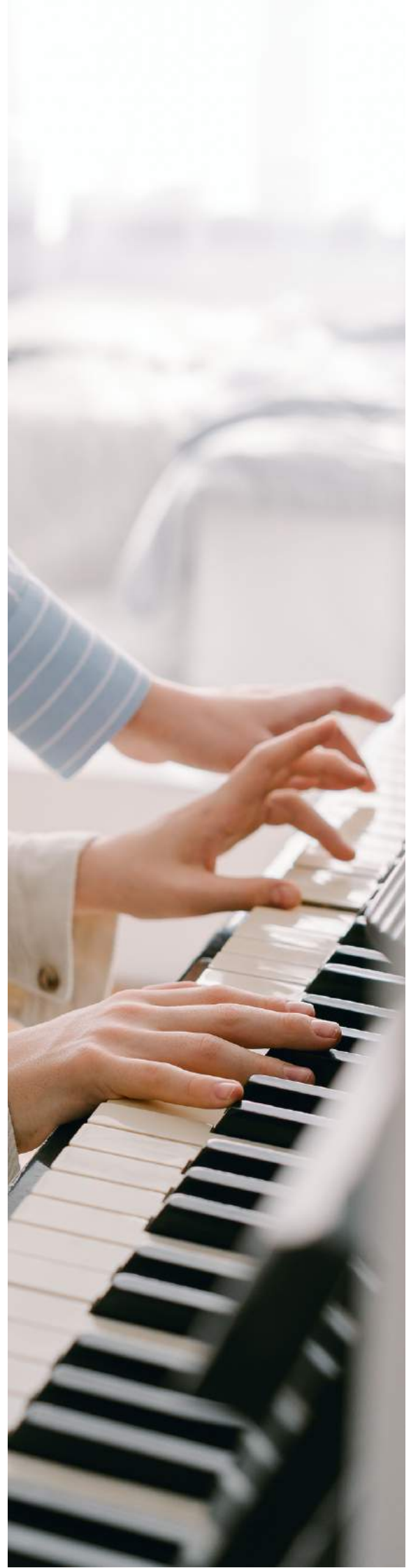
Let's take a step back to review what is our life purpose instead of just following the fabulous. Covid-19 has impacted each and every one of us. New norms have been formed and mental health issues are on the rise. Some people who had always been focusing on work and status were lost when they lost their jobs. They seemed to have lost their identity and value when they became jobless. Apparently, it seems that most people have been focusing on working until retirement. Life is a journey and not a destination. Maybe it is time to start to plan our journey by revisiting what our priorities are. With a lighthouse to guide the path, the journey forward may seem to be clearer on what and how we should proceed instead of overwhelming ourselves with training without analysing the purpose and value.



Dr Chris Fong, academic, psychologist and creator of the W.H.A.T model highlighted human priorities in four categories, namely Wealth, Health, Ability and Time. Within each category, priorities can be further classified into Finance, Family, Fitness and Future. Prioritising our values and beliefs allows us to be more aware of life's purpose and our ability to work towards it. With awareness and clarity, we are able to manage our stress and anxiety better.

Sometimes engaging a coach to partner us would be more effective in increasing our awareness, identifying our blind spots, seeking possibilities with wider perspectives, identifying resources which we may have overlooked, formulating plans, reviewing and reflecting on our plans regularly and being accountable for our lives. It can be beneficial at the individual level, social level and organisational level. With a coach as a lighthouse, we would be able to identify training that is required and suitable to help us to unleash our potential to leap forward. With awareness and clarity, we would be able to identify various types of training that are suitable for us and plan the training in accordance to our needs instead of overwhelming ourselves.

Lifelong learning is about identifying life skills required for our journey in life. It involves us being able to constantly review, reflect and be aware of skills required at various stages for us to survive and enjoy the journey of life. It is okay to not be okay while journeying. Learning to embrace failure in our lives is a lifelong learning skill for us to progress. Failure is a catalyst for change. Success is not about failing; it is about failing forward and being resilient. One should have the grit to move forward. I end here with a quotation often misattributed to Winston Churchill but that I find nonetheless stirring: "Success is not final; failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts."



# Thriving in University and Beyond

*By Benjamin Low*

Welcome to the next chapter of life! University and working life gives you much freedom to design your own life. As with all life transitions, you'll need time to adjust to new challenges and opportunities.

This article provides broad suggestions for thriving through university and beyond. They are based on 12 years of experience of studying at three different universities, teaching as faculty, and as a clinical psychologist providing therapy for university students and working professionals at various stages of their careers.







## From Entrance to Progression

### **Cultural Adjustment**

The biggest challenge you'll face isn't your subject matter, but the oft-unspoken academic culture. The memorisation of factual content may allow you to pass, but distinctions are obtained with the reasoned critique and creative application of learning. It's not about studying for the test, but studying to master the field.

In this regard, the ample amount of free time that you have in university should be used judiciously. You will need to reflect and read independently. Faculty will not direct your efforts, but they will respond when engaged. If in doubt, please approach your tutors. I was heartbroken when my student said, "I didn't understand it so I gave up," and I told her that she could have approached me earlier. Another student asked for detailed feedback and got 96% on her exam. Soliciting positive and negative feedback is a life skill that helps you grow. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

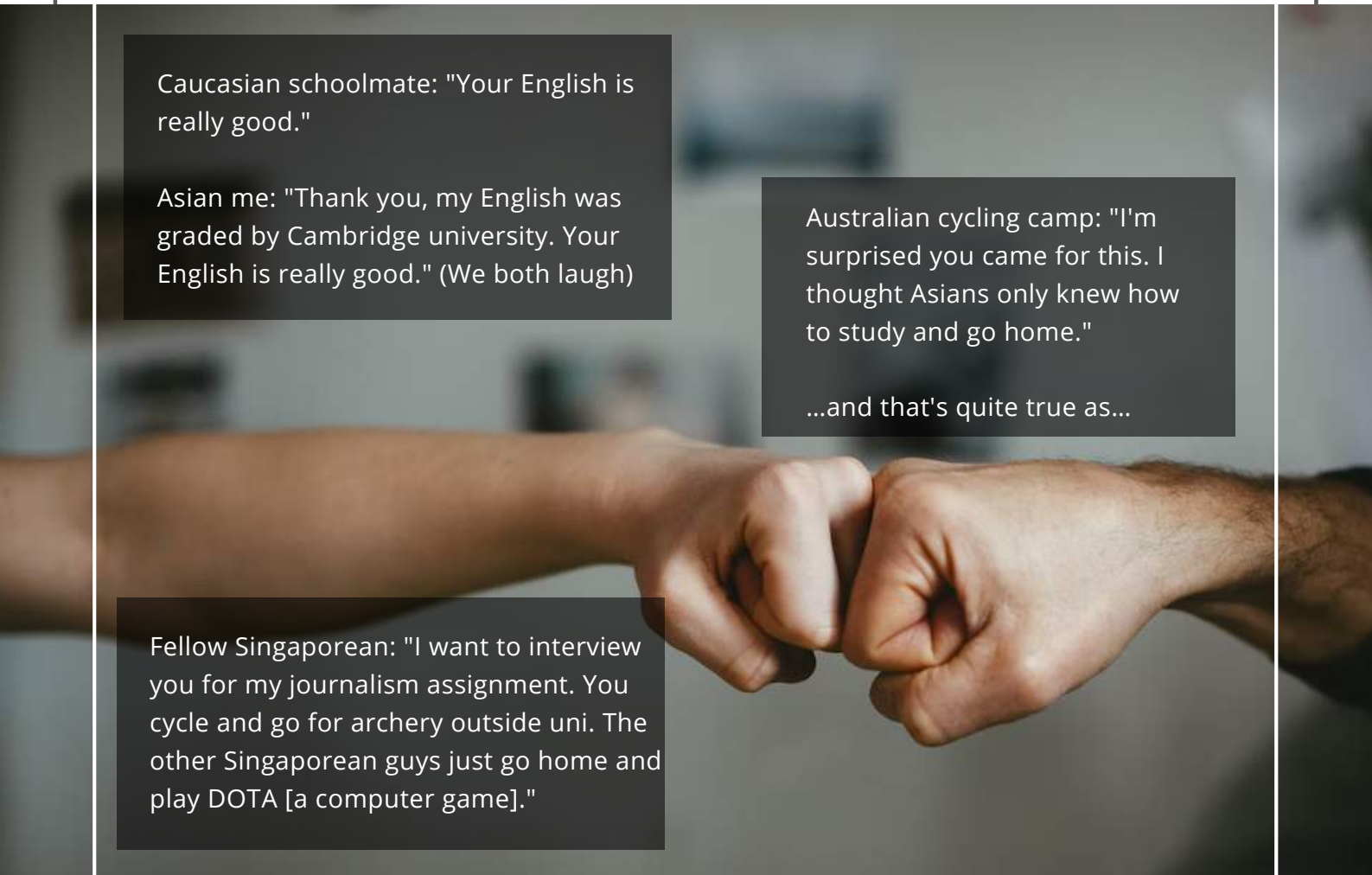
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## Social Adjustment

You would have made friends through common happenstance before within a structured and stable schooling environment. This is not an ideal strategy in university because you will rarely see classmates. Classes are also disbanded at the end of each semester. Instead, cultivate alternative relationship-building skills that will help you now and also in your working life.

Common interests are a great way to start. Such activities provide fertile ground for learning the important skill of small talk. Don't limit yourself to clubs in university either, especially if you study overseas. Learn to make friends across the cultural and socioeconomic milieu. It may take some effort before others (and you) overcome stereotypes. Here are some personal examples:

A close-up photograph of two hands, one from a person with darker skin and one from a person with lighter skin, performing a fist bump. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with some furniture.

Caucasian schoolmate: "Your English is really good."

Asian me: "Thank you, my English was graded by Cambridge university. Your English is really good." (We both laugh)

Australian cycling camp: "I'm surprised you came for this. I thought Asians only knew how to study and go home."

...and that's quite true as...

Fellow Singaporean: "I want to interview you for my journalism assignment. You cycle and go for archery outside uni. The other Singaporean guys just go home and play DOTA [a computer game]."

Similarly, xenophobia, homophobia, and other prejudices against some static demographic will not help you. You have a funny accent like everyone else. Get to know people who are different. You'll find that a nice person, helpful classmate, and good colleague are found across demographic categories. This is helpful if you want to work internationally or move into management. You'll find that exploring others' ways of living, loving, and laughing is an enriching experience.



## From Progression to Exit

There are several pathological mindsets that are best addressed before ending university or during your early years of work. Clinical experience suggests that these are commonly associated with depression, impostor syndrome, social/performance anxiety, or burnout.

First, do not mistake conventional success for personal contentment. Arbitrary social norms, or social comparison, is a poor substitute for what you actually want. Have some vision of a meaningful life within and beyond your career. Try out internships, learn to date, consider long-term hobbies. You don't need to figure out your whole life right now. That vision evolves over time. Just have a prototype for the first few years beyond university.

Second, you are a person, not the sum of your grades. No true friend or partner ever sustained your relationship because of your grades or salary. Your colleagues will appreciate you for your personable nature and work ethic in addition to your technical skills. Your grades or performance evaluation will fluctuate, just like everyone else's. A performance evaluation is not a personal evaluation.

Thirdly, focus on people rather than showing off your worth. This is important for work as well as postgraduate studies. A good life requires us to cultivate relationships and its occasional frictions. For example, fulfilling a project at work involves substantial stakeholder engagement beyond your technical input. A good long-term romantic relationship isn't just about creating sparks, but also soothing burns as we inevitably encounter differences.



Lastly, give yourself a chance to learn. In the face of important challenges, we sometimes feel we should have known it all yesterday. Any skill, including those above, are gained with time and honed over a lifetime. No one is perfect in all these regards and perfection is not essential for progress. We will encounter mistakes, failure, or just sheer bad luck. As Sir Patrick Stewart said in his role as Captain Jean Luc Picard: "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness; that is life." Fall forward and learn with self-compassion rather than berating yourself. You will cultivate your own resilience in the process, accept yourself more, and learn how to support others as well.

Yes, life is challenging. That's why students and professionals alike see me for therapy. You're not alone. Speak to a psychologist, senior, mentor, or perhaps a wise friend. You're not alone. Better is possible.

**So, above all, aspire.  
The rest of your life always starts tomorrow.**





# Thinking Critically About Critical Thinking


*By M Akshir Ab Kadir*

Critical thinking is a skill that is being developed by schools across the world because it is increasingly seen as an essential skill for life in the 21st century. It is seen as an essential learning outcome of contemporary education because it helps individuals thrive not only in the workplace, but also in their personal and social domains. But what is critical thinking and how can it be defined?

The literature on critical thinking is replete with the different ways of conceptualising it and no consensus on a definition. Some theorists such as Sigel (1984), Bloom (1956) and Gardner (2008) see it as a set of cognitive skills and capacities respectively. For instance, Sigel (1984) views it as "an active process involving a number of denotable mental operations such as induction, deduction, reasoning, sequencing, classification and definition of "relationships" (p.18). Gardner's five minds—disciplined, synthesising, creative, respectful and ethical – suggest the types of thinking capacities that will be key in the future. Bloom's taxonomy of six cognitive categories—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation—comprises lower-order to higher-order thinking skills in which the higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation are associated with critical thinking (Anderson et al. 2001; Krathwohl, 2002; Paul, 1995).



Other theorists like Ritchhart (2001, 2002) and Tishman, Jay and Perkins (1995) emphasise thinking dispositions in which the notion of "intellectual character" (Ritchhart), for example, captures this dispositional dimension. 'Dispositions' are seen as the "characteristics that animate, motivate, and direct our abilities toward good and productive thinking and are recognised in the patterns of our frequently exhibited, voluntary behaviour" (Ritchhart, 2002, p. 21). For instance, Ritchhart's idea of "intellectual character" consists of six dispositions identified by different theorists in the field such as Ennis (1985, 1993) and Paul (1995). Within this framework, critical thinking comprises the dispositions to seek "truth and understanding", to be "strategic" and to be "skeptical" (Ritchhart, 2002, p. 27). Similarly, Costa's (2001b) Habits of Mind [HoM] delineate key traits that can be viewed to comprise what I refer to as the dispositional, attitudinal or "characterological" (Ritchhart, 2002, p. 19) dimension of critical thinking. The HoM draws attention to the habits that are key to intelligent behaviour and thinking. Furthermore, Lipman (1985, 2003) coined the notion "a community of inquiry" (p. 100) that views thinking as a social, collective and collaborative practice.



Apart from conceptions of critical thinking as comprising cognitive skills and processes—what can be described as the cognitive dimension—the attitudinal, dispositional or 'characterological' dimension of critical thinking highlights the importance of inclination to do so in various situations is also key (Ennis, 1991; Facione & Facione, 2000; Ritchhart, 2002; Paul, 1995; Tishman, Jay & Perkins, 1995). thinking dispositions and attitudes that predispose a person to think critically in daily situations. Thus, while having the ability to think critically is essential, having the natural inclination to do so in various situations is also key (Ennis, 1991; Facione & Facione, 2000; Ritchhart, 2002; Paul, 1995; Tishman, Jay & Perkins, 1995).



However, Paul (1995) resists pigeon-holing critical thinking and conceptualises it in a number of different ways that should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. His definitions include: "thinking about your thinking while you're thinking to make your thinking better" (p. 91), which has a metacognitive dimension; and the following definition which seems to be characterised by the characterological dimension of thinking:

...a unique kind of purposeful thinking in which the thinker systematically and habitually imposes criteria and intellectual standards upon the thinking, taking charge of the construction of thinking, guiding the construction of the thinking according to the standards, assessing the effectiveness of the thinking according to the purpose, the criteria, and the standards (p. 21).

Paul, (1995) contends that seeing critical thinking as a cognitive process alone is insufficient. Both the propensity to think critically and the attachment of standards he refers to as "intellectual standards"—the criteria by which to assess the quality of thinking—are also essential. These criteria include clarity, precision, relevance and logical coherence in the act of thinking critically. Paul also underlines their importance by warning against superficiality and the impropriety of certain manifestations of critical thinking, labelling them as "pseudo critical thinking" (p. 47).

Given critical thinking's elusive multifaceted nature, Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance" (see Wittgenstein, 1958) has also been employed to explain the overlaps and similarities of the conceptions of critical thinking found in the literature. I proposed that drawing on the concept of "family resemblance" could help apprehend the various definitions of critical thinking and reflect its multidimensionality (Ab Kadir, 2007; 2010).

Thus, in light of the variety of understandings of critical thinking found in the literature, it is important in my view that the inherent multidimensional notion of critical thinking that captures such complexities and richness is embraced. Following this, I suggest that critical thinking in education (formal or informal) must be thought of and manifested as not only a set of cognitive skills to be developed but, importantly, as the concurrent development of dispositions or habits of mind – in other words, the development of critical thinking must also entail the development of the critical thinker.



# When Two Senses are Better Than One: Lessons From Multisensory Integration

*By Cameron Choo*

Multisensory integration has been a widely researched topic in cognitive neuroscience. Defined as the combination of information received from two or more senses, this integration can provide many benefits to various aspects of daily functioning such as speech comprehension (Crosse et al., 2016), space orientation (Buchholz et al., 2012), and even taste enhancement (Escobar et al., 2022). These benefits can also extend to the classroom, where instructional methods can make use of the student's visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile senses to enhance the learning experience for a certain subject (Joshi et al., 2002). With technology being integrated into the classroom as well, most learning methods do not necessarily have to follow a traditional whiteboard-teaching style to inform theoretical concepts anymore. For example, the usage of visual-haptic (see-touch) technology has been shown to improve the understanding of some key concepts in physics such as force or friction, while others have also shown improvements in the understanding of elementary-level mathematical concepts as well (Cuturi et al., 2022; Pantelios, 2004).



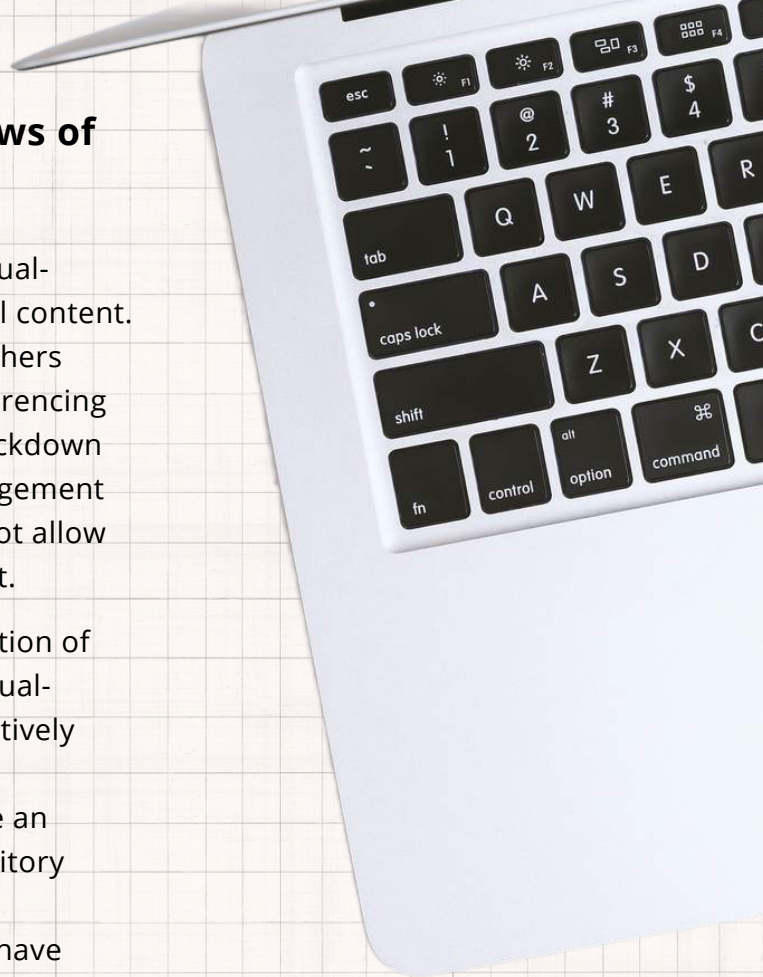
## A Common Lesson: The Highs and Lows of Visual-Auditory Integration

Nevertheless, many classrooms mainly rely on visual-auditory integration of information through digital content. As exemplified in the recent pandemic, many teachers were forced to rely upon the usage of video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom to hold lessons during lockdown (Tan et al., 2021), where methods of student engagement were limited to videos and gamification and did not allow for students to physically interact with the content.

This is not to say that this specific sensory integration of teaching is poorer than the others. Rather, the visual-auditory integration in human perception is a relatively large area of research stemming from the famous *McGurk effect* (McGurk & MacDonald, 1976), where an illusion of a third sound is perceived when an auditory stimulus of a first sound is paired with the visual stimulus of a second sound. From then on, many have derived multiple benefits and implemented many methods in the classroom to enhance learning.

For example, making use of visual-auditory integration has been shown to benefit students who are both primarily audio and visual learners (Volpe & Gori, 2019). At the same time, similar methods have been shown to improve memory recall, where individuals can use visual and auditory cues more efficiently to retrieve specific information previously learned (Pearson & Wilbiks, 2021). This would be beneficial in answering questions that rely more on memory recall, or even procedural methods seen in specific mathematical and science concepts during a written examination. Scoping into subject-specific benefits, visual-auditory integration also aids in the learning and acquisition of both vocabulary and grammatical construction of second languages (Muñoz et al., 2021), a key component in the Singaporean education system.

Despite the benefits, there is simplicity in the way visual-auditory inputs can be implemented both in and out of the classroom that allows multiple loopholes to be created. For example, sustaining a student's attention to the material can be difficult to oversee, especially through online platforms where student activity is not entirely visible to the teacher. As such, this creates a double-edged sword when used incorrectly and emphasises the need to consider the attentional capabilities the students have when applying such methods.





## Newer Lessons: The Application of Visual-Haptic Integration

Other than visual-auditory methods of teaching, others have adopted a more hands-on approach. For example, the ability to recognise geometric shapes has been proven to be a crucial prerequisite of mathematical and spatial knowledge in preschoolers, and often this can be done using two-dimensional maps

(Kalenine et al., 2011). That is to say, the transfer of learning from two-dimensional planes that allows preschoolers to orient themselves better in the physical environment would be dependent on the two-dimensional shape exemplar used. Therefore, using visual-haptic (see-touch) exploration methods of teaching allows preschoolers to not only be more efficient in recognizing these geometric shapes later, but also to exercise their motor brain areas during retrieval of the haptically encoded stimuli (Barsalou, 2008).

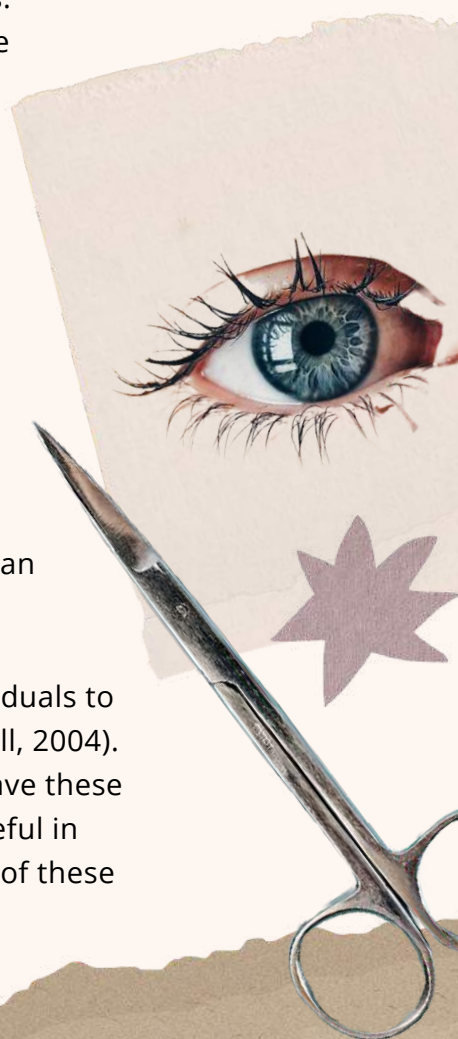
With the advancement of haptic technology, such approaches are more feasible in this age. As briefly mentioned previously, many classrooms can now adopt such methods to increase the visualisation and understanding of non-tangible physical phenomena such as electromagnetic interactions.

Furthermore, teachers in classrooms that lack the necessary equipment or who are teaching more specific disciplines such as surgery can choose to use haptic incorporated virtual simulators to execute the same lessons, which do not deprive the students of their learning experience (Neri et al., 2018). Of course, a larger amount of cost is required for such forms of technology, which can limit the student's accessibility. Nonetheless, it is a worthy direction to look towards to enhance the quality of teaching in the classroom.

## Hidden Lessons: Issues and Applicability

No doubt, the usage of the other basic senses such as taste and smell can be extremely useful in the classroom too, though this might be more specific for classes that require odor detection such as chemistry. This

sort of visual-olfactory (see-smell) integration helps individuals to detect odorants or threatening stimuli more quickly (Small, 2004). However, since primary education may not necessarily have these higher-level subjects, such applications would only be useful in classrooms or even laboratories that can take advantage of these senses more accurately.





Furthermore, an important concept to consider whilst implementing such methods is the developmental trajectory of the child. To illustrate, research has noted that babies can integrate both visual and audio input simultaneously as early as the age of four months. However, the benefits of haptic exploration of physical objects may be reaped only in the later years of childhood (Dionne-Dostie et al., 2015). Therefore, early education classrooms implementing such methods need to consider the extraneous factors that would affect the receptivity of such teaching methods.

## Conclusion

The research toward multisensory integration has benefited classrooms for many years now. Through the implementation of technology and various teaching methods, students find themselves able to learn about non-tangible topics now in multiple ways. Nevertheless, the usage and implementation of multisensory integration in classrooms still require more understanding. As illustrated, opportunities are being created every day. With interesting findings such as the Pokémon game being sound symbolic (Kawahara et al., 2021), entertaining yet strategic teaching methods can be created to enhance the classroom environment to facilitate better learning experiences. Even so, there are other considerations such as developmental trajectories or even cost requirements. Despite that, the current direction still promises enlightenment for education for future generations to come.



*/teIst/*



lemon



# The Bilingual Advantage: When Acquiring a Mother Tongue Matters

*By Xavier Lim*



In 1959, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew underscored the importance of a bilingual education system in Singapore. Lee believed that a bilingual society where citizens could converse in both English and their mother tongue language would provide greater access to one's cultural heritage and reinforce their sense of cultural belonging. Hence, Lee proposed for the compulsory study of a mother tongue language (i.e., Chinese, Malay, Indian) that corresponds with one's ethnic group. This proposal was formally implemented in all Singapore institutions in 1966. While students like myself might frown at the thought of studying a mother tongue, psychological studies in bilingualism seem to converge on findings that suggest learning a mother tongue language can have benefits on cognitive control processes (Lai & O'Brien, 2020), beyond cultural benefits. This brings us to an intriguing line of inquiry: *Does bilingualism affect how our brain functions, and if so, how?*

## The Bilingual Experience

In the literature, a bilingual is defined as someone who speaks and comprehends a second language besides their native language and can accurately adhere to the grammatical rules of that language rather than by paraphrasing their native language (Bialystok, 2009). Since a bilingual must manage two different languages, a unique dilemma is observed—as both languages are concurrently active in the mind, the brain must spontaneously decide which language to activate and suppress respectively. The simultaneous activation and suppression of languages is thought to be governed by a system in our brain called the executive function—a system that allows us to control our attention, recall information, and ignore distractions when concentrating on a task (Diamond, 2013).



## The Bilingual Advantage

Contemporary studies in bilingualism have demonstrated its implications on cognitive control processes. In a seminal experiment by Peal and Lambert (1962), they observed that bilinguals significantly outperformed monolinguals on measures of verbal and non-verbal intelligence. Ever since, remarkable evidence has suggested that habitual bilingual practices can produce differential cognitive benefits, leading to the notion of the "bilingual advantage" (Adesope et al., 2010; Bialystok, 2017).



### Executive Function

For bilinguals, the continuous activation and suppression of languages suggests that the brain is engaged in a never-ending workout that perpetually strengthens the brain's executive function—like how regular exercises strengthen one's physiological fitness. This hypothesis has been experimentally tested by researchers across various facets of executive function, including inhibitory control (i.e., ability to override one's predispositions by controlling one's attention; Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008), working memory (i.e., ability to store and manipulate information in the mind; Grundy & Timmer, 2017), and cognitive flexibility (i.e., ability to swiftly shift perspectives; Kuipers & Thierry, 2013).

You might ask: *With the purported benefits of bilingual practice on executive function, would the similarity of languages matter?* Barac and Bialystok (2012) explored this issue amongst children belonging to three bilingual groups (Chinese-English, French-English, Spanish-English) in comparison to English monolinguals. While languages which are more similar (i.e., both alphabetic) could require relatively more control to activate and suppress, it could be argued that distinct languages (i.e., alphabetic vs. logographic) require more cognitive resources to switch and monitor. Barac and Bialystok (2012) amalgamated the two hypotheses and proposed that both would yield comparable enhancements to executive function as they both require effortful attention, to which their findings concurred.

## Disadvantage of Bilingualism

While the advantages of bilingualism are attractive, there are disadvantages associated with learning two languages. For instance, bilinguals generally have an average vocabulary size smaller than monolinguals (Bialystok, 2009). Additionally, bilingualism tends to be associated with weaker semantic fluency (i.e., ability to recall words fast and accurately) and more tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon (i.e., inability to recall a specific word, but understand its nature and meaning) compared to monolinguals (Portocarrero et al., 2007). These disadvantages have been linked to the interference between both languages in the mind and how this conflict must be resolved (Bialystok, 2009).



## Strategies in the Educational Context

Beyond mandating bilingual practice in the classroom, there are several evidence-based strategies that both parents and teachers can adopt to promote balanced bilingual development and biliteracy. In this section, educational insights and strategies are discussed in the context of children's educational environment.

### Critical Period

While research seems to suggest that the critical period for language acquisition sits around the age of five to puberty (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978), this range is still speculative. Nonetheless, researchers concur with the notion of "the younger, the better". This does not mean that it is impossible to pick up a second language after the critical period—rather, it requires comparably effortful practice. Remember, the benefits of bilingualism tend to result from habitual practice—it is better late than never!

## **Linguistic Environment**

Children are naturally able to recognise accents associated with languages when exposed to conversations in their surroundings. As such, it is beneficial to converse with and around children in grammatically appropriate ways. Three strategies (Farrar, 1990) can be used habitually to facilitate the understanding of language—recasting, expanding, and labelling. Recasting refers to phrasing the child's utterances into a question to extend the conversation (e.g., "What is the dog eating?" in response to "Dog eat."). Expanding refers to correcting the child's utterances (e.g., "Yes, the dog is eating." in response to "Dog eat."). Labelling refers to identifying names of objects found in the child's environment (e.g., pointing to a picture of a dog, and asking the child to name it).



## **"One Person, One Language"**

Unequal exposure to both languages may encourage the development of differential competencies in languages. As such, the "one person, one language" approach, where both caretakers of a child can speak to the child in an exclusive language, can help promote biliteracy in an environment free of mixed utterances. This technique not only allows the child to develop verbal fluency in both languages but also trains the child to switch languages across different contexts from young (De Houwer, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

Ever since the implementation of Singapore's bilingual education policy, the benefits of bilingualism have been observed beyond socio-cultural belongingness to improved cognitive control processes. With considerable evidence suggesting the contributions of habitual bilingual practice to enhancements in both socio-cultural competency and cognitive control, it is important for parents and educators alike to promote bilingual literacy in the household and classroom.



# Well Done! Keep it Up!

*By Janice See*

It is commonly known that employees do not leave organisations—they leave their management. How relevant would it be if we apply the same concept to learners? Students do not leave educators, they graduate from schools. Our educators play a big part in what we become today. The role of educators is important. Educators are role models of learners especially for children.



Whether we like it or not, actions that are taken by us may be learned by some other people. Some of us may have been taught to learn good habits and remind ourselves what not to do when we see habits which are not acceptable in our society.

People may be consciously or subconsciously influenced by our actions. I remember that when I was young there were some issues with one of my aunt's eyes; she had to tilt her head when watching television. Being young, I felt that it was unique and started to mirror her actions. Luckily, my parents spotted it fast and took the effort to correct my behaviour.

We constantly looked for role models as guiding stars for us when we were young. Being innocent at a tender age, information and observed behaviour may have been deciphered in an unintended way, similar to noises in our communications.

## Who are Educators?

Every one of us is an educator to some other person around us intentionally and/or subconsciously. One does not need to have the title of an educator to be able to teach, nurture and encourage another person. The professional title is an acknowledgement of the individual's livelihood (i.e., the way the individual works to get compensated/paid).

Caregivers, parents, guardians, mentors, coaches, siblings, relatives and friends are all our educators.

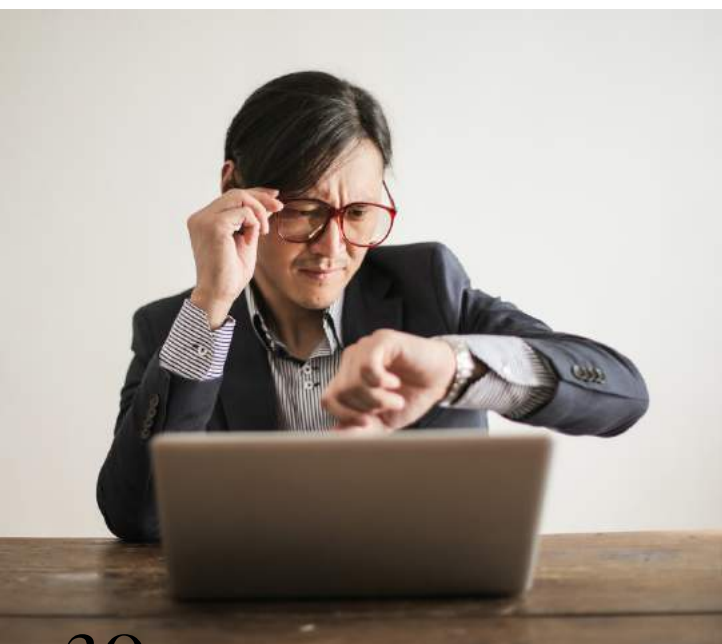
## You Are Important! Actions Speak Louder Than Words.

Human beings are social beings. We want to be accepted and included in our societies.

It is without doubt that the role of educators, and especially those working in public schools, is challenging and daunting. The number of students in a class is large. Students come from diverse backgrounds. Learning capabilities of students and attention required from educators could vary vastly. Environmental influences pose additional challenges. Hence, teaching in public schools is strenuous especially in non-air-conditioned classrooms and having to teach while wearing masks. Being a volunteer, I managed to volunteer to teach in a few public schools. There were numerous times I witnessed teachers scolding students in front of the class and shouting at students to get them to obey instructions. Words like "slap" were being used. This type of attitude was common in the past; however it is no longer relevant now. These experiences triggered my thoughts about what would happen to the self-esteem of the students being scolded. What about the rest of the students? Were instructions being followed due to fear?



The rat race we are in seems to have resulted in us losing sight of ourselves and just focusing on achieving results and tangible outcomes. Time may not be on our side for most of us hence human touch, interaction, authenticity and empathy seem to be diminishing as time passes while frustration, agony, anxiety, stress and burnout are on the rise. Our psychological wellness is being compromised. As time passes by, the way we react and respond to situations may be putting off people around us subconsciously. Although the unpleasant reactions were unintentional, people may assume that they had been rejected and try to reduce communication going forward. The phrase "tomorrow never comes" seems to materialize as people grow. Children, being children, will wait anxiously for things to happen once they are told of upcoming plans. As time passes by and incidents of not materialising repeat, children may become confused about credibility and trust. Some coaching clients shared that this childhood experience had resulted in them feeling insecure in relationships. Those with partners tend to overthink and make unnecessary assumptions when their partners are not with them physically. For some, this can result in a possessiveness of their partners. Managing insecurity has resulted in mental stress.



Self-reflection is important to increase our own awareness. Out of good intention, educators may want to provide the best possible ways to attain knowledge based on their experiences and perspectives. How would it still be considered as educating? Subtly directing instead? Best practice for one may not be feasible or suitable for others. One of the common coaching topics among youth and young adults is methods to be able to choose what they want without disappointing their parents and guardians. Even though they want to take accountability of their own life in making choices, they feel lost. Their parents and guardians have been planning for them thus far. Clarity and help were sought on how they can start to take charge of their future. How far and long can educators, caregivers, guardians and parents provide the "carpet" to cushion falls and failures? It is not possible for individuals to be living in bubbles and not get hurt.

Let's go back to basics and review the role of an educator: To provide the fish on the table or to provide a fishing rod and fishing skills? Human nature is that we will lose our skills if we do not use them; hence, maybe it is time for educators to review ways to educate people. Maybe it is an opportunity to partner with a coach to increase one's awareness, bouncing off ideas and leveraging on available resources instead of facing the challenges alone.



## **Embrace, Engage, Empower, Evolve and Endeavour!**

Let's embrace the fact that everyone is unique with different capabilities. Considering the current environment, being agile is much needed in addition to being resilient, and showing grit and perseverance to survive in this competitive age. Lifelong learning is required by all parties to be willing to adopt an open mindset to empower and evolve. Being congruent and aligned with what is spoken allows individuals to develop. Instances happen when learners are informed that they are being empowered only to end in them being criticised because their decisions did not comply with the educator's expectations.

With positive attitudes and openness from both educators and learners, the life journey may be more enjoyable. Affirmation at appropriate times is necessary to encourage and motivate individuals. In my personal opinion, successful educators are those who are able to guide their learners in realising where their lighthouses are and inching toward them. Let's be one of the reasons why learners around us are progressing in accordance with their life purpose.

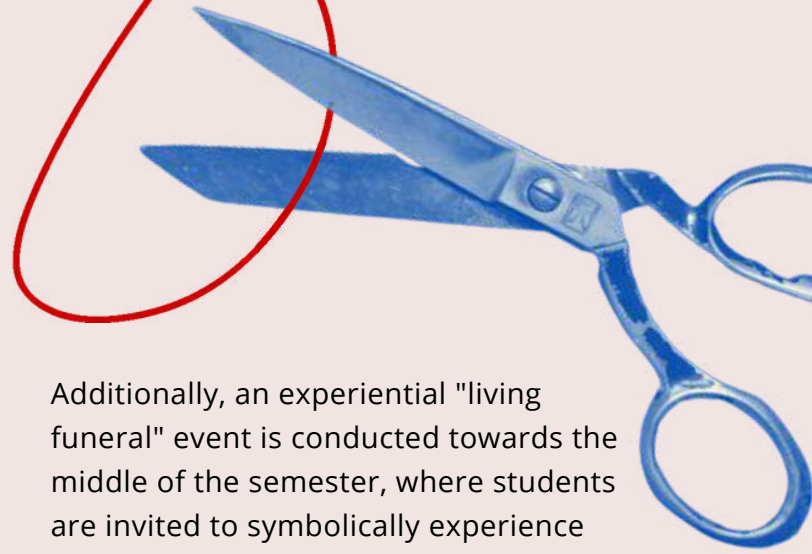
Let's give ourselves a pat on each and every of our shoulders for being willing and open in enhancing our skills to continuously enhance our learners' experience and indirectly support their psychological wellness.

Well done!



# Difficult Discussions: Reflections on Transformative Learning from a Death Studies Course

*By Paul Patinadan  
with mentions to Assoc. Prof  
Andy Hau Yan Ho*



Over the course of my doctoral journey, I was privileged with the opportunity to facilitate and support the teaching of a new thanatological module open to both undergraduate and post-graduate students at a Singaporean university. "The Last Dance: Psycho-socio-cultural Perspectives on Dying, Death and Bereavement" (or TLD, for short) embedded within the Psychology programme is always heavily subscribed from when it was first introduced. Taking a multi-disciplinary stance, TLD explores various core theories on mortality and grief, perspectives on clinical practice, and studies of death and dying from both a critical global viewpoint and a more nuanced Asian context. This seminar-based module is novel in more ways than one, perhaps most saliently in how it bisects education with the deeply personal and intimate life experiences students bring with them.

Additionally, an experiential "living funeral" event is conducted towards the middle of the semester, where students are invited to symbolically experience their own funerals, complete with shrouding, solemn music, and a eulogy they write in class personally read to them by an instructor. This exercise culminates in an opportunity to create a reflective art piece.

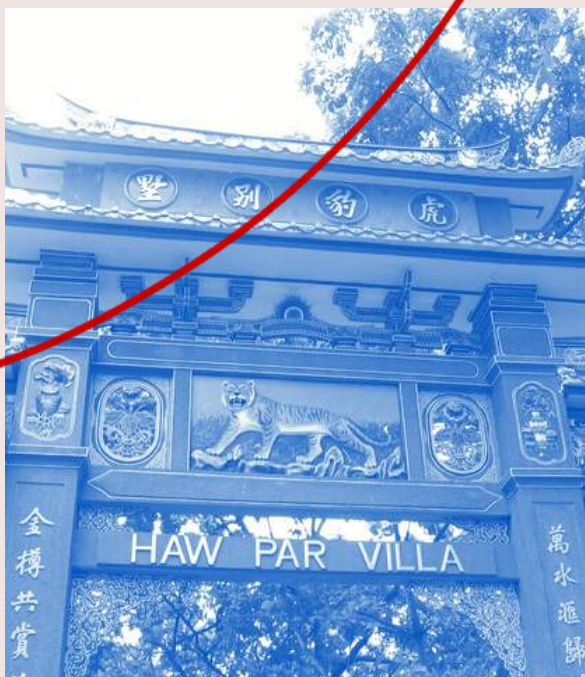
The weighty topics contemplated and discussed subvert what we know the university classroom to be formally for; the sole promotion of learning, and introduces also the expression of feelings and emotion, which is not usually expected or experienced in the space (Caswell, 2010). I reflect here on my experiences across the three years I contributed towards TLD as a Teaching Assistant, considering closely the module's transformative learning capacity.



In approaching the education of death studies, current literature often focuses squarely on what is offered for health professionals; courses discussed being specialized within the biomedical and clinical care sphere (Caswell, 2010). TLD's multidisciplinary content and eclectic learner profiles posed an interesting conundrum of how such learning might be received. Mellor (1992) commented how for some individuals, thinking about their mortality can threaten their sense of ontological (*what we know*) security, and they choose to avoid such thoughts instead. The natural assumption would be that students choosing to read TLD would be ontologically resilient, or able to handle the influx of sensitive information without having their worldviews shaken. However, through discussion board exchanges, engaging with activities, and conversations in and around the classroom space, I observed the *journey* of how students grappled, comprehended, and reconciled potentially distressing material (emotions and all) as they re-established their worldviews within a new paradigm. Rather than an expected resilience, there is an extended reconstruction.

I observe this wayfinding to be similar to Mezirow's (1991) enduring 11-step process towards a posited transformative learning experience. As students go through (1) *a disorienting dilemma*, such as being reminded of their mortality or becoming intimately aware of the breadth of the human grief experience, they (2) *experience a self-examination* which may engender feelings of guilt or shame (perhaps at a previous nonchalant or insensitive view about life). They then (3) *recognise that their discontent and transformation process has been shared; others having negotiated such change*. Clear and supportive facilitation from instructors and provision of real-world scenarios is key at this point. An (4) *exploration of new roles, relationships, and action* occurs both internally and with students' external experience, as well as an imperative (5) *critical assessment of pre-held assumptions*, such as feelings of invincibility or that "death is something that happens to someone else". (6) *Provisional trying of new roles* often follows, as students get increasingly motivated and confident discussing sensitive death-related issues, first within class, then outside it.

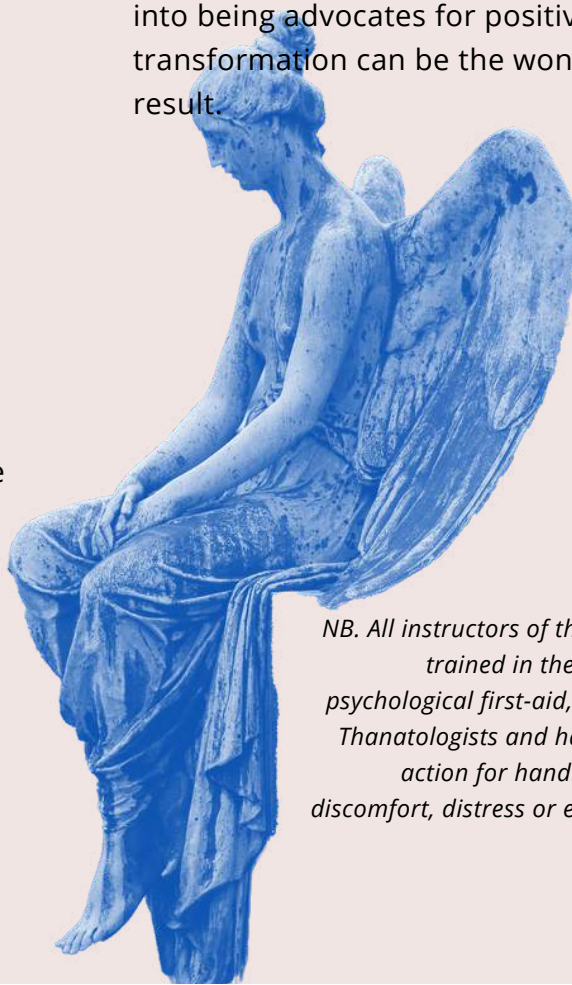




This is intrinsically tied into their (7) *planning of a course for action*, which is promoted by the critical engagement provided by completing assessment objectives. Through (8) *acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans*, students gain expertise in the practical; knowledge about clinical End of Life programmes such as Advance Care Planning (ACP) or understanding socio-cultural rites and rituals during mourning and bereavement practices. A critical phase of (9) *renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships* centring around self-reflection is seen as students reorientate their inner value-system. They are then able to (10) *build competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*, often leaving the classroom as confident advocates for open and honest dialogue regarding death, dying, grief and bereavement. Finally, though subtle, I bear witness to their personal (11) *reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective*.

As individuals embarking on understanding their own mortality, they embark on life's most important exploration; one of personal discovery and spiritual awakening. Harrawood et al., (2011) observe three themes in their qualitative study of students reading a death studies module; an increased openness to constructs of death, a greater understanding of their own beliefs about death, and a reduction in their fear of death. Though no formal investigation has been conducted on TLD, similar observations are to be expected.

Courses such as TLD showcase that the university classroom can be alchemized into a safe space for the discussion of sensitive topics (with relevant contingencies in place and from the vantage provided by deep expertise). Transformative learning that promotes personal growth and constructive perspective shifts, and guides students into being advocates for positive social transformation can be the wondrous result.



NB. All instructors of the course are trained in the provision of psychological first-aid, are certified Thanatologists and have a plan of action for handling issues of discomfort, distress or emergencies.



# Buying Education

The Obsession with Private Tuition

By Jessy Yong



## FEATURES

SINGAPORE

### Private Tuition Rakes in Big Bucks

In 2018, private tuition grew to a S\$1.4 billion industry in Singapore (Seah, 2019).

CHINA

### Ban to Black Market: China Cracks Down on Tuition

Just last year, China banned off-campus tutoring, which led to a massive black market of underground study centres ("China tried to ban", 2022).

SOUTH KOREA

### Tuition Agencies Flood the Nation

As of 2020, South Korea had over 73,000 private tutoring establishments (Welle, 2021).

CHINA

### Tuition Fees to Family Financial Woes

Families in China that go into debt after spending money on their children's tuition fees (Sharma, 2013).





**In every Singaporean neighbourhood**, there is a tuition centre within walking distance. Going for tuition classes in Singapore seems like the norm rather than the exception. And tuition centres here are enrolling younger students more than ever before, even for children as young as 4 years old (Mustapha, 2022).

Over the years, as extreme figures and news stories of private tuition are repeated in countries across the globe, scholars and journalists have begun to describe this extreme fixation on this practice as an "education obsession" or "education fever". But why is the tuition industry so resilient and unrelenting? Why do so many parents and students partake in it? And what exactly does private tuition mean to us?

### **What is Private Tuition to Students?**

"Four hours' sleep for success, but five hours' sleep for failure."

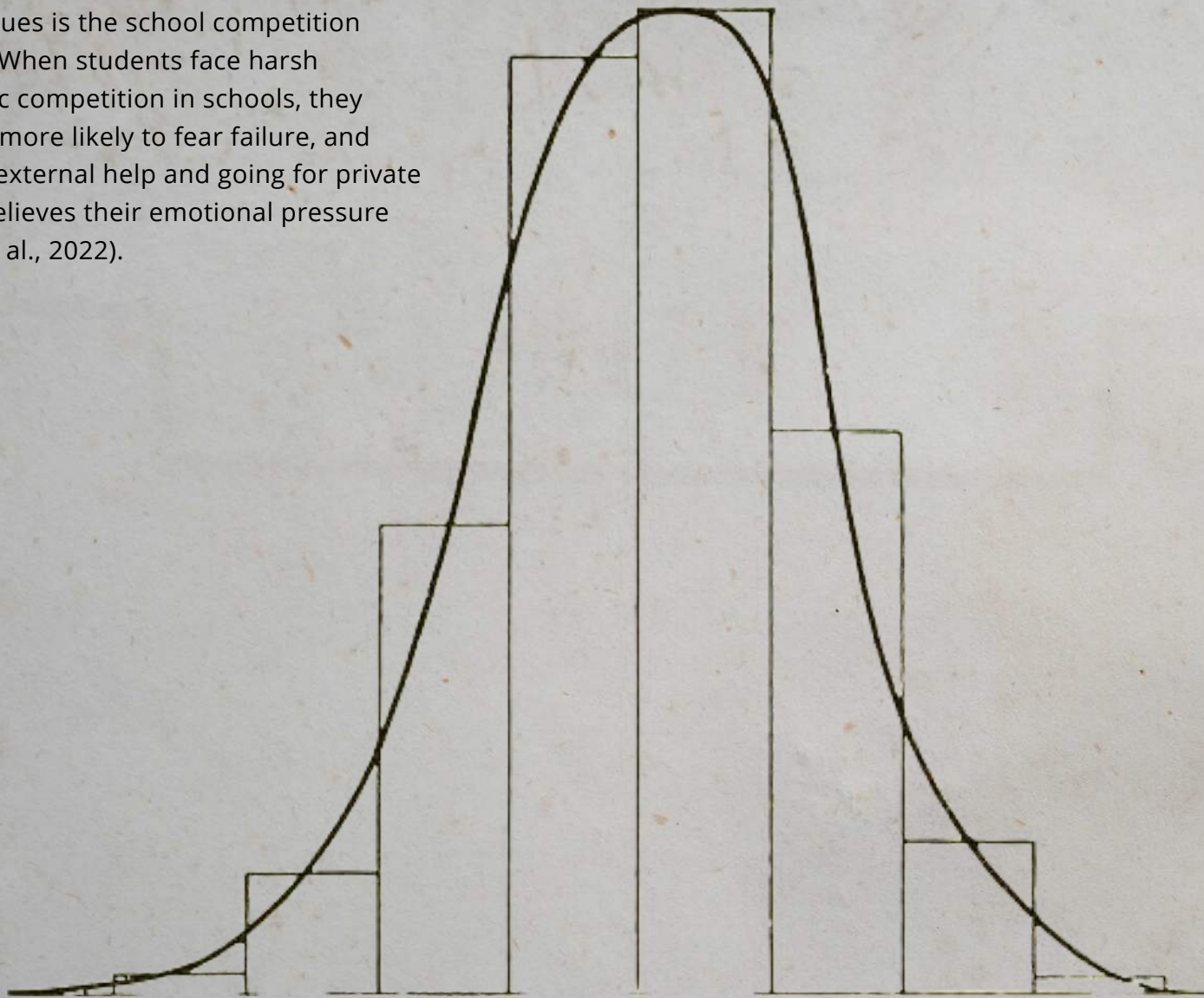
In Japan, this well-known phrase represents a strategy for students to pass their college-entrance examinations (Tsukada, 1991, p.8). Unfortunately, at the cost of sleep and children having to attend both mainstream schools and tuition, such a strategy creates a non-stop learning process that leads to fatigue in students who are only in secondary school (Years 7–11) (de Silva, 1994). So why do students still participate in this daily grind? Kim and Fung (2021) state that parents play an "outsized" role in the issue. They believe that parents need to re-think the premium they place on academic excellence, which is the reason so many families hire tutors.

But is the value of private tuition really, as Kim and Fung state, something that is mainly appraised by parents? Taking a step back, we can first begin to ask: Why does private tuition exist when we have access to established mainstream schools, especially in Singapore?





One may assume, that the existence of private tuition signals that there may be issues in current mainstream schools. According to Liang et al. (2022), one of these issues is the school competition climate. When students face harsh academic competition in schools, they become more likely to fear failure, and seeking external help and going for private tuition relieves their emotional pressure (Liang et al., 2022).



With private tutoring, some students even feel empowered. According to Cayubit et al. (2014), students face negative feelings after being unable to cope with academic demands in school. But after going for private tuition, it not only made studying no longer feel like a burden, it even became an opportunity for them to do better, gain knowledge, and work on self-improvement (Cayubit et al., 2014). Students who previously felt insecure and inferior regarding their studies have built feelings of confidence and had higher self-esteem, because they could now keep up with their peers and approach learning positively (Bray, 1999; Cayubit et al., 2014).

Hence, rather than private tuition being the biggest issue at hand, it seems that our current school environment breeds insecurities among our children. But to understand what is further lacking in mainstream schools, it is worth exploring what parents seek in private tuition as well.



## What is Private Tuition to Parents?

Even though some parents may not have experienced private tuition themselves, they have decided to entrust their child to a tutor, and they are the ones who make the final decisions on their child's education. To dig deeper into why parents believe in private tutoring, we must consider their social circumstances. According to Kim and Bang (2017), depending on the socioeconomic status of the family, parents' perspectives on private tutoring can differ.

In Korea, parents with higher income and education are found to spend the most on tutoring and to have high expectations of their child's academic performance. They are also mostly known as Tiger Parents, which refers to parents who are highly invested in ensuring their child's success. On the contrary, Korean parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel guilty about spending little or no money on tuition. These parents lower their expectations due to their economic status, but would still prefer their child to choose practical majors that would lead to a stable career.



Even closer to home, in 1991, Singapore was found to have the highest demand for English tutoring in families that did not speak English at home, and in which the father had middle-income earnings and an education below university level (Bray, 1999). Although there was no further explanation given for the demand for English tuition in Singapore at that time, I would like to propose that some Singaporeans will be able to relate to this, including myself. For our parents who did not get to learn English properly when they were younger and did not receive a university education, getting their child an English tutor seems like it would give their child an easier life in the future.

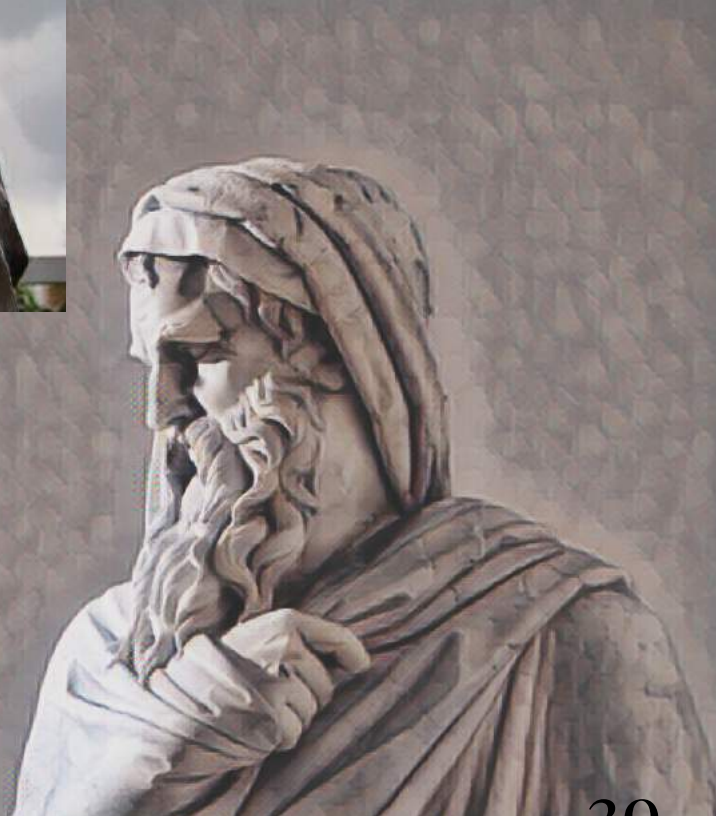
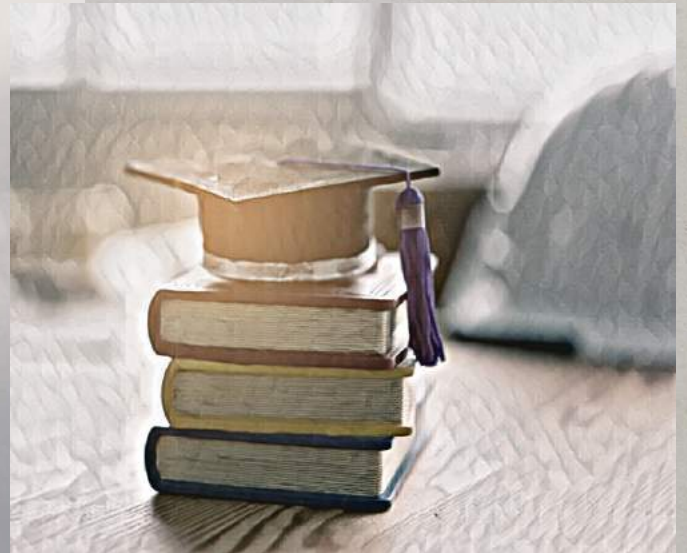
But it also appears that no matter the socioeconomic status, there seems to be this belief: Mainstream schools are not sufficient to guarantee our children's successes and futures.



## What is Private Tuition to Us?

We have heard some students' and parents' perspectives on private tuition, and it reflects quite poorly on mainstream schools. But it is never easy to correct a well-established institution. To do so, it would require us to understand the foundations of education and what it meant to people in history.

Since centuries ago, the concept of education has existed. We know this from philosophers who have discussed the role of education in society (Lee, 2017). Chinese philosophers Confucius and Mencius regarded education as a means to achieving self-actualisation and creating a harmonious society. Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle viewed education as a vital tool for individuals to obtain a "happy life" (Lee, 2017, p.5). So, although parents want to guarantee a successful or stable life for their child, maybe what some of these adults are actually looking for is self-actualisation and happiness for their children.







But in contrast to those ideals, education seems to have strayed from its path, leading to student fatigue, academic insecurities, and a fear of failure. Some parents may even feel a need to place pressure on their children to study for a better future. One may argue with Chinese idioms like my family did—"先苦后甜" (xiān kǔ hòu tián) (direct translation: bitterness before sweetness) or "苦尽甘来" (kǔ jìn gān lái) (direct translation: the hard days are over, and the good days have come)—to show how we will be rewarded after experiencing hard work and adversity. However, in a highly educated society like Singapore (Teng, 2018), it seems like burnout among adults is far too prevalent (Tilo, 2022), and a self-actualised and happy life is still quite a distance away even for many former students.

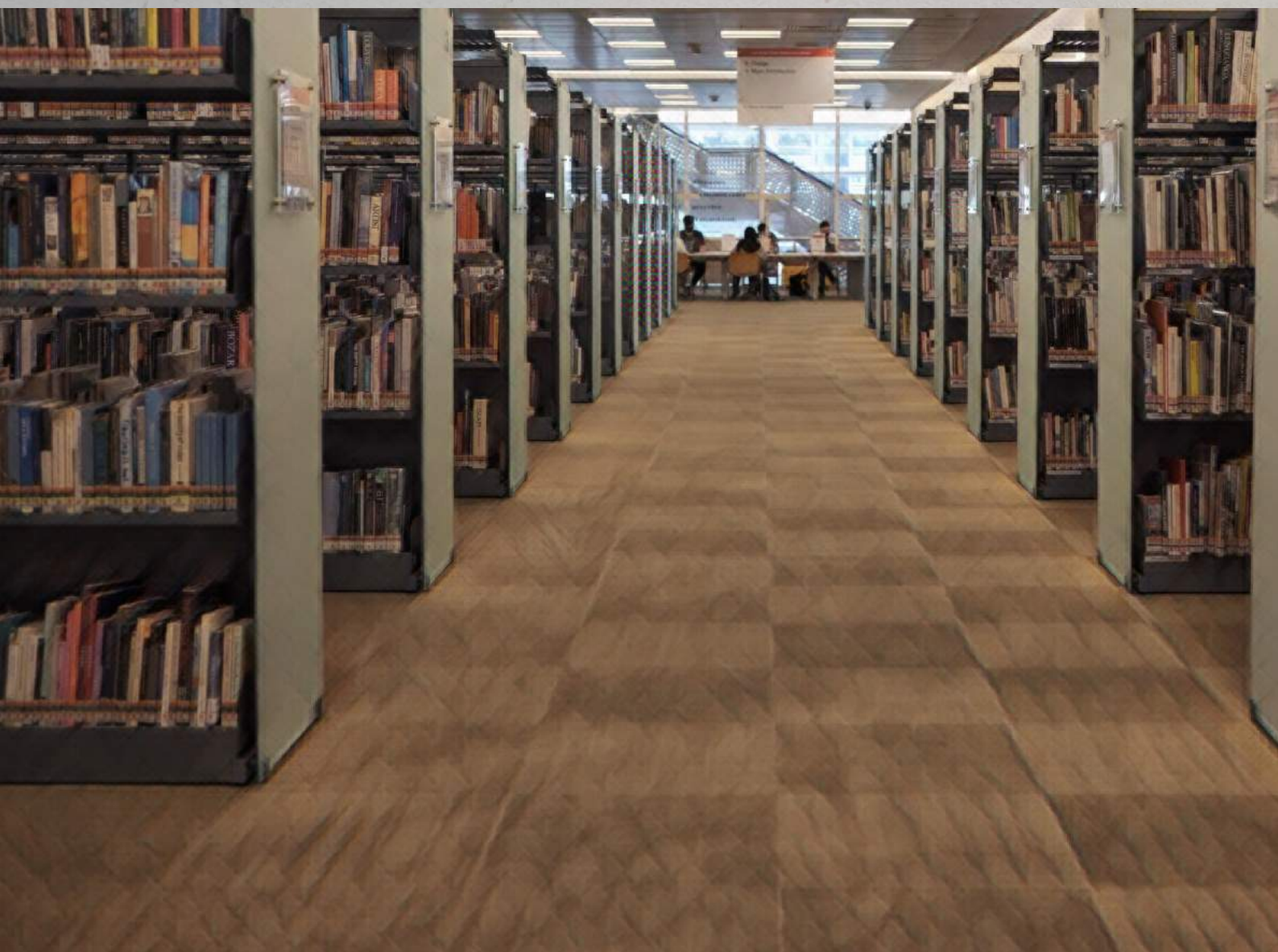
The strained relationship that many have with education today is therefore not only a sign that our mainstream schools are causing great pressure among parents and students (not to mention, teachers)—but even its symptom, private tuition, has grown so out of proportion that it signals we have lost sight of the goals of education.





However, it will take decades for education to change, and I am unable to find solutions or answers just by writing this article. The ironic aspect of education is, even if it taught me languages, mathematics, and sciences in the earlier years, and attempted to teach me in-depth knowledge and critical thinking in the later years, it has not taught me how to approach the larger issues: What is success and happiness? How should we teach our children? How can we edify education?

Perhaps then, before enacting change, we first need to figure out if education and the end goals we desire can converge. When it comes to the promises of education, is a successful career really what we want to promote? Can good grades give people better lives? And can education ultimately bring us happiness? Even after 16 years as a student, I still do not have the answer. However, for a nation that once had two million unskilled and illiterate people, to an education system that is now recognised worldwide, I believe that Singapore can educate individuals who are capable of transforming and adapting education for the country's happiness and future.





# Craving Contentment & Dabbling with Despair

*By Denise Dillon*



When proposing this topic, I reflected on what can be gained through formal education and through informal instruction. It seems that in some ways we associate education with happiness or contentment as an aspirational goal—learning will open doors, lead to higher rates of pay, and keep us up to speed with what others do and know. This is particularly true of expectations about higher education, where the goal of advancement is even nominally explicit. And yet higher education is also associated with challenges, including problems to be solved and skills to acquire, all of which can lead to dissatisfaction and discontent—to unhappiness. The notion that education might promote despair instead of happiness is anomalous to the seemingly prevalent search for happiness or contentment. Nonetheless, some argue that despair can be edifying:

“Education, I maintain, is meant to create a state of discomfort, and to this extent may also make us unhappy, but is all the more important for that. Contrary to the spirit of our age, ...apparent happiness can be dehumanising. To be educated is, in part, to be aware of one's despair, accepting of it, and able to work productively with it. (Roberts, 2013, p. 464)”

Roberts argues that despair is integral to living well, in that desperation can make us productive because it provides a contrast to what we strive for. To recognise and accept despair is the starting point of learning. And yet to approach learning as a consumer who aims to absorb as much as possible as fast as possible is to fall into the trap of consumerism. The mere absorption of knowledge does not lead to satiety. Contentment comes from the realisations achieved through self-reflections over time, learning about oneself. What is it for me that is "personally unlearn-able" (Gibbs, 2017, p. 249)?

“ Learning is about thinking and addressing that which confronts us and may be painful, frustrating and negative. It is about dealing with the world and being prepared to act. (Gibbs, 2015, p. 67) ”

Learning through education helps deepen our consciousness and changes our qualitative state of being. To have tasted despair offers a contrastive experience from which we can base our aspirations for contentment. Despair helps underpin what we do not know, which can be both unsettling and uncomfortable but at the same time encouraging.

“ Contentment is becoming what one wills one's being to be, in the knowledge of one's capabilities. It arises from the convergence of different emotions such as happiness, frustration and despair. (Gibbs, 2017, p. 244) ”

At the core of a pedagogy of contentment is knowing one's place in the world, and understanding the despair of failure, struggle and elation of achievement, balancing these in a personal attunement to the world. (Gibbs, 2017, p. 250)

From an existentialist perspective, to appear happy and content at all times is to offer a façade that veils an underlying despair from which motivation arises. The role of education involves the development of reflective consciousness that allows us to find contentment by facing despair and living through it. According to this view, despair leads away from indifference and towards passionate commitment. Education can be transformative through such development.

“ Transformation can lead to despair but a supportive educative environment recognizes this and helps students see new insights through this despair. Failure to do this leads to disengagement with a notion of transformation or, at worst, depression. So... despair can be positive. (Gibbs, 2018, p. 2) ”

The notion that we might achieve contentment through despair nonetheless brings us back to the consideration of contentment and what that might look like for one who has developed through the transformative process. Does the contentment of the learned and enlightened have the same quality as the contentment of the ignorant and uninformed? I would argue the answer here is "no". Gibbs (2018) argues that "education is about learning to be settled with oneself" (p. 3). This is the transformation that differentiates the learned from the ignorant. To be educated is to understand that anxiety can be resolved through the realisation of one's potential. To be ignorant is to remain in despair without appreciating that the power to change lies within and stems from despair as a positive force for change.



**Singapore  
Psychological  
Society**  
(Established 1979)

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