

## Unconventional Learning

I will always be grateful to my mother and father for their willingness to take risks and provide me with opportunities that strayed from traditional paths.

When I was about nine, I started a class in a small classroom above a Kumon centre in Subang Jaya, a suburb in Kuala Lumpur. It was a very odd class and there was very little that was 'traditional' about it. The 'Future Problem Solving Program' carried the aura of a think tank, not six or seven boys and girls who had yet to hit double digits. It was here, that I first began to understand unconventional learning.

Unconventional learning, I think, drives greater growth than any conventional system.

Conventional learning tends to drive evolutionary, slower mental growth because we are faced with few unknown quantities – the system by which we learn remains fairly constant and we need only understand the new content. Unconventional learning tends to drive revolutionary, faster mental growth because we are faced with greater unknown quantities—we have to learn new content and a new system of learning that content.

In the typical classroom of 2015, methods for learning are largely reverse engineered. Knowledge absorption and application is determined by a finite paper at the end of the year. The content taught by teachers is based on how to answer a very limited set of possible questions. Legend has it that one can now nail exams by memorising set essays and reading mark schemes. There is, apparently, a set formula for acing exams.

This is conventional learning. Some learning happens. Parents are happy when the grades come in. It looks good on transcripts to send off to universities.

Every day, more and more students learn about this 'secret' formula to acing exams. Every day, the competition to do well in exams heightens. Every day, university entrance acceptance rates fall.

As a relatively young nation, Malaysia must not allow itself to be caught in the same trap many developed nations now find themselves in. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but mistakes are there to be learned from.

One mistake is the tendency for students to remain trapped in the hamster wheel of standardised teaching. Future Problem Solving provided a solution for me to break away from this. Of course, this might be impractical while universities still require standardised grades. But, at the same time, I would consider it a sad waste of potential for a child to be solely exposed to a standardised learning environment.

The new system my parents recommended to me, and you can choose your own, was the Future Problem Solving Program. It afforded a system where I could break the bounds of mark schemes and their strictly defined answers and instead learn in an unconventional system that bears much greater resemblance to the real world. A program like this teaches a whole new system of thinking. There is a leap in personal re-invention instead of the small incremental steps in personal development that plague the conventional, standardised exam factory.

It is this re-invention that is so important. Teach a child knowledge and you help him learn for his next exams; teach a child how to think and you help him learn for a lifetime.

Alexander Long,

Alex participated in the Future Problem Solving Program while studying in Malaysia. He is currently completing his undergraduate studies at Stanford University.

