

Introduction

The art of teaching and learning is extremely fascinating. Who we are and what we are today, are in part, or some may argue, wholly a product of this intriguing process. In this enlightening and provocative look at the power of active and lifelong teaching, learning and relearning, the discovery and nurturing of multiple intelligences in children, and the innate potential in every human being for adaptation and change, the authors, through a skillfully crafted and highly engaging tale, challenge conventional thoughts and practices in education with their idea on how mindsets and things should change to realign the way we approach human capital development – especially our children, the next generation.

Despite ... stands by itself as the book that attempts to persuade both parents and teachers to look at the process of teaching and learning differently from the status quo. The authors also offer a view of what it takes to promote critical thinking in every 21st Century parent and teacher, and to make discovery, creativity, fun, and enduring success standard features of the art of teaching and learning for every family and community.

The novel in this book is sandwiched by a prologue and an epilogue. It is imperative that you read all three parts – the prologue, the story and the epilogue – for a wholesome understanding of the core ideas.

Enjoy.

Prologue

What American social activist, educator and politician John W. Gardner had to say about education is profound. Yes, even in today's context. For example, the man once said: "We don't even know what skills may be needed in the years ahead. That is why we must train our young people in the fundamental fields of knowledge and equip them to understand and cope with change. That is why we must give them the critical qualities of mind and durable qualities of character that will serve them in circumstances we cannot now even predict."

The former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under the Johnson Administration and counsellor to five other presidents, clearly knows what he is saying. And as the years unfold and as we move deeper into this new century, we cannot help but agree with Gardner for his foresight.

The 21st Century, folks, is definitely not for the weak and unprepared ... that much is clear.

So to thrive in this 'dog-eat-dog' environment, just being great academically is not good enough. Having an education system that is merely producing students to pass public examinations and qualify for a tertiary education in public institutions of higher learning is seriously flawed. There's obviously more to a wholesome education than having a brilliant report card. Then why are parents pressuring their kids to produce that brilliant report card?

Don't get us wrong here. We are not saying scoring well in exams

is bad. Our contention is simply ... having straight A's has nothing to do with the next generation being adequately prepared to work for organisations when they graduate or enter the job market – the real world – and contribute positively to the community they are part of in particular and mankind in general. This partly explains why many employers today are less concerned about employing staff with straight A's credentials.

But let's face it ... in everything we do, people only look at the bottomline, and in the case of education – results, results, results. To be more precise, the A's. "How many A's does your child have?" is a common question these days around the neighbourhood, isn't it? Do these folks really care if their children are totally ineffective later in life because their earlier focus was purely on producing A's? Have they ever wondered why so many graduates today are unemployable? If the situation is not quickly and systematically resolved, Malaysia will be saddled with a human resource nightmare! And that's putting it mildly. We dread to see that happen.

So what needs to be done? The way we teach and learn has to change.

For starters, learning is not a test on the ability of a child to memorise, but to solve problems. But our public school exams are targeted at testing the memory instead of the intelligence and problem solving capabilities of the child. There is a shortcoming in this approach – we get regurgitators; not children who will think critically and solve problems. Passive learning is no longer the answer to the 21st Century demand on human capital. And with the Communications Revolution in full swing and

the advent of information technology, the pressure to produce active learners is further compounded. We need to teach and nurture our children to be expert learners – to be people who will know where and how to extract the required information and utilise the right resources to solve problems. Is this not what creativity is all about?

But to bring out this creativity, a coach/teacher is needed to inculcate active learning and enhance the results of learnt concepts. This learning initiative – which we have passionately called R.E.A.L (**R**esult **E**nhancing through **A**ctive **L**earning) education – is an experiential learning concept that focuses on the processes that facilitate the development of dynamic interpersonal skills, individual creativity, problem-solving skills and leadership qualities. It is, by no means, a new learning concept.

Then, what's so exciting about it?

In the R.E.A.L approach to education, learning is active and it concentrates on enhancing what's important – the child's ability to be resourceful; to think out of a box. It puts the child in the driver's seat, so to speak. The coach/teacher is the facilitator. His primary job description: to guide. He points the child to the right direction. He listens and he encourages. He is also trained to decipher each child's unique abilities and multiple intelligences in order that they may be groomed to their fullest potential. This approach puts the responsibility of organising what is to be learnt in the hands of the child. It incorporates a diverse range of teaching styles and methods to promote active learning and is designed to help a child develop into a well-rounded individual.

And even at the risk of sounding clichéd, we will still say it. We strongly believe in the development of a holistic individual. If there is a time for the creation of such an individual, it's now. Which is why we are of the opinion that our education curriculum should be both utilitarian and vocational in nature. As such, the emphasis in the mastery of languages, science, mathematics, information technology and the creative arts as well as the promotion of entrepreneurial skills is paramount. Through this new dimension of learning, we are hopeful that it will provide an ideal learning environment for our children. By using the holistic approach, we believe we will be able to cover the intellectual or academic as well as the physical, social, and moral aspects of a child's development.

Globalisation, liberalisation and the ubiquity of the Internet are also rapidly changing the way we live, work and play. In a world where about the only thing that's constant is change, active learning is imperative. And it (active learning) is probably our only salvation to global marketplace competitiveness and continuing progress as a nation.

We strongly believe in a system that encourages the child to **e**xplore, **e**xperiment and **e**xperience – the three E's. But more often than not, the three E's are methodically stifled, especially in our current education system. Children are currently not taught to ask questions, see a problem from a different perspective or do critical thinking. The current emphasis on the three R's – **r**eading, **r**iting and **r**ithmetic – is important, but extremely rigid. Our children should not only be graded on their abilities in the three R's. This is not only highly fallacious, but also undoubtedly biased. We clearly need to venture beyond this approach to learning.

How's this for thought: 3Es + 3Rs = R.E.A.L. That folks ... is the very essence of our R.E.A.L philosophy to education. Really, think about it – 3Es + 3Rs – is a potent mix. This blend of skills, we believe, will liberate our children's minds for a more meaningful learning experience. Nothing beats living the learning. Where learning is fun, living the learning is easy. But we seem to have overlooked the fact that learning is naturally a simple and active process. It involves putting our children into situations, which compel them to read, speak, listen, think deeply and write.

And over the years, we complicated things. We, intentionally or otherwise, set unnecessary boundaries to learning. We dictate, in the name of progress and development, what our children should and should not learn. We also tell them how, where and when to learn. And we even rationalise with them the reasons why we have structured their learning process that way. In the course of this 'madness,' we inhibit our children's most natural instinct – their insatiable learning capacity, which is a tragedy indeed.

In the conventional approach to teaching, most class time is spent with the teacher talking and the students passively listening and watching. Such teacher-centred instructional methods have increasingly been regarded as less effective to instructions that engage active learning, in which students solve problems, answer questions, devise questions of their own, discuss, explain, debate, or brainstorm during class.

Hence the R.E.A.L charm.

Its impact to your child's learning is obvious – whether we are measuring short-term mastery of concepts and languages, long-term retention, or depth of understanding of subject matters,

acquisition of critical thinking or creative problem-solving skills, formation of positive attitudes toward the subject being taught or level of confidence in knowledge or skills. The magic of R.E.A.L is actually in the interactive instructional techniques. Here, the role of the teacher or more appropriately – coach – is key.

To effectively illustrate the R.E.A.L philosophy, we thought a nicely crafted and engaging tale would be appropriate. After all, everybody loves a good story. Hence, *Despite ...*, a fictitious account of a journalist who learns what it means to be a lifelong student and teacher.

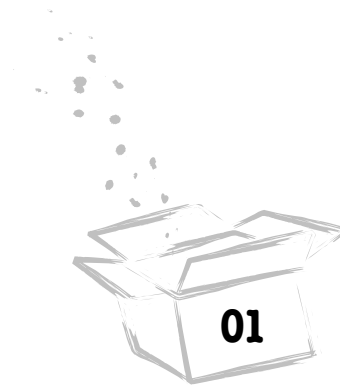
Adam Monteiro is epileptic. A bitter childhood has driven him to conceal his illness in adulthood, by reinventing himself into a hardhearted, ruthless reporter. Coupled with his gift for writing, his new personality has helped him carve an illustrious career. Before long, his success convinces him that this is his true self. Then his perfect world changes when he accepts his editor's challenge to interview the tsunami survivors on Thailand's Phi Phi Island.

Adam struggles to extract stories from the survivors and almost gives up, when a new friend takes pity on him and shows him how empathy goes further than apathy. Adam gets his story, but his editor unexpectedly discovers his epileptic condition and demotes him. Furious, Adam resigns and returns to the island to pursue a new job opportunity. Unfortunately, he's too late.

With no job and no money, he is forced to play pre-school teacher to four Thai children. Throughout the next few months, he stumbles along in a teacher's shoes. Then one day he realises, to his amazement, that he has also played the role of student. He was learning himself!

This book is not so much fiction, as it is a guide to parents and pre-school teachers. The story attempts to illustrate how the R.E.A.L approach to teaching and learning can be woven into our children's lives, both within and outside the classroom setting. It also serves to challenge its readers to open their eyes to the many ways in which children learn (through their multiple intelligences) and emphasizes the need to plant the hunger for knowledge deeply in them.

We believe *Despite ...* should be enjoyed as a story and used as a guide in helping children blossom and be all that they can be. Read it, absorb the 'teachings' and practice them on both your children and yourself. After all, *it is only when we know how children learn, can we know how to teach them.*



The demon was back. And he wasn't prepared.

The familiar nauseating odour entered the makeshift shelter and shot straight up his nostrils like a pinch of wasabi. His stomach heaved.

“Not now,” he pleaded, but the words only rang in his mind. “Not here. Please”

Joanna Keane was saying something to him, but her voice sounded disembodied and she looked like she'd just stepped off the set of *The Coneheads*. He desperately wanted to shut out the image, but his eyes insisted on staring it down. Joanna was still talking. The odour was getting stronger.

Now Joanna was looking at him expectantly. He continued staring at her. He saw her puzzlement turn to concern and eventually alarm.

Just a few minutes more.

She began shouting for Samantha. A large girl thundered into the makeshift shelter. She took one look at him and said something to Joanna, who hustled four children out the doorway. Samantha was calm. Had she seen this before?

After what seemed like eternity, the odour disappeared, his hearing returned and his stomach settled. Adam sat down shakily.

This time the demon had stayed for a full ten minutes.



The world was brought to its knees at 9:37AM on December 26, 2004. The digits burned themselves into Adam Monteiro's memory because it was the exact time the headboard of his bed began slamming into the wall of his Taman Desa apartment. Zorro, his fighting fish, thrashed wildly in the fishbowl on the side table. The tall Ikea lamp beside it shuddered violently.

Adam scrambled off the bed, feeling the tremors zigzagging up his legs as his feet hit the floor. Grabbing his wallet and mobile phone, he pulled on a pair of jeans, begged Zorro for forgiveness, and shot out the front door. The entire block resonated with panicked shouts and screams.

Almost half Desa Tower's residents were already milling in the outdoor car park and more were streaming from various stairwells. The tremors had clearly caught some in awkward situations. Adam couldn't help grinning as he surveyed his surroundings.

A woman in an oil-splattered apron waved a wooden spatula as she chatted animatedly to another lady, whose wet hair was making tiny puddles around her feet. A young man blotted shaving foam off the right side of his half-shaven face and an elderly lady unwound her hair from hot pink rollers. From where he stood, he could hear snatches of their conversations. An earthquake and a terrorist attack were the prime suspects. Fear and confusion were the reigning emotions. But Adam only felt excitement and a pure rush of adrenalin.

He stared hard at each apartment block, half-hoping to spot a telltale crack or two. If the building collapsed it would be his best story this year. Definitely good enough to win this year's Asian Feature Writing Award. He began mentally crafting his opening paragraph.

“Adam! Jom mamak. Very hot here! I'm dying for a teh-o-ais-limau!” His computer genius neighbour Marzuki Bakri clapped him on the shoulder, causing him to jump. Adam shook his head, his eyes still glued to the building.

“You go ahead-lah, Zuki. I'm gonna lepak here for a while.”

Marzuki sighed. “You ni. I know why you wanna lepak here. Nak scoop, kan?”

He leaned towards Adam and whispered in his ear, “Eh, no need to stare so hard. The building won't collapse. Probably a blast at some construction site-lah.”

“Hello. It's Boxing Day. No one's working-lah,” Adam said, finally

turning to Marzuki. “This could be a big story and I want it.”

“You’re crazy. Even if the building collapses, you think you can cover the story? You live here-lah. You’ll be too sakit hati to write anything.”

“That’s why you’re not a journalist,” Adam retorted. “There’s no such thing as being too sakit hati to write. First law of journalism – never let emotion get in the way of ambition.”

“Huh? What?”

“Don’t. Mix. Personal. With. Professional,” Adam said. “I don’t. That’s why I’m so good.”

Marzuki rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Let’s just go-lah!”

Before Adam could answer, the *Mission Impossible* theme song shrieked from the depths of his jeans pocket. His editor’s name flashed furiously on the Sony Ericsson T610 screen.

“Saved by the bell,” Adam grinned, flipping it open. “Hey Bernard. You’ll never believe what’s happening here.”

But Bernard Foo’s news was evidently more groundbreaking. Adam’s only other word was ‘Okay’ before he hung up, his face the colour of ash.

“Oi. What’s wrong?” Marzuki asked.

Adam looked at him, his left hand automatically rising to his

mouth. He gnawed on a jagged thumbnail.

“There was a tsunami this morning,” he said tonelessly. “Phi Phi island is gone.”

“And,” Marzuki prompted.

“John’s in Phi Phi.”

“Oh God. Is he okay?”

“Don’t know.”

* * * * *

As Valerie Monteiro prepared the coffee in the kitchen, she cast frequent glances at the seven silent figures in the living room. Her husband Matthew, her eldest child Kate, Kate’s husband David De Costa and their toddler Amanda, her youngest child Gary, Adam and his new girlfriend Lisa Rajkumar.

Her eyes rested on Adam and she felt a pull at her heart. He was attacking his nails again, a childhood habit she had tried to break, but which she knew he only succumbed to when he was nervous, uneasy or deep in thought. And right now it was probably all three.

Adam and John Seetho’s paths had crossed ten years ago on Mount Kinabalu, as both of them stood half-frozen in the bitter cold, cameras poised, waiting for the sunrise. They exchanged pleasantries through clattering teeth, snapped pictures of each

other against the brilliant background and sealed their friendship over scalding hot coffee from Adam's battered aluminum flask. The next weekend, they were hiking in Negeri Sembilan's Gunung Datuk. The weekend after that, they pooled their money and invested in a full set of camping gear.

Valerie had pleaded, argued and rationalised, but Adam kept packing his backpack every other weekend. He was pushing himself too far, she had said. He was pushing himself so he could go far, he had replied. Each time they drove off in John's black Ford Escape, she would stand at the doorway watching until the car disappeared from sight, feeling like the mother of a soldier going to war. And just as she had thought it couldn't get any worse, Adam announced he and John had decided that their life's calling was in journalism.

Three years later and string of credentials under their belts, they marched forth and wound up at *The Straits Tribune* where Adam was a news reporter and John, a sportswriter. Valerie had almost burst into tears when he told her.

"Adam, you can't! You'll get yourself killed."

"I'd be killing myself faster if I had a desk job."

"But how will you cope? You need to travel and you can't drive."

"So I'll take a taxi."

"What if something happens?"

“Then it will happen. It’s not like life will be perfect if I sat behind a desk.”

“But at least ...”

“Mum. Enough. I’ve taken the job. Just have faith, okay. I know how to take care of myself.”

From then on, she had assigned John, albeit unfairly, to be the bearer of bad tidings if anything should happen. But the demon she feared was silent. After the first year, Adam ignored her pleas and moved out. By that time, he had become almost a stranger to her. It was as if the demon’s silence had made him bolder, goaded him into believing he was invincible, tricked him into thinking that brazenness would keep it at bay.

Valerie watched as Adam slowly morphed into the journalist she never dreamt he could be – ruthless and emotionless. The kind of journalist who would have no qualms sticking a tape recorder under the nose of a accident victim’s distraught mother and asking her questions that would play in her nightmares for a long, long time. The rewards came in bigger and better stories, but she always wondered if it was possible to be both proud and ashamed of her own child.

Only one thing hadn’t changed. John. He had reassured her that while Adam could seem callous at times, he was still the same boy she’d raised. She hadn’t believed him, but appreciated the assurance.

Yes, John was more than family. Which more than explained the

mournful expressions in the living room. But she was not going to allow them to behave like John was dead. Picking up the coffee tray, she marched into the living room.

“Stop looking like he’s not coming back!” she ordered, setting down the tray and distributing the coffee cups. “I’m also worried. But no news could be good news.”

Adam managed a smile.

“You’re right, Mum,” he said, reaching out to gratefully squeeze her hand. “He’s probably helping the rest of the world and forgot to call.”

“Wouldn’t he call his parents first?” asked Gary in puzzlement. Adam shook his head.

“They’re camping in Australia. I doubt they’ve even heard what happened yet.”

Kate set down her half-full coffee cup and stood up. “Adam, I have to go,” she said regretfully.

“Are you going to the Malaysia Aid office?” Lisa asked. She greatly admired Kate’s philanthropic nature, but Lisa’s contribution to society lay in her gift for teaching. She had just completed her doctorate in education and was eager to start ‘shaping young minds’ as her lecturers put it.

Kate nodded. “Yup. We’ve got tonnes of emergency supplies to pack. Let me know when John calls, okay?”

Before Adam could answer, the *Kill Bill* theme song trilled through the room. Everyone's head snapped in its direction. Adam snatched up his phone. "John! Thank God! How are you? Where are you?"

Kate sat back down and they watched Adam pace the room. He never uttered a word, but every now and then stopped to close his eyes, as if steeling himself against the horror John was unraveling on the other end. Finally he said, "I'll call Bernard now. Hang in there, okay. I'll see you soon."

Adam hung up and looked at the expectant faces around him. Sinking back onto the sofa, he took a gulp of coffee and sighed.

"He swallowed a lot of water, but he's okay. He was diving during the tsunami. Apparently that's what saved his life. I need to call Bernard. We have to get John back."

Kate stood up again. Kissing her husband and daughter good-night, she promised to be home by seven the next morning.

"Can I drop by the headquarters tomorrow Kate?" Adam asked. "I want to interview a few people on the aid we're providing."

"Sure. I'll inform the next shift. Keep me updated on John's situation. Thanks for dinner, Mum. See ya guys!"

Adam dialled Bernard's number. He picked up halfway through the first ring.

"Macha, you better tell me John called," he said. Adam smiled. Six years of working with Bernard and the Indian accent still amused

him. Born and bred in Sentul, the only hints of Bernard's Chinese roots were his passions for *bak kut teh* and mahjong.

"He just called. He's fine, but we need to get him home. Can you do anything?"

"Well, some Datuks owe me favours. But macha, this is a fantastic story! If John's back tomorrow, I want you to interview him."

"Interview him?"

"Ya-lah! The dude just survived a tsunami, man! Our readership will fly! Maybe next month all of you will get a raise."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Adam began, but Bernard cut him off.

"Get the story first then we'll talk. Okay, I need to call the big-shots. See you tomorrow." The line went dead.

Adam could almost hear his editor rubbing his hands in glee at the unexpected good fortune of having his own journalist among the tsunami survivors. He'd bet his next paycheck that at that very moment Bernard was calculating the potential rise in readership and profits.

"Adam, please tell me you're not going to interview John," Lisa said anxiously.

"Of course, I am. It's a strong story. We'll be the only paper to have it," Adam replied.

“Unbelievable!” Gary exploded. “The guy just went through hell and all you’re thinking about is a stupid story. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Adam answered calmly. “Like I said, it’s a good story. Don’t worry-lah, John will understand. He would have done the same thing.”

Gary was about to retort when Valerie spoke.

“No he wouldn’t. He would have the sense to leave you alone. Stop being like this, Adam. You’ve already won. Stop fighting.”

A startled silence fell over the room. Lisa stared at Valerie in bemusement. Adam’s jaw tightened. Matthew cleared his throat.

“Well, I’m sure Adam knows what’s best” he said diplomatically.

Valerie shook her head in silent disagreement, as she began clearing the coffee cups. Adam took Lisa’s hand and rose.

“Okay people, we’re making a move,” he said. “I’ll let you know when John gets back. See you Sunday.”