

## The Tension between Triumphant on the Matric and Learning Critical Thinking Skills

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In Myanmar the goal of fifteen year old students and their families is to excel on the matriculation examination. What intellectual and personal strengths grow in preparing for the matric? Among top Matric scorers, what augmenting of critical thinking skills is required to meet ASEAN goals? What are modes of developing them? Initial answers to these questions are drawn from my ten years' teaching experience since co-founding the Pre-Collegiate Program of the Diplomatic School, Yangon. The 16-month Program assists students to: think clearly; become educated people who can entertain ideas that they do not accept; relate what they have known to new bodies of knowledge; and synthesize their traditional values with values essential in the modern way of life. The Program has enabled almost one hundred students to win scholarships abroad, to thrive in their studies, and, after college to go on to graduate school or return home to begin their careers.

As we know, preparation for the national matriculation examination is the crucial period of schooling. A year of intensive study is generally regarded as essential for the six days of testing. Because medicine and engineering are prestigious careers almost all ambitious parents channel their children into the science stream for high school, that is, 10th and 11th grade. A few of their children prepare for the matric on their own and with friends. Families that spend least will hire as a study guide a student who recently achieved several distinctions on the matric. Families pay more to enroll their children in tuitions, classes taught by retired or current government teachers. Tuition teachers who have a strong track record may accept as many as sixty hopefuls into their classes. A family of means will spend \$5,000 for individual and group tuitions in six subjects, Myanmar language, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. High matric scorers are at the level of high school graduates in other ASEAN nations in their knowledge of mathematics, physics, and English.

While we realize that disuse erodes knowledge from our high school days, we expect continuity in intellectual and personal skills mastered then. Memorizing ability and fluency in the written Myanmar language are skills that students learn for the matric. Mnemonics and simple repetition are the main techniques for remembering. They are not the recommended techniques of elaborative rehearsal, transfer from past learning, and transfer to future learning. From kindergarten onward conscientious

children follow their teachers' demands to memorize. The matric scoring systems deduct points for answers that do not reproduce the text verbatim. The most onerous subject to memorize is biology, where the ideal preparation is to commit the whole 119 page textbook to memory. Looking back on their year of memorizing, some university level students discern that formerly they tried to recall everything but now they analyze to select ideas worth committing to memory.

Mastery of the Myanmar language is tested in an essay and by a vocabulary list of Pali terms. The exam questions are set and scored in a manner that makes earning a distinction in the Myanmar language less frequent than in other subjects. Among other difficulties experienced by the test takers is that they must write in a set format and avoid inserting any English terms, as is their habit in the spoken language. High scorers take pride when comparing themselves to the thousands of students in private schools, where English is the medium of instruction. Only one private school is bi-lingual, Lumbini Academy, founded by Ko Tar, the doctor turned writer. While in the future Lumbini Academy may set the standard for bi-lingual education, now it has grown annually only to seventh grade. .

Facets of character developed to prepare for the matric include sustained motivation and disciplined work habits, both highly relevant to attaining ASEAN goals. The key motivator in the matric is to have a choice of universities. Some students emphasize giving happiness to their relatives. A few strive for the fame shared by the top ten in the nation. One graduate of the school attached to Teachers' Training College (T.T.C.) devoted himself totally for two years by foregoing video games, internet browsing, movies, and his favorite pastime of rambling around local markets talking to sellers. He succeeded in attaining the number four rank out of the half million test takers. During his year in the Pre-Collegiate Program he employed this determination again to drive his SAT score up in only five months from 600 to 740 in critical reading and from 680 to 750 in math. A simple explanation of determination from a girl graduated from Dagon 1 is, "I had only one year to do my best." Some high school graduates comply with the agenda set by the matric but hate the experience. A young man whose top scores permitted him to become a doctor reacted strongly. His life choice is to become an entrepreneur. Never again will he be confined to the dictates of a bureaucracy. Three months after completing his year as House Surgeon, he began setting up his own clinic in an underserved village near Mandalay airport.

Let us turn now to the task ahead for Myanmar's universities -- to reach by 2015 ASEAN standards for critical thinking. The addition of another year to all bachelors' degree programs opens space for innovation. The ASEAN standards are promoted by the ASEAN University Network, an

association subscribed to by individual universities since 1995. The first two members from Myanmar are Yangon University and the Institute of Economics. The ASEAN framework covers all facets of university life so that individual universities may set and clarify their own specific goals, standards, and methods. A statement of common goals for ASEAN universities was made by the Secretary-General, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan.

The essence of higher education is transforming students, empowering and enhancing them by developing their higher order intellectual capacities. This allows them to become autonomous, critical, reflective, communicative, articulate and able to critique their own experiences and themselves. This requires a vision of a teacher as facilitator and the student as an active and committed participant in the learning process.

Teaching students who have passed the matric how to become active learners is the mission of the Pre-Collegiate Program of the Diplomatic School, Yangon. The design that Dr. Khin Maung Win, James F. Guyot, and Dorothy Guyot shaped in 2002 with the assistance of Dr. John Badgley and U Ba Win has advanced students toward ASEAN intellectual and personal goals. The Program's teaching and learning practices are transferable to a wide variety of settings in Myanmar. Here we will discuss how each of the ASEAN critical thinking goals articulated above are achieved in the Program's most portable mode of teaching, Touchstones Discussions.

Watch a chinlone ball being passed among skilled players. We invited you to see the similarities in a Touchstones Discussion group passing ideas around their circle. A Touchstones Discussions class meets weekly for an hour. The students begin the class by rearranging their chairs in a large circle. They read a short text while their teacher reads it aloud. After rereading the text silently and pondering two questions, they gather in groups of four to share their answers. The last half of the class they spend back in the large group discussing their ideas. To breathe life into this generic scenario let us glance at the questions used in the ninth lesson, Aristotle on friendship from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. All of the questions are contained in the *Touchstones Volume A, Teacher's Guide*.

There are three kinds of friendship: when one or both friends use friendship to get something they want; when one or both keep their friendship only because of the pleasure they get from it; and when two good people are friends for each other's sake. These three types can be called friendship for usefulness, friendship for pleasure, and perfect friendship.

The first goal named in the quote from the ASEAN Executive Director is autonomy of students in their learning. Here is how Touchstones Discussions allow students to take responsibility for their own learning. In the Touchstones format, the two initial questions always apply ideas from the text to students' lives. All students can speak with expertise on their own lives and swiftly realize that their classmates also have interesting views.

1. Have you ever had a friendship that was mostly because both of you found it useful to be friends?
2. Have you ever had a friendship that was mostly for pleasure?

In the small groups students discuss their answers without any intervention from the teacher. Back in the large group they hear how answers differ among groups and reflect on new questions raised by their teacher.

The ASEAN criterion of critical thinking is illustrated by this question. "Do youngsters make friendships for pleasure more frequently than adults?"

Here is a reflective question. "Over a lifetime is it better to have many friends or just a few close friends?"

Becoming communicative is the theme of this retrospective view of a woman participant. "Arguing for the sake of learning, as opposed to picking a side and sticking to it as in a debate, impresses me most about Touchstones. When the winning/losing issue is taken away, there is more space for participants to switch around to opposing views, break the walls of dogma, and take a path to an open mind."

Becoming articulate was emphasized by another woman. "You need to know how to get your ideas across to other people because it is futile if you have the greatest idea in the world but do not know how to explain it."

On critiquing oneself a man said, "Having grown to relish my capacity to 'out-think' myself in each Touchstones class as I build on the previous week's discussion, I still leave the large group every time with a renewed sense of awe and respect for fellow participants and what they have to teach me."

The last point in the ASEAN goals presented above is that students critique their own experiences. The Teacher's Guide lays out seven specific ways for students to evaluate both the flow

of the discussion and their own participation. In a usual technique for understanding the flow of the discussion, two students sit silently with the large group in order to listen closely and to give feedback to the group. A question in the check list on basic discussion skills is "to what extent do students express ideas relevant to the topic?" A question from the list of advanced skills is "to what extent are students admitting that the discussion changed their minds?"

The distance is vast between students enhancing their memories in seeking to triumph on the matric and in exercising critical thinking skills during Touchstones Discussions. As universities and the Departments of Higher Education develop their new methods of teaching and learning, the ten years of Touchstones Discussions in Yangon can be beneficial for three basic reasons. One, the Touchstones mode of learning demonstrates that Myanmar students can excel in developing their higher order intellectual capacities. Two, the mode of teaching shows that Myanmar teachers can become skilled facilitators. They can transform themselves from the "sage on stage" to the "guide by the side." Three, the welcoming atmosphere of the Pre-Collegiate Program invites university faculty members to drop by to observe how Touchstones Discussions are conducted.

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