THE HUMANITIES TEACHER
IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

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On my way to work this morning, like most other mornings, I turned on the car radio and listened to interesting bits of news. This morning, our RCS NewsRadio 93.8 presenters, Eugene Low and Geraldine Tan were carrying on about a special study done in the United States which said that couples who make love 2 – 3 times a week develop immune systems which protect them against common colds. This was just before the 7 o’clock news bulletin. Our presenters joked a little about this research finding and also stated that those couples who therefore think that the more sex they have the less their chances of catching a cold beware: the same study apparently also pointed out that more than 3 times a week could make couples, indeed, more vulnerable to colds!!! I laughed with Geraldine and Eugene and then the serious news came on.

Frequently in my talks to school students I tease them about the beauty of this language called English which we nowadays have to study because, really, that’s the way to go! English is, after all, the language of and for the future and hence our mastering it is well-advised. We might, though, note that it is basically American English we are talking about when we think of the future language: how the English sensibility is going to acknowledge this (for there is little to be done to the contrary) is still to be seen. I doubt if the English, like the French, would want to declare wrong the use of certain Americanisms; the English are a very strategically accommodating people and so they will, most likely, accept the inevitability of their language going American and have a good laugh.

Anyway, in my teasing students about English I often resort to that old, old cliché, *a chicken and egg question* and I passionately say to these students that I am very upset about this statement and with this statement because it does not at all give me face! – it denies my identity and by implication my sexuality for in all of this chicken-and-egg thingys where does the rooster come in? Does the rooster, that old forgotten sod, not feature at all in chicken and egg discussions? My students, predictably, always laugh and find this very funny. My

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teacher-colleagues find it funny and also corny and I know many (a lot of them having been
my students at some point or other) say, "Ai yiah, that’s typically Kirpal. He’s always doing
that." And they are right, of course, for I do tease and I do provoke.

What Eugene Low and Geraldine Tan joked about this morning would have been
unthinkable even 10 years ago; indeed ten years ago, there was no NewsRadio 93.8. Things
have changed, the times are more relaxed and people now realise more fully the value and
virtue of a good, hearty laugh. At a dinner three days ago, a young writer said that he felt very
silly not knowing much about English or European history. The context was some allusion to
the strife during the reign of Elizabeth the Virgin Queen. I listened to him and then assured
him that it was okay that he didn’t know more English history since the average person of his
age in England would probably not know much of this either but more to the point he/she
would not know anything of Singapore’s history but that he/she would not therefore feel silly.

I have begun in this vein to make one major point for the Humanities teacher of the
future: he/she must be someone who is open, ready and prepared to entertain all manner of
discussion. By ‘open’ here I do not simply mean accepting everything. No, what I do mean is
that he/she will have to be flexible and ready to enter into and engage with students from
many different and differing viewpoints. There will be many different takes on many, many
issues and questions and the traditional and received notions of what is right and acceptable
will give way to the new ethos of the appropriate and most discussions will view as
appropriate angles of analyses which today shock or confound us. Thus talking about the
relationship between making love and catching a cold would have to be seen as perfectly
acceptable; just as my teasing about the rooster will have to be seen as perfectly relevant to a
sound discussion of English. Both constitute examples of areas of conflict, conflict in terms of
what value-judgements we make about these matters. In a Knowledge-Based economy the
Humanities teacher will have to realise that his or her judgements/values are merely one among hundreds and that the students have full access to these many hundreds.

Information technology is already altering our lifestyles in ways which we are only slowly starting to fathom. In the future such Information technology is going to be energetically interactive, thus making it even more problematical for the teacher to maintain a position, any position, for long without being subjected to critical scrutiny by the more enterprising of his students. More than the science or maths teacher the humanities teacher will have to be fully confident and secure in his own beliefs and convictions. Subjects like History and Geography have already changed radically from the days when people like myself and Victor Savage studied them. In fact sometimes I find it hard to separate these subjects since more and more we are moving into a holistic, a global frame of reference. Thus where do we position the question of Migration -- under History or under Geography?

Maybe we position that interesting topic under Literature; after all Literature has -- and therefore probably can -- accommodate anything and everything! And it does. And it will. The humanities teacher of the future will have to move away from notions of the text; with the Internet, there would not be any more just one text between the covers of a book. If we think about it we quickly realise that on the internet, the text is, literally, endless and so its configurations. And the young will play around and with these configurations -- this game will make their learning and use of the technology exciting but for us, unless we change, this game will create a fit condition for the asylum. Many teachers will not be able to cope with the stresses that this new modality of learning/teaching is going to bring about and it behoves us to be prepared.

In the next millennium, as I see it, our teaching will have to roam and range over many different subjects, genres and historical and geographical frames of reference. Allow me to
illustrate with a simple, easy example: Lee Tzu Pheng's poem, *My Country and My People*, provides an immediate and relevant point for departure here:

My country and my people
Are neither here nor there, nor
In the comfort of my preferences,
If I could even choose.
At any rate, to fancy is to cheat;
And worse than being alien, or
Subversive without cause,
Is being a patriot
Of the will.

There are countless interpretations possible of these lines and in these lines and it would be foolish to choose to ignore this and pretend that these are just simple, straightforward lines which say precisely what they state. Question after question needs to be raised and asked: why, for example, are my people and my country neither here nor there? What does this mean anyway? Why is to cheat when one fancies and is there a vague Keatsian association there somewhere? What is the poet really saying about loyalty and patriotism. Why is being a patriot of the will worse than being subversive without cause? And so on and so forth. Then the humanities teacher will have to ask and discuss further issues: when was this poem written? Where was it written? Does it make a difference to anyone knowing that this was written in Singapore and by a Singaporean? Is it any less universal than *Hamlet* a dramatic poem which also questioned the wherefores of identity, loyalty and personal integrity.
The openness I referred to above will have to manifest itself in this type of keen questioning so as to make the lesson both valuable and interesting. Our attitudes towards our students will have to undergo basic changes so that we become like them, fellow travellers on a journey called education where we as teachers enjoy the sole privilege of being paid for professionally doing a job which could, given the wherewithal of IT, etc, be done by almost any one of our students. Quantitative learning will give way to qualitative critiquing and often we will be challenged and so irked by the more adventurous of our students who, breaking parameters of mere formal reticence, will be prepared to push us to our limits through subtle probing. Agility of mind, the capacity to think about an issue from many points of view, will be prized and rewarded; monolithic perspectives will be debunked (indeed they are being debunked even now) and our sensitivities will be the key features of our teaching which our students will pick up.

As we move towards a globalised millennium we will have to be ever watchful about what we try to teach in our schools and colleges. Secrecy will be a thing of the past; we will have to be ready to defend the positions we take in the classroom, whether real or virtual. I think we in Singapore have for long enjoyed the status of privacy which has protected us from awkward and irksome questions. But not so for long. These days every country feels it has the right to question the practices of every other country in the name of freedom and transparency. Of course we will do our best to always reserve the right to admit this but our positioning in the world of tomorrow largely depends on the ways in which we handle this provocative and thorny question of openness. Even as I am giving this speech people around us are questioning fundamentally each other’s rights to be sheltered, to worship, to feel good and secure. Even now the Americans and the Chinese are telling each other to mind their own business and mend their ways. Even now the wires are rushing news about the latest research in changes to the technology of pigmentation which will, in less than a decade, allow
everyone of us to change our skin colour as we see fit. Even now our own policy makers are thinking how best to cope with the stringent demands of a creative market-place for which we may not have fully prepared ourselves. With an Information-driven instrumentality which will allow everyone access to what we are doing we will have to be extra-sensitive to our neighbours, to the ways in which we discuss history, geography, even literature. How, for example, should we reassess those incidents in our colonial past frequently described as riots uprisings but which we know were brave attempts to kick the British rulers out? How do we talk about the movements of our peoples to places like Christmas Island, the Andaman Islands - were these states of exile or states of enterprise? How do we respond to a question such as: tell me, teacher, if you were my age, would you be a true nationalist or a true cosmopolitan?

These are hard, very hard, questions to give answers to. But they will become more and more familiar. In recent months we in Singapore have been very troubled by our delicate relationships with our neighbours. Creative ways of handling these delicate issues are being sought while at the same time we are conscious of just how differently the Malaysians and the Indonesians think and feel. How and in what ways does our study of the history, geography, literature, philosophy and sociology of these countries help us understand what we are going through today? I suspect the answer is a precarious "not enough" for we will be told that no matter what, the "politics" are different. So where do the counterpoints of the humanities meet with those thrown out by politics? At the core of our training to be effective teachers of and for tomorrow lies this underlying question of political outlook and political practice. We must, particularly as humanities teachers, confront this issue for we know more than most just how right that old Aristotle was when he said that Man is a political animal. The future student will be politicised; he/she will know heck of a lot more than we will, through surfing on the net and engaging in all manner of chat-lines. On the one hand it would be unwise to politicise our subjects, on the other it would be totally stupid to ignore the presence of a
politicised worldview. Willy-nilly the confrontation will take place: will we have the courage to stand up for those principles we hold especially dear? Or will our pragmatic selves dictate that we merely survive and co-exist, blow with the wind, even if it is an ill-wind that blows and carries us away?

About two centuries later the English still get irritated when they are reminded of what the great Napoleon said of them: England, said Napoleon, was a nation of shopkeepers. This shopkeeping mentality, this strange mercantile mindset is very rife here in our own nation. We are trying desperately to go beyond it but as a migrant people we find it hard to forget the memory of poverty, so money becomes especially valued. Some years ago, Mr Rajaratnam, the then Foreign Minister, said that Singaporeans know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Have times changed? Do we today truly understand the value of things? Or do we merely kid ourselves and mistake the superficial for the real, taking comfort in the knowledge that so long as we have money, i.e. the means of escape, we are okay?

Our students are not going to think in terms of escape; no grass is going to be greener per se; in the globalised economies of the future, the amazonic woman doing business through her laptop is going to be as efficient as the guy in the grey suit in downtown Los Angeles. Many are going to achieve their orgasms by switching on a device connected to their autonomic nerve. One in three is going to be over sixty years of age. Cloning is going to be a way of life, as is the borderless classroom. These new technologies are already here, with us and they are going to raise enormous issues for which we, as teachers, will not only have to prepare our young but ourselves. On Saturdays I teach a course entitled Literature & Technology and some of my students are right now working on projects which seek to explore the ways in which handphones have drastically altered communication between and among family members; the ways in which the widespread possibilities of test-tube babies will make redundant pregnancy which will in turn affect the growth of the mammary glands
which in turn will put an end to the very profitable and lucrative economy of menstrual pads and even contraceptives; the ways in which Singapore writers have, if at all, explored that very interesting relationship between the 24-hr work cycle in a space in which there is no night or day and the human beings who man these spaces. These are just some random examples of the kind of work now being undertaken by students and their findings are, without a doubt, going to influence attitudes even as these are being documented. Students today are on an adventurous voyage of real discovery and we must be ready for them.

We in the humanities have always prided ourselves in being the ones with the real culture genes: I submit that in the world of tomorrow, there is going to be precious little which is going to divide us from the non-humanities teachers per se. No, what will distinguish one teacher from another will be the attitudes and modes with which he/she conducts classes, encourages and excites students to learn more, go beyond the given to discover the new, the wondrous. These discoveries will be as exciting in the humanities as they will be in the sciences but creativity and critical thought will be the premium virtues. The confidence to think multi-laterally, cross-culturally, across the frames of history, geography, will be assets which will be highly valued, as will be the gentle tolerance of those who differ radically from our own positions. The usual stereotype of the humanities teacher is that he/she is a liberal; whatever that term means it usually means he/she is prepared to leave things ultimately the way they are because he/she understands the broader picture, unlike the scientist whose vision is narrow and tunnelled. Sad to say this is precisely the stereotype which will see the end of the humanities teacher – leaving things as they are is not going to be a feature of the next millennium and we might as well acknowledge this. Change and more radical change is the key to our adaptive existence and especially us in the humanities will now have to move away from traditional sanctuaries into the sanctuary of the new learner where real dialogue and multi-logue will dominate the process of teaching and learning. The adage Thinking Schools
and Learning Nation is a very carefully thought-out and challenging one and provides enough room for encapsulating the necessary agendas for real change in our thinking and teaching. I hope that as we move into the global world of the 21st century we will learn to be more resilient, less arrogant and more genuinely willing to listen.