

A CHANGE OF MIND

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ABSTRACT

In between Malaysian secondary school and pre-university study, there exists a great divide. While they may possess good study habits and are eager to learn, the vast majority of students at pre-university level are ill-prepared for what is required of them at this level; for many, their sufferings continue right through university. How do we, as teachers, assist them to overcome their difficulties and get them on the right track? The answer often lies in changing the mindsets and mentalities of such students, challenging traditional and often misleading philosophies and dicta, and creating awareness of realities and issues that all university students have to accept.

Keywords: Mind, change, attitude, university, college.

INTRODUCTION

'Here we are now. Entertain us.'
Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit"

In April 1994, the writer of these words, Kurt Cobain, put a shotgun to his head and ended his own life. Nirvana's most famous song, hitherto regarded by many as an angsty, self-absorbed rant which appealed only to teenagers and more or less immature young adults, took on a rather different meaning. As was the case with *The Catcher In The Rye* thirty-five years or so previously, many educators wondered how much these lyrics really reflected the concerns and anxieties of youth in the '90s, the Generation X that was said to lack identity, purpose and direction.

Though Malaysian youth today are about a generation removed from those who mourned Cobain's suicide, and most are unfamiliar with grunge music, it is undeniable that they have their own set of problems and worries, one which affects only this age group and no other. Many want to go to university, follow in their older siblings' footsteps, and carve a niche for themselves. Most are eager to enter the world of adults, but unsure of how this is done, or what is involved.

All this boils and bubbles in the mind of each teenager who reaches the age of around seventeen and sits for the SPM examinations. By the time they do so, it can be observed that the majority have developed a certain mindset, one that is formed over years of careful and often subtle cultivation, and that is so profound as to persist long after these young people have left Form 5. It is this mindset, however, which lies behind many if not most of the difficulties students have as they struggle through pre-university courses, and it is this – arguably, above everything else – which must be abandoned if they are to survive university itself.

What, then, is the Form 5 or SPM mindset?

THE MINDSET

In most cases in which this term may apply, we can observe certain tendencies. First, there tend to be limitations to students' thinking. This is not to say, of course, that most Malaysian college students are unintelligent, or less intelligent; the limitations in question do not equate to lesser or lower intelligence, although they definitely pose a considerable threat to intellectual development in their own ways. Such limitations are probably evidenced most clearly in the areas of analysis, evaluation, assessment and critical thinking in general.

One of the most serious consequences of these limitations is that students do not think enough, or properly, about what they are confronted with, made to study, or learn. It is true that even at university level one accepts many things without questioning at every turn; but there is every difference between an inquiring mind which tries to make sense of things and a mind which only stores information.

Another consequence is that students follow, often blindly, and so are usually lost when there is no one to guide them. From the student whose answers appear to be a facsimile of chapters from a textbook to the student who cries for help in even the most elementary of tasks, we have all witnessed manifestations of this tendency to follow and this inability to stand on one's own feet.

There is also the tendency among such students to expect answers, rather than take opportunities to raise questions. The idea of answers not being always available, and certain questions being more important than mere answers, is completely foreign to these students. Again, when students lack understanding, and even the ability to understand, it is easy to see why they seem to care only about getting hold of answers and not about how those answers came to be.

This, in turn, means that a very alarming number of students nowadays have almost no interest at all in knowledge for its own sake. The practical philosophy of the Roman empire, which asked only a few questions of all that was foreign to Rome – the first, and most important, being 'Is it useful to us?' – has its modern equivalent in the minds of these students, who concern themselves only with that which can secure an A, or a pass, or a sufficiently high score. Everything else is unnecessary, an imposition upon this particular mindset, which almost seems to be proud of its narrow-mindedness and ignorance – all this despite its existence in a time when the acquisition and perusal of knowledge for its own sake has never been easier.

THE REASONS FOR THIS MINDSET

In order to better appreciate this problem it will be necessary to examine a number of reasons behind it. The following list is not exhaustive, but may serve as an overview of most of the critically important reasons.

Although it would be too easy to place all the blame on the Malaysian education system, it is clear that this system does have certain limitations, just as many students who go through it suffer from limitations in thinking. This system has undergone multiple changes in the last fifty years, but one of its chief features till today is an emphasis on memorisation, with the ultimate aim of regurgitation. Students memorise whole chapters from books, some the entire book; in subjects like English and Bahasa Malaysia model

answers have become objects of worship in some cases. Inevitably, students do not usually need to understand what they 'learn', or employ powers of reasoning to digest academic material at this level.

As the focus on memorisation is so tremendous, we can see how, in practically everything they study, Malaysian students go by the book. There is hardly any opportunity for argument, or consideration of a different perspective; indeed, often there is little opportunity even to form independent thought. By and large, Malaysian children are not encouraged to draw proper conclusions, make inferences, analyse, or think critically.

It should be acknowledged at this point that Malaysian culture is generally one of tolerance and obedience, without questioning or answering back. This in itself is partly to blame for the infamous '*tidak apa*' attitude, which at its worst breeds complacency, among other things. Why rock the boat, Malaysian students feel, when it is easier and safer just to follow?

Apart from our students being conditioned to be followers, there is still an overwhelming emphasis on academic achievement, but a very unequal emphasis on understanding and application. In the scramble for dozens of As, our students can hardly see beyond their SPM results slip. Most of them find it exceedingly difficult to imagine anything beyond life in Form 4 and 5, and as a result come to college expecting pre-university to be very much like Form 5 all over again.

A certain portion of blame can be placed on the modern appetite for entertainment rather than exploration or inquiry, as well as the accompanying desire for more or less instant gratification. Large doses of television and films have helped nurture minds that quickly shy away from anything perceived as not fun or exciting, as well as ridiculously short attention spans (Sigman, 2005).

Poor language skills, another by-product of our education system, are another factor. As the basis for argument, comprehension of more than the simplest concepts, and examination of all areas of human study, language is either one of our greatest tools, or one of our most frequent and feared stumbling-blocks. All too often pre-university lecturers witness diligent, capable students give up or break down simply because of difficulties with language, which signify an inability to think at tertiary level.

REALITIES AND ISSUES FACING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Although most pre-university students have an idea that university presents its own set of concerns and challenges, only a few realise at the beginning of their course that pre-university is the training ground for them to become ready to face these concerns and challenges; quite a number hardly seem to understand that some of the most important of these concerns and challenges are present even at pre-university level. If a pre-university course is taken seriously by universities around the world, it is to be assumed that it makes certain demands of its students, in order that when they apply to such universities they can satisfy various requirements.

To be articulate, and to be able to express oneself coherently, are skills that ought to be honed from childhood. By the time students enter pre-university, these skills are well and truly expected of them, no matter whether they choose arts or science. Now is not the time for robots, or parrots, or typical laconic teenage answers. In almost every pre-university

programme, students have to present in front of whole classes; in every programme, certainly, they have to write.

Merely being articulate and coherent, however, is not good enough without being able to exercise caution and good judgement. The mechanics of formal English are elementary enough to observe, but as cautious language stems directly from cautious thinking, it obviously requires much greater effort and energy, especially if students are accustomed to writing and saying almost anything they like. Despite the fact that incautious language and opinion are not penalised at pre-university level as harshly as at university level, there is a need for pre-university students to be cautious and sensible nonetheless, with many opportunities to exercise skills of generalisation and qualification, as well as avoid dangerous, casual and haphazard expression.

A certain amount of tolerance and open-mindedness is essential if one is to be properly cautious and sensible, not offending or making outrageous claims. Particularly if students attend university overseas, they will encounter a range of opinions, views, beliefs and attitudes, many of them completely foreign to what Malaysians are familiar with. Open-mindedness is not, of course, the same as not thinking or what many Malaysians call 'free' thinking, which is often an excuse to think carelessly or not at all.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

'*Ceterum censeo, Carthaginem esse delendam*' (In my opinion, Carthage must be destroyed), said Cato the great orator. We know that if a student is to survive university, the typical Form 5 mindset must be changed. This can be done in a great variety of ways, depending on pre-university teachers' perception of the problem, their chosen ways to deal with it, and – of course – each and every student himself or herself. It may be useful to focus on a few points that can assist us in handling our students, delicate as they may be.

The first of these is that teachers, no matter their level, are educators. Notwithstanding modern emphasis on performance in (ironically) its traditional sense, and young people's desire to be constantly entertained and poor powers of focus and concentration, teachers are not clowns, magicians, or prancing ponies. Their function, duty, and calling being very much higher, teachers cannot afford to ignore the danger many if not most of their students are in. It is one thing to be worried about being boring, stale, and antiquated; it is quite another to pander to immature, silly cravings that demand a show at every turn.

As teaching is about much more than mere entertainment, education is about much more than mere curriculum content. At the risk of seeming tiresome, pedantic or even sadistic, we have to teach students the value of asking questions and having inquiring minds, of thinking and expressing one's thoughts and opinions clearly, of being aware and realising things for oneself. One of the challenges of a teacher, it may be said, is to challenge the student. If this means dragging him or her kicking and screaming through the muck and mire of shoddy, woolly and lazy thinking, childish fears and bad habits, then so be it.

Here the daunting difficulty of such a task, given the limitations of time and energy due to the constraints of pre-university courses, presents itself; and a second thing to keep in mind, therefore, is encouragement. The fairly large temptation to criticise, berate and even penalise students for things they do not know, or have been taught improperly, needs to be

resisted, all the more because a teacher's position often makes it very easy to do any or all of these.

Changing one's mind to this degree involves arduous mental exercise, pain and stress, which in turn must be met with diligence, perseverance, and patience. Probably the very first thing a student with a wrong mindset has to do is admit that he or she needs help, his or her position having been identified as dangerous. If a student sees a teacher as a warden or executioner, or regards him or her with hostility, it is entirely possible that the student will not wake up to the frightening reality of his or her situation. Encouraging students to accept reality, accept what awaits them at university, and accept what must be done in the meantime, can ease the traumatic process of changing the mind in this manner.

Though painful, this process can – and ought to – be about enrichment as much as anything else. The realisation on the part of students of the benefits of thinking clearly and critically and being open-minded, inquiring and articulate can hardly be overstressed. Instead of labouring to learn things for which they have little or no appreciation, in much the same way as many of them studied for certain subjects just to obtain As but did not understand three-quarters of what they studied, students can become motivated and focused by recognising the value of these aforementioned qualities.

When the typical SPM mindset encounters a non-typical one, the result can be simultaneously positive and negative. To the former, students who seem to forever ask questions, speak their minds, and try to go beyond the syllabus can appear to be troublesome, nerdy, arrogant, admirable, maybe even enviable. At the back of many of these views is fear, itself varying from person to person – fear of the unknown or unfamiliar, fear of speaking up, fear of being criticised, fear of failure to rise to those people's level, fear of not being able to become someone worthy of the title 'university graduate'. Quite possibly the last thing a teacher ought to do at this point is embarrass, belittle, or poke fun. Fear, as a primal emotion, is not to be bypassed or ignored, but has to be confronted and conquered if a student's mind is to change properly.

CONCLUSION

Unless pre-university students take action and change their minds, they remain in grave danger. However, the very process of becoming aware of one's precarious position can mean many shocks and upsets, before a student even begins to extricate himself or herself from the quicksand; and it is in the interest of every teacher to make this easier, and not harder. Indeed, it may well be that we as teachers are the reason such a process can take place at all. 'To what will you look for help if you will not look to that which is stronger than yourself?' (Lewis, 1952). This is hardly a matter of power struggles in and outside the classroom, or of being in a better position to exploit students' vulnerabilities, but instead a matter of guidance and nurture.

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