A degree in learning to be human

Universities can no longer operate like a factory, churning out graduates, just in time, to industry specifications, as quickly and as cheaply as they can.

Lauded last month, the new college moves on the expertise of two of its oldest faculties – arts and social sciences, and science – to launch more than 3,000 undergraduate students. The college, which will admit the first cohort in August this year, marks a major shift from the traditional way of learning in separate disciplines.

Teaching, Learning More

From 30-plus classes as an educator, there are a few things about learning. It can be done passively or actively, through specific instruction, or as a happy by-product of consequence. In 2015, the Ministry of Education “Teach Less, Learn More” initiative signaled a philosophical shift, where curriculum was reduced to raise space for creativity, critical thinking and love for learning.

It was a delicate balance to decide which was enough. It’s perhaps a matter of personal preference. Our education system has been exceptional in the way it caters to the needs of students. However, it has also been a rousing concern, and we still are looking for more.

This suggests that we are doing something right, but we have also been a rousing concern, and we have been reaching too many: the idea that there is still room to improve our calibration. Singapore is an effective society, and we are conditioned to Hartley, and must see performance indicators. Teachers and learners pressure to perform the syllabus and students are expected to learn everything by the exam date. This is compounded by the rapid changes in the world that seem to require students to learn ever faster.

Learning is not linear.

The authentic learning of knowledge is a complex process of exploration and, often, failure. Learning is not a simple linear progression, but rather a process of reflection that doubles back upon itself. It is sometimes a dead-end, but street lights can have moments of enlightenment. This suggests that some moments actually improve learning outcomes. For example, a 2000 US National Research Council report, How People Learn, found that learning is most effective when it occurs across a number of different environments. Subsequent research has shown that, in addition to being interdisciplinary. Such learning takes time and patience, but it is also one of the most rewarding forms of learning. These connections can cut across domains and topics, across space and time, and across changing societal perceptions. These connections are essential to make the learning personal for an individual. Otherwise, there is no learning, only the accumulation of facts, which would be forgotten over time.

At first glance, the idea of teaching and measuring for more learning might sound counter-intuitive.

After all, all graduates must find work when they graduate. They need to show employers that they can code, model Excel, or write a proposal, and so on. Tackling it in this and— and not to be specific, skills is that first job—can be seen as indulgent. Nothing could be further from the truth. We believe that the freedom to explore is in fact necessary to enhance our students’ capacity to learn. Our graduates will need to maneuver and arrive, learn and unlearn, as knowledge decays faster. We are preparing our students for their first job. We are preparing them for many jobs in their 40 to 50 years of working career. We want them to be lifelong learners.

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Ending the churn

Advances in technology will create many opportunities. Digital skills will no longer be just the domain of the foreseeable future. In the short term, we cannot hope to beat competitors in what they do, it is how they do it. This means that our students should be at the crossroads of these new skills.

The university can no longer operate like a factory. Our focus cannot be on churning out graduates, but in reality, it is industry specification, as quickly and as cheaply as we can.

We must focus on preparing our students, not just for the future of work, but for a future that they will not have foreseen or predicted.

In 1998, educationist Sir Alan Langlands lobbied, "If you are teaching a boy in the machine as we move into Industry 4.0, characterized by accelerated change and job decay. The rates of change in the fields of science, technology, and business are such that the work will be completely different from that of yesterday. The traits of curiosity, creativity, and resilience will be critical to being successful in the workforce. It means that we need to teach our students to be human, as well as earn a living.

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