

Students need to 'tinker' around to be creative

Philip Yeo tells his alma mater that competition is reality



by Alicia Wong

05:55 AM May 08, 2010

SINGAPORE - Faced with a chemistry teacher who was always absent, a young Philip Yeo and his secondary school classmates set up their own laboratory in his aunt's house, where they could brush up on the subject. Most of them ended up doing well for chemistry, recalled Mr Yeo, chairman of Spring Singapore.

But this was achieved only with the help of a "very tolerant" vice-principal, who allowed them the use of school equipment to screen movies. The money earned went to material for their laboratory.

Tolerance is crucial to developing talent, Mr Yeo highlighted at the second Fullerton-SJI Leadership Lecture on Friday and can also build diversity - another important aspect of developing human capital.

The special adviser for Economic Development (Prime Minister's Office) said: "So long as the man and woman can do the job, their idiosyncrasies I can tolerate." If an organisation is filled with people who talk and dress alike, "that would be terrible", he added.

The SJI old boy believes to foster creativity, teachers should not expect just "one answer" to a question, and students should be encouraged to "tinker around" and take things apart.

"If you're not inquisitive, you can't be creative," said Mr Yeo, who added that a child who is "obedient and doesn't give trouble to his parents" is unlikely to be creative. But how can developing human capital, innovation and diversity be done day-to-day, asked a teacher from SJI International.

In reply, Mr Yeo related his experience as a student: Classes were diverse and the better students helped the weaker ones.

"We had this atmosphere of helping our weaker classmates. We played together, worked together. There was no such thing as elite," he said.

As for the debate about whether SJI is becoming elitist, he told reporters: "My understanding is they're trying to improve standards to attract bright students, without neglecting the weaker students. I don't think there's a compromise there ... If you don't raise standards, you don't have good students; (and then) the good students can't help the weaker students."

Students today who apply for scholarships, however, are not very active beyond the classroom, he said. Back then, he recounted, "a lot of us were more involved in uniform groups".

Touching on his initiative to bring in A*Star scholars from various countries, Mr Yeo said: "If you don't bring the bright kids to Singapore to be the standard bearer, our Singapore kids will slack."

And for students worried about the additional competition, he stated, "competition is reality".

Mr Yeo also replied to a question on how to get scholars to remain in Singapore: They must feel "wanted". If Singapore fails to keep them, it is "our fault", he said.



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