

ATTENTION:

The following is a partial excerpt from Chapter 4 of a rough draft of the book *Why Your Kid Hates School: A Look Inside the Schools of Malaysia* by “John” Lee Ming Keong. This document is © Lee Ming Keong 2005, and all rights (including those pertaining to distribution of this document) **are** reserved.

If you have received this document via email from anyone other than John Lee Ming Keong, a website other than <http://www.iroاتم.cjb.net> or in hard copy (paper) form, you should be informed that this document has been reproduced illegally. All original and legal copies are available **only** from <http://www.iroاتم.cjb.net>

Should you have any feedback, comments or incidents you can contribute to this book, you may contact the author via his public forum at <http://forums.iroاتم.cjb.net> or through email by johnleemk@gmail.com. In particular, the author is in need of first-hand experiences of schools going overboard with discipline, stupid teachers, pointless examination questions, irrelevant textbooks, and the like; such opinions from students who have sat or are about to sit for the SPM are especially valued. Opinions about the matter of vernacular schools would also be appreciated.

Chapter 4

I have been in school for eight years. I’ve been to five different schools over that timespan, and regardless of the time or place, I’ve found that there’s not much difference in the quality of teachers or the complaints of the students taught by them. The only exception is the private primary school, which I’ll call S, that I attended for almost two years. There was considerable rapport between the teachers and students there, as best as I can recall, and although the discipline teachers and principal were much feared, there was no obvious disrespect or even hate that I have seen exhibited towards teachers elsewhere, particularly in secondary school.

There is a large gap between what students expect of teachers and what the teachers are actually achieving. I asked a very influential prefect in my secondary school which teachers she particularly liked. After about a couple of minutes, she finally managed to answer: “No-one.” And she is not just any ordinary scumbag kid who harbours a grudge against education and everything it stands for, who goes to school to escape her nagging parents and play some basketball. She is a prefect who deals with teachers on a daily basis in a casual manner. That she has not found a single teacher she even likes indicates something is dreadfully wrong with the way teachers deal with students.

The role of teachers is a critical one, because they are the ones who connect students with the material they learn. A boring subject can become the subject that every student looks forward to due to an excellent teacher, and vice-versa, even the student most dedicated to a subject can decide to skip it just because the teacher has turned it into a chore. Teachers also are intended to serve as a human contact point for students to ask questions and discuss the material they learn. That few teachers are open to questions, and that even fewer openly encourage discussion in class shows a mass failure of the system to stimulate intellectual thought and discussion. Is it any wonder few students bother to even greet teachers any more?

But good (or bad) teachers are only half the story. An inadequate syllabus can be the cause of as many problems as incompetent teachers, and according to all whom I have discussed this with, there is a lot of room for improvement where subject matter is concerned. Often students are bored out of their skulls by the overemphasis on local history and geography, to cite an example. Moral education is teaching that there can be only one solution to a problem, which is hardly the case in a real world where practically every decision you make doesn't have a black and white answer. And, of course, the standards of English are abysmal.

Worse still, most subjects that involve memory-work, such as history or geography are taught by books that break down the material being taught into supposedly easily digestible chunks. Most books students use for revision are point-based instead of being written in prose, because it's easier to memorise. Every subject is so compartmentalised that there is no context at all. Yes, every good student can recite the reasons UMNO was formed. Do they know what the hell they're talking about? A hundred ringgit says ninety-nine out of a hundred won't.

While you can memorise tiny bits of data (and keep it in there just until the end of the examination), you can't learn tiny bits of data. You only learn the big picture. You might learn it with a gap or two here and there, but as long as there's a big picture, it's just like a nearly-done jigsaw puzzle — you can easily hazard a guess as to what's missing. Don't believe me? Well, I'll be damned — aren't mind maps all the craze for memorisation these days? And don't they put everything into a big picture? Well, duh — you don't learn each data in a compartment separate from everything else — as any decent biology textbook will tell you, everything in the world is related to everything else! Compartmentalising information is a key fault in the Malaysian education system, plain and simple.

What Subject Matter Is Taught, Exactly?

Let's start with the languages. I don't have anything to complain about when it comes to Malay; I feel the syllabus has been well-designed and is certainly of sufficient standards. Any student who fails his or her Malay exam has nobody to blame but him- or herself (barring any mental disorder).

In primary school, English and Malay are roughly equal in the way they are taught. (Although a veteran teacher going by the name K.I.G., who wrote a letter to the New Straits Times published on August 29, 2005, argues that the "English texts for primary schools are based on very simple language.") However, in secondary school, when literature (both English and Malay) enters the syllabus, things get very different. First

of all, compare the literature anthologies for Malay and English. Regardless of what form you or your student of choice is in, the Malay anthology is always substantially thicker. For example, in forms 2 and 3, the anthology of Malay literature is literally infinitely thicker than the English anthologies, because there isn't one for either form. In form one, the Malay anthology is double the English anthology in thickness.

Then, compare the novels (which, I should add, is hardly a deserving title for the heavily condensed English novels), too. In form one, they are about equal. In form 2, the Malay novel is at least double the English one in thickness. Likewise with form 3. And here we are, grumbling about how poor a command of English our graduates have!

The teaching style teachers use also plays a huge part in influencing students' command of English. For instance, it wouldn't hurt to have English teachers who can actually speak the language (one English teacher, who is a Chinese by race, I may add, has made famous gaffes such as pronouncing the name Nigel as "nee-gel"). And, importantly, the teaching of English is one case in which we should avoid former Prime Minister Datuk Dr. Mahathir Mohammad's command to look East towards Japan — English there is taught by rote memorisation, as something one learns by memory, and not as a language where, after a while, you just "know" what a word means.

Right now, the way English is taught is that students fill in the blanks in sentences, with an essay every once in a while. This can easily be memorised by anyone (well, not necessarily easily, but for some, it's a lot easier than learning to use English as a language). Although good teachers can work their way around this clumsy mess of a syllabus and still provide effective lessons by giving more essay assignments and assigning students projects to present to the class, few teachers actually do so, despite the fact that this is how you pick up a language!

You don't learn a language by filling in the blanks in a sentence; you learn it by using it! Even if you're a genius at correcting sentences or figuring out where a particular word fits in a sentence, you will be considered to have a very poor, at best, command of English by anyone you talk to if you can't even string a proper sentence together. Writing and speaking in public are an integral part of learning language, and this should be recognised by those who design the syllabus. Essays and speaking should be the main core of the teaching method for languages, and filling in the blanks can come in later.

For example, my form three English teacher loves assigning essays to us. We get at least one or two a week, which is a lot for the typical student. For those who have been exposed to writing English much of their lives, such as myself, these assignments were a breeze. For most of my class, however, it was torture. Some of the "brightest" in the class even begged me to write their essays for them. And, lest we forget, these assignments are simple! Often, even the outline is provided, and yet, it is just a burden some of the smartest students cannot bear! How will these future professionals, businessmen and politicians fare when they have to actually write something, and there is not even a question to guide them?

Even speaking can be arduous. The same English teacher loves to provide speaking assignments — just do a little research on some subject (like an inspiring person) and present your findings to the class in verbal form. Although it can be boring at times, this is something that many people have to do often in the real world. Presenting a project to the boss, speaking at a conference — it is likely many of my fellow classmates will be in such a position in the future. Nevertheless, they are paralysed by such assignments.

Again, the “brightest” resort to trickery and plagiarism. I have been asked to prepare notes for a presentation by some otherwise undoubtedly intelligent students, while several of my classmates who just couldn’t decide on a hero to present to the class grabbed a book and photocopied the pages to serve as notes. When queried on the subject matter they were presenting, they were clueless.

It doesn’t have to be this way. The reason our secondary school students are this way is because they have never been exposed to such things in primary school. The extent of their public speaking experience is reading from a book to the class, when even eye contact is easy to avoid. I distinctly remember my experience in year two at a private school, S. Every Thursday, we would have to read aloud a Malay essay we wrote (to avoid plagiarism, it would often be on a personal topic such as our daily routine) to the class. To reduce the fear one often experiences when speaking to a large room, we would sit in a circle in a corner of the class, and only the student speaking would stand up. That is how you learn to use a language. Not filling in the blanks, but actually **using** it.

I have little to complain about when it comes to science and mathematics, at least on the textbook side. Primary school mathematics textbooks, however, do suffer from the fact that very few pages are devoted to explaining the concept being learnt in each chapter, and instead are made up of mostly exercises. Fortunately, this is no longer the case in secondary school. Each new concept is discussed, albeit in a rather stiff manner, sufficiently to prepare students for the problems given. Examples are also in abundance; the textbooks are so easy to use, I studied several chapters ahead in form three mathematics until trigonometry, without any help from the teacher!

The teaching styles of different teachers vary, though. In form two, my class had one particular mathematics teacher whom most of us loved. Although those she had to punish for turning in homework late never did like her, the rest of us always felt she cared for us and had our best interests in mind. She did her best to ensure we were learning and comprehending the subject matter she taught us

The transition from Malay to English as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science seems to have been rather easy for most students in the urban areas; those who had no clue of what was going on in primary school still have no clue in secondary school, and vice-versa. Everyone seems to be adapting easily, although the teachers’ English does leave much to be desired. Slide shows and other such interactive elements are often used to teach science and mathematics, but I see little to no benefit derived from them except covering up for the weak command of English most teachers seem to have.

Geography (I will not be covering local studies, a primary school subject, and instead focus on its two branches, history and geography, separately, as that is how they are taught in secondary school) is one subject I have much an issue with, however. Half of it is good; for example, features of different kinds of terrain, measuring demographics, and so on. However, other parts of the syllabus serve little purpose, such as memorising the location of important ore and oil mines. What does it matter if we know how many oil rigs are there in each state, or can point out their exact location on a map? Not much. Anyone can visit the nearest library or log on to the internet to find out these minor details. (Not to mention that these petty things are liable to change in the future. For example, will we still be mining bauxite twenty years from now?) Will any of our graduates even have to know that we mine bauxite from the Gulf of Ramunia (*Teluk Ramunia*) to get a job?

If they do require such minute information, with the internet, it's within reach at any time! Employers don't want to see knowledge of every single factoid; this was useful before computers existed, but now, it's the simple truth that Mycroft Holmes (the brother of the famous fictional detective, Sherlock, who described Mycroft as the British government's clearinghouse of knowledge and factoids) is an anachronism. Employers want students who can articulate clearly, can come up with creative ideas, and actually think. If their knowledge is deficient, surely someone who can think critically and creatively would have no problem Googling sufficient answers, no?

World geography, particularly, is sorely lacking, and in a global economy (yeah, yeah, Western imperialism, whatever; we still have to live with it), we cannot climb under a rock and ignore the world. A little knowledge goes a long way, and can often break the ice when meeting a foreigner — “Oh, you're from Holland? I just love your tulips!” A well-rounded education must not lack in covering subjects of global importance. This is something our current education system is sorely failing at doing.

For example, I compared my form two geography book with that of my 21-year-old friend's and my father's. Mine dealt mostly with local matters (such as the growing of rice, the usage of valleys, etc.) and identifying features of the terrain. A wee smidgen of world geography was added, dealing mostly with the climate around the world, and alternative power sources being used in France, Holland and Japan. My friend's book dealt with the geography of Malaysia and Southeast Asia. And as for my father's book? Well, here's a hint: its title was “The Southern Continents”. If you don't get what that means, it means it discussed the geography (terrain, utilisation of land, demographics, everything!) of Australasia, South America and Africa. It's simply mind-boggling, the difference between then, the intermediate period, and now. Mind-boggling enough to make my friend laugh his lungs out when I told him about my geography book. Just six years' difference between us, and what a gulf exists between us in terms of educational quality!

To me, the change of focus represents a shift in paradigms among those who write the geography textbooks. The focus has gone from teaching geography and introducing terminology and concepts (such as different terrain, climates, etc.) as necessary (for example, while describing the Klang Valley, also pointing out the various uses of valleys), effectively consigning them to secondary status, to elevating the concepts above the purpose of geography itself, that is, to study places and people. To me, this is an extremely bad change, as it takes all the life and spirit out of geography, which

used to be my favourite subject (along with history) before I started my formal schooling.

It boggles the mind how much brainpower is being wasted on memorising trivialities, bit by bit, instead of looking at the big picture, which, let's face it, is a lot easier for the human brain to handle. But let's not stop there. History is an even worse offender. I'm not a big fan of the Singapore education system because of their overemphasis on test scores to the point that a suicide hotline for troubled students who score "only" 95 upon 100 has been made available, but nevertheless, anyone who has picked up their 'N' level (don't ask me what that stands for, because I have no clue) history textbook knows that the syllabus there focuses more on the big picture instead of tiny details, and that the workbook features numerous questions on provided source material and analysis of a particular historical situation. Few questions require outright memorisation of facts (usually such questions count for a very small portion of the final grade), and even then, these are often the sort of questions where partial credit can be given, instead of ones where your grade can hang entirely on whether you know the exact date the Pangkor treaty was signed.

The history textbooks are also not very non-Malay-friendly, let alone the kind that encourage unity. Often at the end of each chapter, there is a paragraph outlining the lessons learnt, and almost invariably there is a reference to "bangsa" (race). While I know this can also refer to the nation, the word "negara" (country) exists for a reason. Using phrases like "demi mengembalikan maruah bangsa" (for avenging the honour of our race/country) which have an ambiguous meaning can not necessarily bode well for racial harmony, especially in a political climate where there must always be give and take and when such phrasing comes at the end of a chapter that has just finished covering the sacrifices of purely Bumiputra heroes (I know it's inevitable when the textbook covers the earlier periods of our history, but isn't that precisely why more clear language should be used; to avoid misinterpretation?).

Aside from that, **half** of the form four textbook is devoted to covering Islamic history. No offense meant here, but, please — which had more effect on the history of the world, the Caliphs of the 17th century, or the Renaissance? What changed world history forever, the split between the Shiites and the Sunni, or the Industrial Revolution? (Okay, that wasn't exactly fair, since both had huge ramifications on world history, but I have a poor command of the details of Middle Eastern history so I'm having difficulty coming up with a better analogy.) I'm not arguing we shouldn't cover Islamic history at all, but they are only a small part of world history. It is just as unfair to ignore important world events as it is for the Japanese to gloss over their atrocities — particularly to students leaving secondary school with a poor command of world history.

As a matter of fact, one big problem I have with our history syllabus is that we don't even get to world history until form four! There are small references to things like the Industrial Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars when necessary (such as explaining the importance of tin), but other than that, practically nothing until form four! This is a very big step back from the syllabus of yesteryear. I remember enjoying reading my father's year four history book when I was a child — not only was the Malaccan Sultanate in there, but so were other events that really impacted world history, as the life of Jesus.

Likewise, I remember his forms one, two and three history books, which were miles ahead of ours today. At least our form one books, for the most part, coincide in their coverage of world history — both focus on ancient Asian history, except mine has a particular focus on Southeast Asia and Malaysia. Our form two history book is a joke. It is completely devoted to local history after the fall of the Malaccan Sultanate until about just before the Great Depression, and requires the memorisation of extremely trivial issues, like where revolutionary writer X studied.

For example, chapter seven of the book describes the brief lives of eleven revolutionary heroes (Dato' Maharaja Lela, Tok Janggut, Dato' Bahaman, etc.). Dates and brief descriptions of the numerous battles they fought are provided. For the PMR and any school tests from form two until form three, every detail in this chapter must be memorised, with particular emphasis on the three to five reasons for each uprising. That's, on average, 44 individual bits of data from one chapter to memorise, not counting the name of each hero and the other details such as locations and dates (a favourite question teachers ask on test papers is something along the lines of "Where did Hero X defeat the British in year Y?"). This is one chapter out of about ten. Multiply that by three (for the three textbooks for three forms until the PMR) and you have 37320 bits of data to memorise. (Is it any wonder even the most "intelligent" whiz kids barely manage an A on their history tests?)

Is that what a historian does? Memorise data? There is no attempt to get students to look at the big picture as a whole. I am mainly comparing this with the Singaporean history examination, for the record. While I am no big fan of certain aspects of their schools, let's face the facts: their students learn how to analyse sources such as political cartoons and other primary sources, and provide appropriate interpretations of them. (And, contrasting the amount of data they have to memorise, the 'N' level textbook has perhaps sixty to eighty bits of data to memorise per chapter, of which, as of this writing, there are a total of nine, which makes about, at the most, 720 bits, presuming, of course, that you would even want to try such a clearly unreasonable method.)

I am sure there are many ultra-nationalists who argue that world history matters little. There is a Malay proverb reminding us not to be like the *katak di bawah tempurung* (frog inside the coconut shell). We cannot be isolationist and pretend the world matters little. A grasp of world history is important for understanding events in the news. The cliched George Santayana quote about history rings quite true here. Although local history provides important lessons (just see how the British divided the rulers against each other and colonised them by taking advantage of the internal conflict), no country is an island any more. Events in the United States can have just as much effect here as they do there. To interpret them, we must have a strong foundation in world history, especially as it often provides lessons applicable to more than one situation while local history may have lessons not necessarily applicable to every situation. This is not just my personal opinion, but the opinion of practically every student I've discussed this issue with.

And now, we arrive at one final classroom subject I loathe: moral education. Why do I hate it? Let me count the ways... Firstly, it presumes there is only one possible definition of a moral value. There can be no other meaning applicable to "kejujuran",

“hemah tinggi” and so forth. Secondly, moral education is the most memory intensive subject in the whole syllabus — even more so than history. Instead of planting morals in our heart where they can take root, it plants morals in our brain, where they rot and end up producing paedophiles, rapists, hucksters, conmen, and just plain lawbreaking people like those illegal drivers who park along the road near the condominiums just outside my housing estate.

On a moral examination, all questions fall into two categories. Either they’re clearly common sense (everybody knows it’s wrong to steal or murder) or they require intensive memorisation (such as memorising the exact definition of a moral). Rarely is there any middle ground or even a moral dilemma (do I chase down that serial rapist and murderer who has evaded capture innumerable times, or save the life of a hit and run victim two blocks away?); nope, everything is absolutely clear-cut for examiners, unlike in the real world, where there is rarely an obvious right or wrong. But let’s not judge the efficiency of moral education as it is now based on that. Let’s judge it by the results.

Here’s a start: how well do moral examinations judge the content of our character (as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it)? The answer is: very, very poorly. I knew a lying, backstabbing prankster in form one who could score perfect marks for his moral examination. Was he a picture of a good citizen? Hardly so. Moral education exists only to appease a public insistent on forcing schools to do the job of parents. What could possibly be easier to learn than good morals? There are a hundred-and-one opportunities to teach your child them every single day (“See these double-parked cars here son? They’re breaking the law, making life difficult for others. That’s why the law exists: to ensure people do not unnecessarily inconvenience others, so we should follow the law.”), so why offload this responsibility onto schools? Are we really that lazy? Or do we really have such low self-esteem that we can’t even bring ourselves to believe we’d do the right thing if we were in the place of the guilty? I don’t know; as I said in the introduction, this book is meant to provide questions, not seek answers, and what I do know is that moral education as it is right now is absolutely useless.

I have not suffered through any civics classes (fortunately), but I have seen my sister’s textbook, and it’s just more of the same, only with a focus on being a good citizen. There is nothing of substance, and nothing that can be related to students’ experiences. I remember my father’s secondary school civics textbooks. To teach democracy, they depict an election for a fictional school’s geography society, where a form one girl votes for the first time. Later on in the series, she runs for office herself. And so on. These examples can easily be related to.

Another instance of what I mean would be my father’s form one civics textbook, which does not even bother to take much of a serious stance on the issues. Although you can tell that implicitly, certain actions are being supported and others, rejected, at least you don’t puke at the overwhelmingly “goody-two-shoes”, idealistic, texts we have today for moral education. The second half of the form one civics textbook consists of a short biography of several different fictional characters such as Mr. Tidak Apa, Miss Spick & Span, and so on. The text may sarcastically chide Mr. Tidak Apa for just not caring at times, but it never outright says “This is a bad, bad boy!” as some moral education textbooks today with their unrealistic depictions of bad

characters are wont to do (“This boy took drugs, and he died! Don’t be like him!”). As such, even if the depictions of these fictional characters in the civics book seem too unrealistic, at least the actions are never explicitly stated to be good or bad; the book presumes you to be mature enough to know what is what, something sorely lacking in the moral education textbooks, which I have always felt belittle me as a mere child who does not even know the difference between right and wrong.

What else do moral textbooks tell students these days? Well, as I pointed out earlier, a staple is an unrealistic depiction of two characters, one good and another bad, and then stern admonitions to be good. For example, when it comes to democracy, often all you get is, “Malaysia is a democracy. In democracies, citizens elect their leaders. We must be prudent in who we vote for and not be swayed by propaganda,” followed by a photograph or two of citizens voting or standing in line at the polls. On the test itself, a student’s morality is evaluated almost entirely based on how well he or she can remember the rigid definitions of moral values and parrot the correct answers spoon-fed to us in the classroom. Is it any wonder why the headlines nowadays are full of murders, incest and rapes? (Then again, a good number of these criminals are Muslims, who do not attend moral education classes in favour of Islamic classes.) Is it any wonder that there is no such thing as civic consciousness among the citizens of Malaysia?

The moralists of our age love to condemn our youth for their adoption of Western ways and norms and enjoyment of entertainment foreign to our culture. They blame the corrupting influence of the West for the cynicism and lawlessness of our youth. The sex, lies and drugs that are all-too real things in our schools are seen as evidence proving beyond all reasonable doubt that the West is this evil, monstrous thing that has stolen the souls and morals of our teenagers.

Do I believe the West is more accepting of elements seen as dangerous and immoral by anyone with a good sense of morals? Yes. Do I believe that Westerners intend to corrupt themselves and the people of the world with immoral behaviour? No. It’s a sad and dangerous by-product of what some might call Western imperialist hegemony, but I think that although it is for certain youth have taken to a culture that is foreign to ours, it is not necessarily the West’s fault. (Or, at least, the fault does not lie solely on the West’s shoulders.)

Parents are counting on schools to ensure the upright moral standing of their children. Parents demand more and more subjects to be taught during school hours to ensure they never raise a headlined child molester or rapist of tomorrow. But, who really is raising this generation? Is it the parents or the schools? Good morals are something you have embedded in your heart from a young age. Until today, even when telling a white lie, I feel a pang of regret inside because of what my parents have drilled into me. Waiting for schools to deliver moral education is not an option; to butcher a quote from the television show *8 Simple Rules*, you only have so many chances to instill a fear of God in your child.

Now, in addition to moral education, as I mentioned earlier, we have civics again (civics **and** moral education? I’m sorry, is there a difference?). What do students do in these classes (which are not examined or tested, so students need not worry)? According to my sister, when she learnt about democracy, the teacher told her class to

draw the flags of the democratic countries. I don't know about you, but I don't think that really taught her much about democracy. So you know that Australia is a democracy (and that its flag with different sized stars is bloody difficult to draw). Does democracy mean anything to you? Have you gained an insight into the meaning of the word "democracy"?

In the Pursuit of Intellectual Curiosity

One important trait that seems to come up often when the subject of college or university admission is discussed in the United States is "intellectual curiosity". "Intellectual" implies intelligence and knowledge. Curiosity implies wanting to know the what, how, why, when and where of something. I'll take it for granted intellectual curiosity is a positive trait we would like to see in students, particularly the top achievers. Students should always be looking to learn more instead of doing the bare minimum. Students should not be afraid of embarking on independent study projects. Students should not be afraid to challenge the norm, as practically every groundbreaker has, such as Albert Einstein, who challenged the assumptions of Isaac Newton, who likewise challenged the typical assumption that gravity is just "there".

Are our schools doing a good job of preparing students like these, students unafraid to challenge the status quo? Frankly, the answer is hell, no. As you've seen in the past chapters, schools are more occupied with keeping students in line, following the syllabus. Any particular interest or propensity towards a particular field is often ignored, and in the end, nullified, as rare are the students who can be well-roundedly excellent; most students instead become well-roundedly average. The pressure on students to excel in a range of subjects from Moral Education to Mathematics can never change the fact that while some students are cut out for one particular subject, few really ever succeed in fully understanding all the classes they take while they are in school.

Scoring As in examinations is often meaningless, particularly for anything less than STPM (*Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia*), as I will demonstrate in a later chapter. All you really have to do is memorise each page of the textbook and regurgitate it onto paper. Often, for the top-notch students I know, this is accomplished by buying up every workbook on the market and completing them all. In fact, as I show in a later chapter, these students know their books so well, they can tell you from a glance which school-set test papers have been copied from workbooks and which are original.

However, workbooks do not stimulate intellectual curiosity. They do not even prepare students for work experience. When preparing a report on, say, the feasibility of opening a new mine, you actually have to write a full-length paper. There are no blanks to fill in here, and most workbooks are basically nothing more than a few hundred empty blanks with words in between. I do not believe memorisation is learning. Perhaps, in one's working life, there may be a time, once in a while, when you simply have to memorise factoids of trivial importance.

I don't deny this is true, and indeed, anyone seriously studying has to force themselves to memorise much material. In cases where there is simply no choice, such as the various formulae required in physics, then, yes, workbooks are absolutely

brilliant. Repeated usage drills these important formulae into our heads at an efficient pace.

But memorisation for the humanities? I don't think so. Unlike in mathematics or science, there is never one true absolute answer in any of the humanities. As Napoleon Bonaparte is reputed to have said, history is but a lie agreed upon; as such, we should expect the lie to be challenged. There are many interpretations of historical events, for example; for instance, some argue the atomic bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki should never have been used in the first place, while others view them as a regrettable, but valuable incident that averted many civilian casualties that would undoubtedly be caused by a ground invasion of mainland Japan (the civilians had been told that the Marines would torture them to death; many at Iwo-Jima, for example, committed suicide rather than be taken captive). History is made up of both opinions and facts. You can memorise facts, but you can't memorise opinions. Opinions are subjective — there's no one true answer, so why memorise the one true answer when it isn't there?

Nevertheless, for these subjects, that is exactly what students are doing. Roll out the workbooks, and let's get started on memorising those definitions of moral values! Ready or not, one-sided view of history, here I come! All I can say is, I'm glad Malaysian students aren't sitting for Singaporean 'N' level history, which has only one question devoted purely to stating memorised factual data; all else require formulating opinions and defending them, which even some of the best Malaysian students are incapable of doing.

Well, sorry folks, but that is what historians do. They look at the sources and establish the facts, but at the end of the day, you need to decide what to infer from the facts and be able to justify them. It is, in my opinion, exactly what should be done for moral education as well (if we even intend to keep a clearly rotten system; it's better to reform it and start from scratch). Moral education should not expect pure black and white answers from students, but provide real moral dilemmas with no one correct answer, and base the marks awarded on how well the answers are justified. Not the black and white "I would not use the grocery money my mother gave me on arcade games because it's bad" but moral dilemmas of real substance, such as witnessing two crimes occur at the same time and asking the candidate to pick one to respond to, or, better yet, find a solution that can tackle both crimes.

Perhaps the attitude of most teachers towards intellectual curiosity (and definitely the curiosity part) can be typified by this exchange (translated from Malay to English) I witnessed in a form two classroom:

Student: Teacher, who were the Dutch?

Teacher: Aiyah, you don't need to know; it's not coming out on the exam.

Classroom discussions are heavily discouraged, and although most teachers I know try to be receptive to questions, some just can't be bothered. This is dangerous in practically every subject area I know of, especially in science and the humanities. Science and the humanities revolve around different opinions, different interpretations of facts, and hence, discussions among those participating in the field so a conclusion

can be reached satisfactorily. (Often, even a conclusion cannot be reached; just look at the diversity of opinions in science or history!)

That many teachers still do not recognise this does not bode well. Toeing the official party line may be helpful in school, but not in the scientific world. Take the discovery of penicillin, for example. Alexander Fleming was not the first to discover it. He just was the first to question the convention that the mold formed on his petri dishes was of no use. By doing so, he saved numerous lives thanks to his discovery, even though he was not the first to “discover” penicillin.

Some teachers I know are especially good at facilitating class discussions. When the discussion begins to die down, they know just how to resuscitate it with a good infusion of an anecdote of their own. However, to the best of my knowledge, this attribute has never been really noted by any higher-ups. All they want to look at is the grades, and, hey, moral education isn't exactly a subject where students score higher if they discuss the meaning of moral values more, is it? After all, the definition is already there! They're just better off spending the time discussing the value memorising its definition!

Discussion is important, not just for the utilisation of language or for the broadening of one's perspective, but for learning tolerance. You don't learn to appreciate another person's viewpoint or even know there are people who take such a stand if you don't ever discuss the pertinent issue with them. There are some in the United States who have correctly pointed out that you can easily learn all the subject matter you like if you just spend everyday at the library, which does have its advantages: you learn at your own pace, and of your own volition, two important ingredients for fostering a love of learning and a deeper understanding of the material. However, the reason this isn't an option more commonly chosen is because you benefit a lot more by discussing the material with others.

Plagiarism 101: Coursework, and How to Cheat On It

Coursework, at least as far as I can tell for forms one to three, is basically a report compiled on a particular topic to be marked by the teacher in charge of the subject. Depending on what form you are in, it can count for as little as 10% and as much as 40% to 60% of your final grade (this includes the PMR in form three, where coursework counts the most). The only subjects where coursework is mandatory are history, geography and life skills (KMT/ERT). Although its official Malay name is *Kerja Kursus*, I have seen variations such as *Kerja Khusus* being used.

Coursework is also commonly used in other subjects, however; for example, in form three, we had to prepare a report on space exploration for science. Moral education teachers are also fond of using coursework to gauge students' abilities. As coursework is, for the most part, practical, you can expect many students to be rather riled up about it. I have seen more than one student complain that coursework is a terrible stress in form three when students have a huge enough burden of having to study for seven or eight subjects on them.

This is in spite of the fact that students have been prepared for coursework since primary school, where teachers have often assigned casual reports for students to whip

up. And it shouldn't be that hard either, since for form three, all you have to do for history is write about a patriotic hero, and for geography, about your neighbourhood. Life skills isn't that difficult as well — just write about how you built your stationery holder/cosmetics box/whatever.

Maybe what pisses students off is the lack of creative leeway given. Students spend a good deal of time tripping over each other trying to find out the correct format for the report. How many references do we need? How many people must we acknowledge in the credits? Can we use a computer instead of writing the report by hand? How long must each chapter be? Do we need a “kaedah kajian” section? What on earth is the teacher expecting us to put in the appendix? Can we just submit our reports without any appendices? What choice of topics do we have for the history essay we have to attach to the report? Students must have the answers to each and every one of these questions to complete their coursework report without being unduly penalised — yes, even that question about how many people should be acknowledged (you need at least three people for form three history coursework, or you lose one mark).

That isn't to say there isn't room for students to get creative and prettify the reports they hand in. As any parent can attest, kids as old as 15 years of age go gaga over trying to submit the report that is the most pretty, most referenced, thickest, longest, most decorated, and so on. Often these reports look like something you would expect kindergarteners to be labouring over, but no, we have grown 15 year old teenagers agonising over what colour should they use for page 17 of their report. And although few teachers admit it, let's face it — more colours and decorations mean more marks. In a *kiasu* and test-crazed culture such as Malaysia's, would anyone hand in a colourful project with pretty flower stickers all over it if this wouldn't translate to a higher grade?

And the pressure to get a good grade is intense. As I mentioned earlier, for form three students, their final grade on history, geography and life skills depends heavily on their coursework for these subjects. How much? 40% to 60% of the grade is depending on coursework, that's how much. For something so academically important, you'd think these papers would be more, well, academic in appearance instead of looking like a 10-year-old girl's scrapbook. One also wonders, too, whether when exam time rolls around, there are any teachers out there awarding favourable scores towards students likely to do well in the examination. Hey, at least it's more honest than when a rural school substituted some year five students for year six to sit the UPSR (*Ujian Pendidikan Sekolah Rendah*) so as to boost the school's ranking.

Now, how do students cope with this pressure when it's really intense, say, in exam year? Why, plagiarise, of course! In my form three class of 34 students, I think maybe two to three people turned in purely original reports for history. It's a lot harder to cheat on geography and life skills, but even then, I wouldn't rule out some students plagiarising portions of other students' papers. When the day came to hand in our history work, all over form three, you could hear students saying things like “Thank God, I had Z's work so I could finish my project on time”, “I looked at one or two pages for a while, then I thought, what the heck, so I copied them all”, “I copied this really long essay, like maybe two or three pages, off the internet!”, and “K copied his report from his cousin”.

When I was in form two, I think about half of all the form two students in B handed in history projects based on the same material. It was quite simple at first; we were allowed to band into groups to do our research about the topic: the history of the school. Then, one or two students in a group consisting of some of the best students in form two passed copies of the gathered material to a friend who would only be allowed to pass it to a friend. Next thing you knew, practically everyone could lay a hand on a copy of those materials if they wanted to. I have them on the table next to me right now as I write this. It's not really plagiarism, but it sure isn't accomplishing what the coursework was intended for. All the material painstakingly gathered by a select number of students from interviews, brochures, etc. for their own use was suddenly in the public domain.

Do the teachers notice these things, or even care? Not likely. After all, one of the top boys in the class noted: "All you have to do is make your report really thick. With the small amount of time teacher has to go through them all, do you think she's really going to read your fifty-page project?" This fellow is also the son of a teacher, so I think he's on to something. With that attitude, it's not a surprise most students seized the opportunity to plagiarise. To some, there's not even a difference between plagiarising off the internet, and writing an original report based on sources from the internet.

Even original reports are not necessarily clean. The same teacher's son as before told me that he writes fake interviews of random members of the public and adds them to his geography report because such interviews are mandatory for maximum marks. When told of this, another top student laughed because the teacher's son uses a random name generator to create names for his interviewees (is that a word?). The latter smart guy can make them up off the top of his head. There's just no shame among most students nowadays; they'd rather cheat than hand in an inferior report.

With these farces going on in schools, and among some of the brightest students (most of these comments were culled from students who are in the top class in form three), what hope have we for the future? Oh, well, it doesn't really matter anyway, does it? After all, we're already a haven for the VCD pirates. It doesn't make a difference if the businessmen of tomorrow do a little *cetak rompak* today.