



Revamping Malaysia's education system: Should our schools be boring?

Let's begin by stating the obvious: schools must be fun, and schools must be lively and dynamic. Heaven forbid that schools should become boring. This is because we believe boring schools means inefficient use of school time and resources and that learning has failed. We believe boredom is bad because it brings mental stagnation, and it makes our children hate school.



Research have shown we have misjudged boredom and that boredom is actually a necessary experience in learning (photo from www.gazamin.com/blog).

However, research are increasingly showing that we have misjudged boredom and that schools ought to be, well, boring. That schools should be boring appear counter-intuitive. How can this be? The Malaysian government has recently unveiled (yet another) Education Blueprint 2013-25 to bring the country's

education system out of its current quagmire, and it seems counter-productive and even scandalous to suggest our nation's schools should be boring.

Like most people, I believe schools should of course be less boring. Schools should also deemphasize rote learning because rote learning, in my opinion, is like us trying to compete with computers. We will lose all the time because computers can remember much more, and they can remember faster and more effectively than we can. And computers don't get tired or error-prone, unlike us.

However, I now have my doubts. Perhaps I have been too extreme in my stance. Yes, schools should be fun and exciting, and yes, rote learning is not learning *per se*, but schools do need some elements of boredom in them, and schools do need to place some importance on rote learning.

The article "The unbearable lightness of boredom" by Jeremy Mercer in The Intelligent Optimist (Issue 4, Vol. 11, Jul./Aug. 2013) is profound. Mercer argues that boredom has a bad reputation because boredom is associated with weakness or intellectual shortcoming. But boredom can instead unleash creativity and pro-social works and deliver positive outcomes.



"The unbearable lightness of boredom" by Jeremy Mercer in The Intelligent Optimist (Issue 4, Vol. 11, Jul./Aug. 2013).

Boredom is a simmering stage where the brains develops ways to keep itself engage and could spur creativity - such as when bored children develop storytelling skills and imaginative or make-belief plays. Playing tag, sword fighting, robot battles, castles and forts, fairies, and car and speedboat racings can often materialize out of bored children's minds.



Children often use their imagination for creative play such as swordfighting when they feel bored (photo from laundryamah.wordpress.com).

So important is boredom in triggering creativity and enhancing learning that Teresa Belton and Esther Priyadharshini, two early childhood experts, went as far to rally that boredom is a legitimate and necessary experience in school curricula. Astonishing. Boredom, they say, is a critical reflective potential. A child who cannot deal with boredom, they say, becomes flustered with higher education. Could it be that boredom teaches our children mental endurance, focus, and strength?

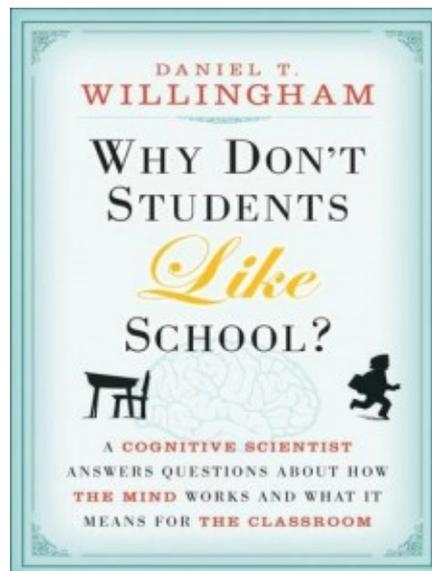


Left alone and feeling bored, children will soon find something to do (photo

from
www.creativityinstitute.com
).

Boredom is a necessary stage a person needs to go through to gain expertise in a particular field. Just as an athlete goes through the tedium and repetitive training in a gym or a piano player banging away the same musical notes repeatedly, a student requires the tedium and repetitive mental exercise of concentrating, memorizing, analyzing and interpreting facts, and accumulating knowledge.

Daniel Willingham, a cognitive psychologist, has written about how the mind works in his book “Why don’t students like school: a cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom”.



“Why don’t students like school?” by Daniel T. Willingham.



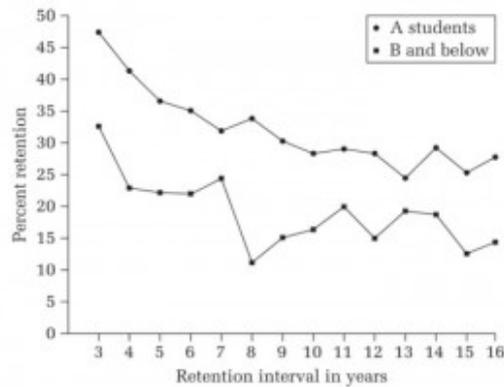
Daniel Willingham, author of “Why don’t students like school?” (photo from aands.virginia.edu).

Critical thinking such as reasoning and problem solving are essential skills that we wish to impart on our children. But Willingham argues that children cannot have these skills without first having a sufficient grasp of basic facts of a subject. This basic knowledge needs to be stored in the long-term memory and storing such information would require extended practice and repeated drilling.

Thinking is tied down to background knowledge, Willingham argues. Only when children have sufficient background knowledge can they recognize relevant facts, distinguish trends or patterns in information, and understand what is required to solve a given problem.

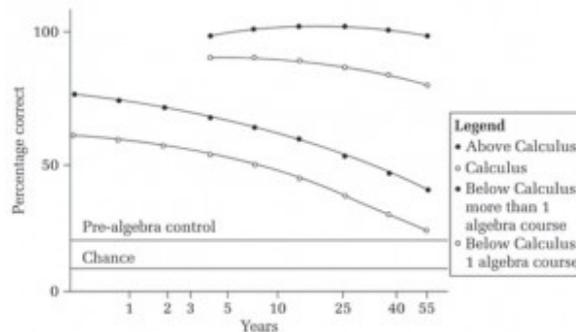
In his book, Willingham cites research where students who have background knowledge will remember and learn more than those without. Knowledge begets more knowledge. Students find it easier to remember a material if they already know something about the subject than if they had not. In other words, having some background knowledge reduces the learning curve and becomes a foundation upon which more knowledge will accumulate.

Furthermore, research has also shown that practice makes memorization more permanent. Students who had taken a single course on psychology, for instance, were tested on their knowledge retention three to sixteen years later. Results showed that regardless of what grades these students had obtained for the psychology course, all these students showed a steady decline in their knowledge retention over the years. This same trend was also observed for students who had taken a single algebra course. However, students who had gone on to take more math courses (such as calculus) saw much less decline in their knowledge retention even after 55 years later! In other words, through practice, especially over long term, knowledge retention became increasingly more permanent.



Graph showing forgetting of course material. From "Very long-term memory for information taught in school" by J. A. Ellis, G. B. Semb, and B. Cole in *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 23, 419-433, Figure 1, p. 428. Copyright © 1998. Reprinted with permission from Elsevier.

Knowledge retention falls steadily over time despite what grades the students had obtained for a course they had taken once years ago.



Graph from Bahrick & Hall. From "Lifetime maintenance of high school mathematics content" by H. P. Bahrick and L. K. Hall in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 110, 20-33, Figure 1, p. 25. Copyright © 1991 by the American Psychological Association.

Practice makes knowledge retention increasingly more permanent. Students who had taken an algebra course for only once forgot increasingly more of what they had learned over time. But students who had gone on to take other maths courses (such as calculus) retained more of what they had learned for longer periods, even after 55 years.

Willingham's book reminds us that there is no shortcut for effective learning. At the end and regardless of whatever new or exciting teaching methods we used in

schools, there is still no escape from practice, drilling, and memorization in learning. A good learner is still one who works hard and *experiences boredom*.

A child who cannot deal with boredom ... becomes flustered with higher education.

Many people are unaware that boredom can also act like a filter, enabling us to focus and appreciate the beauty and profundity of an experience or phenomena. When our children lives are fed with a steady diet of TV and computer games, this cacophony of dynamic excitement distracts or obscures our children from focusing and appreciating a particular learning experience. Boredom provides that focus needed in children to receive and respond to learning experiences which could otherwise be drowned out by excessive stimulations.

But isn't boredom associated with negative and anti-social behaviour? Yes, bored kids do get into trouble by being involved in drugs, crime, and other dangerous behaviors. But the same energy that drives bored kids into trouble can also drive these kids into positive, pro-social activities. Research have shown that, when given meaningful opportunities, bored people will more likely donate money to charities or be involved in charity work than the control groups. In other words, boredom can be channelled into positive outlets.

My own experience have shown that I can be most creative - or at least most productive - when I am bored. Out of boredom in 2011, for instance, I started to write and publish in what soon became my most number of papers published in journals in one year. Likewise, it was out of boredom that I decided one day to write an academic book. This book took me nine months to complete, and I only got started because I was bored in 2006.

Meera Syal, the multi-talented British comedian, writer, playwright, singer, journalist, producer and actress, grew up in a small village. She often escaped from boredom by reading books, going for trips to the library, talking to people she would normally not engage with, or even learning to bake cakes from one neighbour. It was boredom and the lack of constant distractions during her childhood that Meera Syal now sees as crucial drivers to her creative development.



Multi-talented Meera Syal credits her boredom she experienced during her childhood for the development of her creativity (photo from www.bbc.co.uk).

So, yes, boredom has a bad reputation - but this is only because we have misjudged it. Channelled to good use, boredom can trigger creativity and break us out of our procrastination. Boredom teaches us concentration, endurance, and resilience, and it appears boredom is a necessary ingredient in our learning exercise.

"... children need to have stand-and-stare time, time imagining and pursuing their own thinking processes or assimilating their experiences through play or just observing the world around them."

- Teresa Belton, early childhood specialist

"All your intelligence comes into play when you are so bored you can't stand it any more."

- Lenore Skenazy, book author of "Free-Range Kids"



My Bella TV interview: Encouraging children to read, the importance of reading, and what to do with the reluctant reader

I was very fortunate to be invited to appear on Bella, a TV programme by ntv7, on my opinions about ways to encourage a reading habit in children, the importance of reading, and about reluctant book readers.

So, on Oct 13, 2013, 2:30 pm, my family and I made our way to the ntv7 studio in Glenmarie, Shah Alam. There we met the Bella TV crew and the lovely host, Daphne Iking.

Prior to the show, I was given a set of questions that *could* be asked by Daphne during the interview. The following are questions that were more-or-less asked during the pre-recorded show.

In your opinion, do magazine and comics book count as reading?

Yes, they do. If our children are reluctant readers, then it is better that they read comic books than nothing. But bear in mind that there are many types of reading materials. Comic books are only one such type. Each reading type has its own function and effectiveness in building what I call our “mental muscles”.



I was asked about ways to encourage reading in children, the importance of reading, what I thought about public libraries, and my experience as an educator at my university.

Some people join a gym or fitness club - or buy an exercise bike or treadmill - to build up their physical fitness level. They want to be healthier, to lose or even gain weight, or to build up their muscles. Likewise, reading is an exercise for our minds, to build up our mental muscles; that is, our mental facilities for better thinking skills.



Zachary and I are waiting in the visitors' lounge while the Bella TV crew prepare for the show. Zachary was amazingly calm!

Yes, reading gains us knowledge and builds up our language skills, but perhaps most people are unaware that reading also gains us comprehension, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and empathy over a wide range of issues, be they issues on social, economics, politics, environment, and science.

Reading makes us more open-minded, not so open-minded that our brains fall out, but open enough to understand that other perspectives to an issue exists, that world issues are seldom black-or-white as some people tend to see.

So, different reading materials have different effectiveness to train our mental muscles. Comic books are useful and fun, but, as parents, we need to encourage our children to also read more advanced texts, those with more complex ideas that will cause our children reflect more deeply on ideas.

We can introduce to our children more advanced reading materials that have the similar genre or theme as the comics our children love to read.

A good example is a news article I read some time ago. There was an award-winning book author who has an interesting past. As a child, he hated reading and would never read the books his mother bought for him. However, he loved playing football, so his mother, on a whim, bought him a book about football. That book triggered his reading passion. Suddenly, here was a book that he enjoyed reading because it was about football, in which he was passionate. He enjoyed reading so much that he started to write, and who would have guessed that many years later, he would go on to win a book award for young adult fiction.



Daphne Iking, the host of Bella TV programme by ntv7.



Daphne is asking the kids questions about their favourite reading books and why reading is important to them. Each child is from a different parent. Zachary is seated farthest away from Daphne, at the far right.

As an educator, how do you see your students? Do they read books that are other than those required (textbook)?

Unfortunately, students seldom read beyond than the provided lecture notes. Moreover, lecturers, such as myself, would be evaluated by the students on whether the provided lecture notes are suitably comprehensive. So, lecturers cannot just come to class and teach without lecture notes, as done by some lecturers in the past. This “no notes provided” lectures certainly cannot happen today.

Yes, I could force the students to read books by saying materials from one or more books would be tested in their exams. However, this coercion would work only until the exams. Once over, the students would stop reading books. In fact, such coercion would probably enforce the idea in students that reading books is only for exams - a detriment to lifelong learning skills which we wish to inculcate in students.

From your observation, do students who read have better command in English?

Well, reading books is not about English but about command of a language. Reading would certainly improve our language command in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and expression of ideas and thoughts. So, a person who reads a lot would certainly speak and write better.



I hope I got all my points across. It is not easy to highlight all the important points during my interview as time was rather limited.

But what drives English proficiency in students is typically the students' background. Local studies have shown that students living in urban areas and whose parents have higher socio-economic status would not only use English more but read more English-language books.

Some people use reading as a way to improve their English. When they tried to improve their English, there are some cases where people start to make fun of them (for showing off). What is your comment on that?

This is very unfortunate because it is true. According to a 2001 survey, less than 2% Malaysians (less than 400,000 people) use English as their first language. English is seen by many as a language used only by elite minorities or for

professional, official, or international purpose.

The Chinese see speaking English as abnormal, and someone who speaks English is said to be a “banana”: yellow on the outside but white inside.

I once had a Malay student who decided to speak English to her Malay friends. For her effort, she was seen as a pariah. Her friends felt uncomfortable to speak English among one another. The same goes for the Chinese.

I think this is the largest hindrance to increasing English proficiency among Malaysians. It isn't about lack of English teachers or lack of schools hours on learning English. Although Malaysians understand the importance of English, they are not willing to master the language due to social - and political - barriers.

Unfortunately, what we see in Malaysia is not unique to just this country. Philippines and Hong Kong also see declining competency in English despite their government efforts to encourage English usage and even making English a compulsory language course in schools.



In the last segment, all parents were brought in together for our final remarks. These parents are also bloggers about parenting and child care issues.

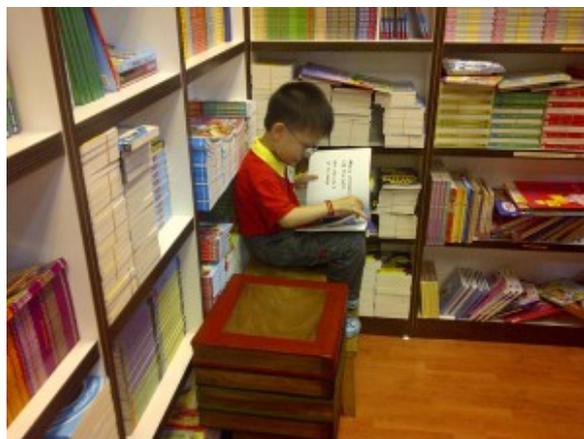
Do you see any significance difference between

students who like to read and those who don't?

Definitely. You can tell the difference between a person who reads and one who does not. And this difference is not subtle. A person who reads a lot will talk, speak, think, and behave differently than one who does not read.

One essential skill reading imparts is the ability to self-learn. As a lecturer, I am sometimes frustrated that I cannot count on books to help my students when they come to me with their problems. I cannot, for example, tell my students to read this or that chapter in a particular book. Students who do not have a strong reading habit suffer from some kind of mental block when they read text containing complex ideas. They may understand the individual words that make up the text but yet fail to understand what the whole text is trying to tell them.

In other words, a strong reading skill enables students to understand complex ideas. Research have shown that children who read a lot understand more complex ideas than children who do not read even if these children are computer or IT savvy.



The satisfying result of inculcating a reading habit in children is when they pick out their selected books from the shelves and start to read on their own — without coercion.

A fictional storybook can cost more than RM 30.

Do you think the price of books is a contributing factor of poor reading habit among children?

This is a common excuse people use for not reading. High price of books is only a small contributor to lack of reading among Malaysians. People are willing to spend so much money on buying the latest IT gadgets such as smartphones and tablets, but yet are unwilling to spend money on books.

Moreover, with their latest IT gadgets, they can buy eBooks which are much cheaper than print books, but do they buy these eBooks? Unlikely.

Public libraries are also available, and book sales are becoming increasingly common. So, the excuse that books are expensive does not hold water.

The real reason why Malaysians seldom read is reading is slow. Reading takes effort especially when reading text with complex ideas that forces us to reflect on its message. Reading is difficult because it is like exercising but for our minds. As some people do not like to physically exercise, some people will not like to read.

It is interesting to note that a baby can learn to speak without being taught. The baby can hear and learn to talk even without us teaching the baby. But reading must be taught. A baby cannot just learn reading on his or her own. Reading takes effort and it is hard work - but the returns are priceless and lasts a lifetime.



My books are this wide and this tall
... Zachary's amazing collection of
books! We started to read to him
since he was only a month old.

When it comes to reading, would you advise parents to encourage their kids to read light materials (Enid Blyton, Sweet Valley, and Harry Potter) or go for heavier and more informative materials (Shakespeare / biography), and why?

It is important that we do not force our children to read books that they do not enjoy reading. Reading should be a pleasurable activity and that our children do not associate reading books to only school work or exams.

But at the same time, we must ensure our children read a wide range of interests or issues. This will expand their outlook on life. We should try to encourage our children to read books on science, geography, and history.

There are so many good books out there that “teach” various important topics without making it too academic.

What is your opinion about the facility of public libraries in Malaysia? What are the things that need to be improved?

School and universities would be all right because these are places of learning. They would continue to see users who patronize these libraries for school or university work. However, public libraries would become obsolete if they continue as they are. Increasingly more books are in the digital format.

Even today, we see bookshops closing down or downsizing. So, in the future, I see a change in our libraries from those that carry printed books to those that carry books in digital format instead. No doubt we will witness an interesting future, to see how libraries evolve or adapt to changes.



Mom reading to Zachary in a bookshop. Ensure your child can see the pictures and words while you read to your child. As you read, point to the words you are currently reading so your child can track your reading.

This interview would be aired on Oct 29, 2013 (Tuesday) at 11:00 am on ntv7. You can also watch it for free on tonton.com.my.