



The drive for lifelong learning cannot hinge solely on Singaporeans attaining more credentials. It must embrace personal flourishing, growing the innate sense of curiosity, and finding purpose at work and in society, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

Kudos to studying for good grades, but education has a bigger purpose

We need to help students realise that there's more value in the process of learning.



Eugene K. B. Tan

I often get a mixed look of bewilderment and amusement when I urge my students to develop and nurture the ability to teach themselves while in university.

In response, the cheekier ones would say they had paid good money to attend law school and the role of their teachers was to ensure that they get good grades that will then set them on the path to making a good living as lawyers.

My rationale for urging students to learn to teach themselves is simple: Every discipline evolves, and there is no alternative if they are to thrive and enjoy what they do professionally.

What we learn in formal education will be overtaken by new discoveries and knowledge. If we are to maintain our competence, not to mention the mastery, there is no alternative to continual learning.

However, education is often seen as attending an academic institution to be taught. But in today's fast-changing world, we must embrace self- and lifelong learning such that it becomes second nature.

Perhaps the focus on wanting to be successful, which is not an inappropriate motivation in and of itself, has resulted in Singaporean students focusing on achievements at the expense of learning. Studying often speaks to achieving while learning is about accomplishment and passion.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

American writer Adam Gopnik puts it well in differentiating achievement from accomplishment. Achievement is "the completion of the task imposed from outside - the reward often being a path to the next achievement". In contrast, accomplishment is "the end point of an engulfing activity we've chosen, whose reward is the sudden rush of fulfilment, the sense of happiness that rises uniquely from absorption in a thing outside ourselves".

Too often, our society prioritises achievements over accomplishments. Hence, in an education setting, getting an A grade in an examination is perceived to be more important than learning well. A short-term objective against the long-term goal.

To be sure, earning a good grade in a subject and learning well are not mutually exclusive. But as an educator for 25 years, I have also seen how a singular focus on achieving gets in the way of learning. This often manifests in a preoccupation with course content, "right" answers, and fear of making mistakes.

Learning is reduced to studying strictly for the purpose of doing well in examinations. Essential skills like reading, analysis, reasoning and writing are often not given due attention despite their outlasting course content.

Credible examinations and, more crucially, wicked real-world problems do not lend themselves to regurgitated rote-learned information, but instead require sound problem-solving skills augmented by the ability to adroitly apply one's knowledge to novel situations. Where there are no answers, asking the right questions can help reduce the

uncertainty while learning from ambiguity.

This learning mindset, by comparison, is less concerned with getting the right answers. It avoids invidious comparisons of achievements but accords due attention to applying concepts, principles and ideas to novel situations. In the legal field, this extends to recognising what the law ought to be and the limits of the law.

More importantly, it moulds a craftsman-like mentality to outdo one's previous best even if it means falling short, and trying again with new confidence. These are the accomplishments of learning, with achievements such as a good grade a bonus.

Given the speed at which technology, especially artificial intelligence, or AI, develops and how society evolves, there are and will be novel and thorny issues.

In the legal world, this can happen even in well-established areas, disrupting age-old regimes of rights, responsibilities and interests.

Consider how the law should regulate harmful speech created by non-human beings? What about the liability of bots, that lack criminal intent, in committing a crime? How can copyright law be fit for purpose with large language models capable of creating novels and AI video generators churning out movies?

It all boils down to whether we see education as an end or as a means. But it should be both. Education should not only be to enable our young to reach their full potential, but also fulfil their larger role as good citizens with a strong sense of self as well as of possibility.

The legal profession will not be the only one that will be affected by these rapid changes. We should expect that every industry and facet of life will be disrupted by technology. In education, technology has impacted how we teach, learn and assess. Memory recall, for example, is less relevant when search engines can not only jog our memory faster and better but also update us on new developments.

An inordinate focus on achievement gets in the way of a student persevering to acquire mastery or even to explore new fields of inquiry. If competence in the form of a top grade is seen as good enough, why go further? Worse, it also generates the desire to persist in doing things one already does well rather than trying new things.

PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

So we return to the age-old question of the purpose of education. There is certainly the pragmatic dimension - that our students can compete well in an increasingly competitive world and secure good jobs.

In this vein, education is a means by which to train workers in a world where technology, such as AI, will play a bigger role. However, we should not confine and short-change ourselves by being mere cogs in the economic machine.

It all boils down to whether we see education as an end or as a means. But it should be both.

Education should not only be to enable our young to reach their full potential, but also fulfil their larger role as good citizens with a strong sense of self as well as of possibility - how they can best lead fulfilling lives and not one denominated only by workplace achievements and material gains.

As Education Minister Chan Chun Sing put it in a recent interview with this newspaper, the real definition of success for the education system is how a person can thrive on his own in the next 50 years of his life - and

not how well one fares on standardised testing and rankings.

The drive to promote lifelong learning cannot hinge solely on Singaporeans attaining more and more credentials after school. It must embrace personal flourishing, growing the innate sense of curiosity, and finding purpose at work and in society.

This is a necessity as technology and the advent of AI have raised questions about what and how we must learn and if certain jobs will remain relevant in years to come.

FOCUS ON VALUES WITH RISE OF AI

This is where values play a significant role with education as their wellspring and formator.

If we have a generation of Singaporeans who dwell only on their personal economic value and what value others bring, then we are on our way to imperilling what it means to live in and contribute to a community. This socially disconnected quest for personal achievements would alienate care and concern for others to the wayside.

It has already been observed that some Singaporeans who have done well have attributed their success to their personal effort and their belief that anyone who puts in enough work will succeed too. But this ignores the fact that our success is partly enabled by the system and the network of people who have contributed to our growth and development.

The purpose of learning is only going to be even more complicated in an AI age. How will human intelligence and AI interact, and what is the proper role of AI? How will it affect attitudes towards learning and the values of education?

The past year was replete with reports of AI's potential benefits, no doubt boosted by the growing immense capabilities of generative AI such as Open AI's ChatGPT. We've also witnessed the downsides and pathologies of the technology where it's used for

nefarious activities that pose a threat to national security and personal well-being.

An achievement-centric mindset and an approach towards technology that is devoid of values could well result in our being contented to be mere adopters of technology accepting whatever it dishes out and deploying it indiscriminately. In this potential reversal of roles, technology is the user and we the tool.

On the other hand, an accomplishment mindset founded on values of human dignity and community will direct us to examine how we should deploy technology that gives voice to the values we hold dear.

If the use of tech is driven by an unfettered quest for achievements and success is determined by the ability to achieve goals, then any goal could be programmed into a superintelligent AI agent that could stop at nothing to achieve that goal.

The consequences can be destructive; we would have arrived at what AI scientist Stuart Russell describes as "a highly competent machine combined with humans who have an imperfect ability to specify human preferences completely and correctly". In a similar exhortation, sociologist-philosopher Richard Sennett urges that: "The enlightened way to use a machine is to judge its powers, fashion its uses, in light of our own limits rather than the machine's potential".

The inordinate focus on the value of transformative technology can blind us to the importance of human values and our common humanity and how to have technology work for, rather than against, us.

AI must enable, not disenable, humanity. How our students perceive education and the values they associate with learning will have a significant impact on how they interact with this technology for years to come.

Students from primary to tertiary educational institutions have begun a new academic term. May they learn well and increasingly become confident with learning independently, nurture their innate sense of curiosity, strive for meaningful accomplishments, imbue themselves with purpose and keenness to develop themselves holistically, and learn to live, work and play with others!

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