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Education for creativity, not captivity

James Campbell

RECENTLY I had the honour of addressing a distinguished group of Malaysian scholars, administrators and teachers on the problem of reforming assessment practices in Malaysian educational institutions. As is always the case with presentations on almost any topic, the speaker finds that he suffers the twin evils of either over-simplifying or over-complicating the topic.

He is caught on the horns of a dilemma and often seeks some safe middle path. Seeking the middle path is however a different thing from finding it and you are always haunted by the thought that you could have said this or that better or added or subtracted this or that to make the presentation more palatable, coherent and relevant.

Near the end of my presentation I briefly drew reference to the ideas of the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, author of the seminal *The Myth of the Lazy Native*

I introduced Syed Hussein's important theorisation of the captive mind and its antithesis, creative development.

His critique of the captive mind was articulated clearly in two important articles, *The Captive Mind in Development Studies*, *International Social Sciences Journal*, Volume XXIV, Number 1, 1972, pp. 9-25 and, *The Captive Mind and Creative Development*, *International Social Sciences Journal*, Volume XXVI, Number 4, 1974, pp. 691-700.

The ideas in his articles provide an evocative way to understand the task ahead of us in reforming assessment and education.

The opposition he drew between captivity of the mind and creative development is a critically useful and insightful way for us to consider and reflect upon the nature of contemporary educational reform.

I drew upon his theorisation to help my audience think through the distinction between reform to educational assessment that is conducive to learning and lifelong growth, and a revamp that hinders creative growth and learning in students and teachers.

The essential argument I made was that for assessment practices to be useful and aid in learning they ought to ensure that they were animated by a commitment to learning as an ongoing formative and creative process. This stood in stark contrast to learning that was characterised by captivity, triviality and the rote repetition of knowledge without deeper forms of understanding and application.

My use of Syed Hussein's distinction between captivity and creativity was generative and meant to solicit a reaction, engender debate and suggest that one of Malaysia's greatest scholars of sociology, religion and history was also an educational thinker of the first order who provided us with a significant contribution to pedagogical theory.

Two things happened, however, to further inspire me to write on the significance of Syed Hussein to current educational debates in Malaysia in a more popular forum.

First, after I had delivered my paper, one of the participants congratulated me on my reference to Syed Hussein's work. He wished I had made more of it in my presentation.

I immediately concurred recognising that Syed Hussein's distinction between the captive and creative mind and his broader critique of intellectual imperialism stood out with equal force in the history of ideas of pedagogy to Freire's critique of banking education or Illich's critique of the consumer logic that underpins contemporary schooling.

Not only was Syed Hussein's conceptual framework equally generative of insights into education as the former two great thinkers, his work was also located in a broad Malaysian context which provides us with an important pivot from which to debate current issues in local education.

The second thing that happened was fortuitous. As usual in my visits to Malaysia I try to go to local book stores and see what's on offer. Luckily for me I maintained my habit.

I chanced upon an interesting book written by Syed Hussein's daughter Masturah Alatas titled *The Life in the Writing: Syed Hussein Alatas*. With chapter titles as thought-provoking as *Because Said said So, My Father and Virginia Woolf* and the excellent Sergio Leone, *Captive Minds and Spaghetti Westernization* I simply had to buy it.

What struck me immediately was the clear and elegant prose which was a joy to read. It reminded me that my sometimes opaque writing could do with a dose of clarity from time to time.

The thing that really gripped me, however, was its combination of knowing and empathic insight into Syed Hussein as well as its opening up of interesting intellectual issues and arguments. For example, the insight into what an exchange between the great British Marxist historian Victor Gordon Kiernan and the equally erudite Syed Hussein would have looked like reminds us of what we have missed out on in the history of ideas.

It equally reminds us of the significance and status of Syed Hussein's writings as universally significant.

The discussion of Sergio Leone's *Spaghetti Western* genre referred to above is another valuable and appealing part of the book, which on the whole is well written, reflective and highly engaging.

Finally, the discussion about the early reception of Syed Hussein's classic *The Myth of the Lazy Native* in Malaysia is highly suggestive.

I began this column with reference to an argument I have tried to make in regard to educational reform.

The argument in its essentials is that a core way to judge the validity of current reform proposals in Malaysia is to ask to what extent they would negate or reinforce the captive mind mentality critiqued by Syed Hussein.

I argued that even in our discussions about assessment reform we must take consideration of how our practices of assessment either encourage learning and ongoing development of our students or the extent to which they do the opposite.

The same holds true of teachers. Do they see assessment practices as a way they too can improve and creatively develop their teaching and their own learning?

A creative and innovative society, which is so often referred to by academicians, journalists and politicians alike, must have its roots in the depth of learning that occurs in our educational institutions.

The distinction between the captive mind and creativity articulated by Syed Hussein provides us with an interesting and instructive way to judge educational reform in Malaysia. It is a contribution that needs to be discussed more often and taken more seriously.

Both the conference participant, who offered some friendly advice, and my purchase of the Syed Hussein biography reminded me that engaging with the latter's thoughts in discussions regarding educational reform is unfinished business.

I was reminded by the conference participant that I should have made more of Syed Hussein's work in my presentation. He was right. Masturah's biography reinforced this view for me.

Her biography also reminded me, among many other things, that clear prose combined with committed scholarship is something to aspire to.

There are not many times when a friendly criticism at a workshop and a chance find in a bookshop cohere to remind us of intellectual work to be finished. This was one of those times.

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