Authenticity and the Problem of the Captive Mind

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"A captive mind is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems"
– Syed Hussein Alatas

Introduction

In his article, *Education and the Captive Mind* (1974), the late sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas, pointed out how dangerous the captive mind is as it plagues the developing world.[1] Caused by the domination of the colonial past, the 'captive mind', which is characteristically uncritical and imitative in manner, restricts one from having an own perspective of one's own reality, and hence impedes progress. It affects all fields of knowledge, though in this reflection, I shall restrict myself only to the field of pedagogy and assessment. The central question to my reflection would thus be this: How would the captive mind manifest itself in the field of curriculum and pedagogy?

Before proceeding, let us make clear what we mean by 'imitation'. This is because the term brings a mental picture to educators, especially those who concern themselves with educational psychology, social psychology and the cognitive sciences. This imitation is not as how was discussed by Dewey,[2] nor is it the same as how it was discussed by Bandura.[3] This 'imitation' concerns itself more with the way pedagogy (both formal and informal) and curriculum (both planned and experienced) imitates the content materials, assessment methods, cultures and values from the West without the serious need to consider the authenticity of it to the local context.

Alatas (1974) pointed out on the need to realize that there are negative implications of failing to distinguish between the two types of imitation: the *constructive* and the *negative*. *Constructive imitation*, if done rationally and critically, saves time and energy. This is because educational structures in developing societies need not re-invent everything. On the other hand, *negative imitation*, of which the captive mind is fond of due to the higher degree of ease it demands, fails to take into account other factors and premises present (such as the local cultural tradition) and the dictates of the local situation, and hence less authentic. This can therefore hamper a valid and more coherent analysis of pressing problems that the society is experiencing.

The Case of Geography

Take for example, the study of Geography. Societies in developing countries have a lot to learn from the body of knowledge that the West has gathered, especially since their colonial expeditions have made geography an important subject. One needs to know where they are going to colonize and what is there to exploit in the places that they are colonizing. When I was in school, I remembered memorizing which countries produce what, what the main exports of countries so far away are, and so on. I was taught how to read and draw maps. I cannot remember a single fact of that now; perhaps, because it has played no important role in my life.

Certainly, it would have been more authentic to be taught to memorize the names of all the golf courses in land-scarce Singapore. It is often highlighted that many nature areas in Singapore– areas necessary to support life, both ours and the rich biodiversity that exists here– have to be sacrificed for development purposes. Geography should teach us the names of the 23 golf courses and 3 driving ranges on the island and how to draw them on a map. Together, these golf courses utilize about 1400 hectares (which is about the size of 3 Yishun New Towns or about 1750 football fields) and represent 88% of land presently set aside for sports and recreation. Surely this is an important feature in Singapore's Geography for our future generations to know.

Likewise, I remembered being taught biomes and ecosystems in Geography. The

Great Barrier Reef is always an example of coral biodiversity. Perhaps, a more authentic content material would be highlighting the fact that the waters surrounding our own Southern Islands house a good deal of beautiful corals. The biodiversity that dwells within these habitats is very impressive indeed. Consider this: The Great Barrier Reef's 350,000 square kilometers of reefs has about 500 species of corals. Singapore's mere 54 square kilometers, has close to 200 species of corals from 55 genera. In other words, even though our reef size is only a tiny percentage of the Great Barrier Reef, we have almost half of the species of corals. Our reefs sustain a good diversity of other marine organisms too, such as gorgonians and nudibranchs. At least 111 reef fish species from 30 families have been recorded.[4]

The issue here, that is, the 'captive mind', as Alatas pointed out, is unable to discern between the universal and the particular. It imagines that all that one learns from the West and own colonial experience, are universally true and can therefore be applied anywhere else in the world. It assumes that what is good and valid in one place is also good and valid in another. It assumes that what is good and valid at one time in the past is also good and valid in the present. More importantly, it assumes that other parts of the world would or should develop in the same manner as the modern Western world. Thus, the captive mind refuses to entertain the possibility of other trends and pathways that the non-Western world can chart for its own.

A tell-tale sign of this internalized domination and captivity is this: Those of the captive minds are not able to create ideas not already present in the land of its captors but simply parrot what have been said. I cannot help but to find it strange to learn about Aeolian landforms and coastal dunes in California or to learn about podzols in Australia, when we have them both in nearby Pahang (a state in Malaysia).

It is important to note that neither is this reflection an advocacy to be anti-West, nor is it a discouragement to those from developing societies to learn from the West. On the contrary, it is an encouragement for us to learn from the West, but in a selective and constructive manner. What is happening in other countries, the lessons that they derive from them and the valuable experience that they have gained, serves as wonderful and rich resource that we in Singapore can draw insights from. But I think that there should exists courses, seminars and publications to raise awareness on the dangers of the captive mind and the need

to contextualize inherited knowledge for local use. Such educational measures should form a social pedagogy necessary to check the growth of the captive teaching community.

Conclusion

This pedagogy to liberate the educators in developing societies from the perils of captivity must be the concern of two groups of people: (1) the ruling elites, and (2) a group of emancipated thinkers within the educational community. The important role of the teacher with a 'healthy curriculum consciousness' in contributing to society's progress, has not received as much attention as the role of the teacher with a repertoire of classroom and assessment techniques.[5] For assessment to be authentic, we need also to start with the authenticity of the content. If not, the phenomenon of the captive mind will again distracts us from the real problems in our society and we will start to look again to the West, 'cut and paste' whatever they have tried for authentic assessments here in our local context, but without really scrutinizing our authentic problems.

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End Notes

[1] Read, Alatas, Syed Hussein. "Education and The Captive Mind," Paper presented at Asian Seminar Proceedings, March 1974. Edited by E.H. Medlin. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 1975, pp. 39-45. This whole reflection is written with this article in mind. The central question of my reflection would be: "How would the captive mind manifest itself in the field of curriculum and pedagogy?"

[2] Dewey discussed how imitation is an important mode for social direction. For elaborations, please read Dewey, J., (1990) *The School and Society. The Child and the Curriculum (An Expanded Edition. with a New Introduction by Philip W. Jackson)*, Chicago/London, The University Chicago Press, p. 26 to 35.

[3] Bandura (1986) pointed out that there are at least two other forms of modeling other than direct modeling, where students simply attempt to imitate the model's behaviour. Please read Eggen & Kauchak, *Educational Psychology: Windows on Classrooms*, 4th ed., Merrill, NJ, pp.220.

[4] Chou Loke Ming, "Status of Southeast Asian Coral Reefs," in C. Wilkinson, ed., *Status of Coral Reefs of the World: 1998* (Cape Ferguson: Australian Institute of Marine Science, 1998), p. 84; data on reef fish from Chou Loke Ming *et al.*, "Coral Reef Fishes of the ASEAN region," in C.R. Wilkinson, *Living Coastal Resources of Southeast Asia: Status and Management*, Report of the Consultative Forum, Third ASEAN-Australia Symposium on Living Coastal Resources (Townsville: Australian Institute of Marine Science, 1994), pp. 13-17.

[5] For a good discussion on the need for both techniques as well as consciousness, please read G. N. Posner, "Models of Curriculum Planning," in *The Curriculum, Problems and Possibilities*, eds. L. E. Beyer and M. W. Apple. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 96.