

Thinking Big, Thinking Differently

written by Sheryl Khor

Do Singaporeans dare to dream, to think big and to think differently? The push for disruptive thinking is no longer limited to global industries. Students today are being encouraged to develop unique ideas and solutions, even from a young age. How can the education landscape better embrace disruptive thinking in this technological era? Four panellists share their thoughts on the key skills this generation needs.

Is the notion of thinking big, and thinking disruptively simply a nebulous one? While there has been much talk about thinking differently from an education context, both in terms of crafting the learning experience and in various educational outcomes, the question remains as to how an Asian country like Singapore can learn to think disruptively.

At the societal level, our national narrative is that of a meritocratic society based on efficiency. However, when we look at the educational and cultural landscape, the fear of failure in any context continues to exist. There is thus a need to encourage a culture that allows space for failure, or rather “creative failure”, as Mr Balamurugan Krishnasamy, Principal of SIM International Academy (SIM IA) terms, and also the ability to pick oneself up from the failure and try again.

Similarly, disruption often has a negative connotation, but in the context of concepts and ideas, the importance of disruptive thinking is to be aware of its relevance and purpose. According to Mr Balamurugan, “We must ask what would be the purpose of disruptive thinking in education, and what would be the gap in today’s education landscape that is preventing that disruptive thinking from taking place? One essential feature is that we need to create a culture of learning that promotes co-creation and identifying of problems for value-creation instead of focusing on problem-solving.”

It is thus insufficient to merely train students to think of different ways to solve problems; there must be new approaches to motivate them to seek new ways of thought. Mr R. Sinnakaruppan, Chairman/Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Education Academy (Asia Pacific), suggests that while children are naturally inquisitive and want to learn, the school system and home

environment must allow them to ask questions. “They must be allowed to hone their sense of curiosity by finding things out for themselves,” he explains. Good performance in conventional problem-solving scoring systems, like in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) global rankings of Math, Reading and Science, does not necessarily correlate to the ability to innovate. While the top three country scores tend to come from Asia, with Singapore topping the list for the 2015 report, the top three most innovative countries in the world are not found in Asia, but in the US. “Being exam smart in the yester-years is very different from today’s world where you need to think on your feet and think differently,” says Mr Sinnakaruppan. “Creating innovation and enterprise requires a completely different mindset and skillset. So we need to change.”

Culture of Thinking

Enabling a person to tap on available resources and to repurpose them in different ways is thus essential to disruptive thinking. There must also be a culture that is willing and ready to embrace change, even when the pace may seem frightening. From a corporate perspective, Chief Executive Officer of Nufin Data (JK Tech Group of Companies), Mr Thomas Wee, notes that the speed of change has changed dramatically because of technology, with short-term and long-term timeframes being compressed, making it vital for companies to be adaptive to this pace of change. Correspondingly, these companies are looking for the right kind of talent that possesses critical thinking skills, presentation and communications skills on top of the basic skillsets required for the job. “We need people to really think big and think different because we are trying to disrupt, we are trying to change the status quo to bring new ideas into how things are done,” he says.



Panellists (from left to right)

Thomas Wee
Chief Executive Officer
Nufin Data (JK Tech Group of Companies)

R. Sinnakaruppan
Chairman/Chief Executive Officer
Singapore Education Academy
(Asia Pacific)

Low Sze Wee
Director
(Curatorial, Collections and Education)
National Gallery Singapore

Teymoor Nabili
Moderator

Balamurugan Krishnasamy
Principal
SIM International Academy

Besides the obvious reliance on technology and the increasing rhetoric of a Smart Nation, there are soft skills and subtle shifts in attitudes crucial for enabling disruptive thinking in education. Mr Low Sze Wee, Director of Curatorial, Collections and Education at the National Gallery Singapore, explains how a small shift in focus from the artwork to the visitor has made a big difference in the general public’s acceptance and participation in the local arts scene. “We want the Gallery to be a place where your sense of curiosity is provoked, and we inspire you to think and do things more creatively in daily life,” he says. More importantly, Low believes that with art appreciation - be it merely having a preference for an art form or contemplating its origin and creation - comes the ability to develop critical thinking skills. “This ability to articulate and form an opinion is extremely important in developing critical thinking skills. And that’s something that an encounter with art can bring to the corporate world,” Low enthuses.

Pathway to Possibilities

At the same time, the complete removal of a grading system and academic rigour is not ideal - the challenge lies in infusing relevant skills within the education process while encouraging innovation. One of the ways is to encourage the development of a global learner who can adapt quickly to different pedagogies of learning. As a global campus with over ten top ranking universities from the UK, the US, Europe and Australia, SIM GE gives its students the global edge with the ability, adaptability and employability to stay ahead.

“We need both academic discipline competencies as well as technical competencies, but to what extent do you want to upscale?” says Mr Balamurugan, who heads the SIM IA. This newest forward-thinking institution, encourages its multi-cultural community of students to be curious learners, community builders and creative thinkers. “Standards-based curriculum has a place, but now we need to look at competencies and

how you build that within the system. The business skills that are required in the corporate world such as co-creation, collaborative skills, visualisation and verbalisation - these are the things that are essential for one to be successfully navigating the industry as well as the working environment. These are the key elements that can be taught with a bit more purpose and intent.” This is the path that SIM IA is taking to encourage students’ application of their knowledge and skills to real-life scenarios, including proposing solutions to identified problems and collaborative learning through technology.

Find out more from the four panellists as they expound on the culture of thinking in the face of changing technologies, disruptive economies and adaptability beyond academics.

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