

## Notes from Asia Pacific, mid February 2013

Some argue that a Singaporean education discourages creativity and imagination at an early age. There is the story of a man who when he was at primary school in Singapore the children in his class were asked to draw a tiger. He thought it would be fun to draw a green tiger with purple stripes, but he was caned for his cheek, because “no tiger is green and purple”. Later, when he was at an American school, there was a similar incident when he said the teacher praised him for his imaginativeness.

In today’s Singapore one could be shown many counter-examples to this story: young children creating wacky and imaginative things and new well-resourced schools and colleges supporting excellence in the arts.

But there are two underlying policy issues – the preference for setting clear boundaries to knowledge before encouraging too much experimentation beyond them, and the unashamed pragmatism of Singapore’s education policy in the 1970s and 80s, aimed at producing the skills that the economy needed. Ironically, the demands of pragmatism have now taken a turn – more companies want staff with creativity and flair and they might well prefer job applicants who drew green and purple tigers.

This thinking is reflected in the educational policy industry around so-called “21st century skills”. There seems to be common ground that the economy of the future will have fewer processing jobs and more jobs requiring creative and critical thinking, as well as communication skills and the ability to work with others. Some researchers have also identified the need for more affective characteristics such as empathy, compassion and respect – what the Americans call “wisdom skills”. Cue many national and international projects with acronyms – including “P21” in the USA and the “ACT21S” project group, of which Singapore and Australia are members, as well as Finland and the USA.

Cambridge Assessment Singapore recently started a discussion on LinkedIn about 21st century skills in an Asian context. As often with social media, the discussion got locked into an exchange between two correspondents, one who thought that the talk of “21st century skills”, and actions flowing from it, was just a fad and the best approach was to stick to traditional good education and wait for the fad to pass. The other thought that the group of changes addressed by the 21st century skills discussion marked a step-change which could not be reversed, bringing together as it did such rapid changes in technology and the world economy.

Of course, there is nothing particularly “21st century” about some of the skills championed by the projects with acronyms. Plato’s guardians were educated with higher-order thinking skills. And the technological and economic trends so often prayed in aid were in train in the latter years of the previous century. But that does not invalidate the discussion. The millennium was a label – an excuse to take stock of the needs of the future and the kinds of knowledge and skill that young people would need for their adult lives in the heart of the new century. It is no bad thing to take stock every so often.

Coming back to Singapore, one of the national policy skills which it has inherited from the founders of the modern nation is to back both horses. So, in education, Singapore carefully cherishes and polishes the academic core of its curriculum and is cautious about too many changes in it or the ways in which it is assessed. At the same time it engages eagerly with the international debates about higher-order skills, sponsors IT-based projects of the most radical kind and encourages its schools to promote “critical thinking” and artistic expression.

This is the season of the Chinese (Lunar) New Year, which is another excuse for taking stock. In Singapore, the New Year coincided with an emotional Parliamentary debate, prompted by a controversial Population White Paper, about what kind of lives Singaporeans wanted their children to live.

New Year can also prompt cautionary tales of perils ahead if we do not take heed and follow the right paths. In Hong Kong, at a much-reported Taoist ceremony, a community leader drew a stick bearing the unlucky number 95. It bore a prediction which says: "In a splendid carriage you embarked on your journey. Today, you came home barefoot. Is it that you failed the imperial exam? Or did you lose all your gold in business?". This prompted comment that the splendid carriage could refer to Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, who was born in the Year of the Horse, and whose glamorous-sounding policies could go wrong later in the year. The last bad-luck stick was selected in 2009, when Hong Kong was hit by the global financial crisis, and the one before that was in 2003, the year of the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak. However, an unlucky stick can be a useful early warning and thus beneficial in the long run.

Although the most common New Year greeting (gong xi fa cai) wishes us a prosperous New Year, some prefer a less materialistic greeting, using the word that is translated in English as "blessed" – a word more commonly used in English in this part of the world than in the UK or USA. "Education for blessedness" – there's a theme for a new Government policy.