

THE BIG IDEA: Stop being the sage on the stage

FROM 15 years of crafting education policies for the British government, including being chancellor of two universities, Lord David Puttnam says that teachers have to change the way they prepare students for life as follows:

- Start the new school year by analysing the strengths and weaknesses of every child in your class. Leave aside for a moment concerns about whether they can read or count as well as you would like them to do.

Instead, once you have determined

what they are best and worst at, encourage them to be great at what they are clearly good. And worry less about making them competent in subjects in which they are clearly not interested.

Lord Puttnam understands that this is easier said than done because existing education systems are structured in complex ways. But he says the strengths-weaknesses analysis is still valuable for identifying a child's innate abilities that will help him or her remain employable for life.

- Accept that you do not know a lot

about everything, so change the way you teach from "I tell you what to do, so do it" to "I can help you do what you want to do and I will support you such that you learn meaningfully".

At the same time, invite external experts on subjects that your students want to learn more about, to talk to your class occasionally. This will give students a better idea of how their interests play out in the real world.

- Actively encourage your charges to be fearless. Ask them regularly: "What would you do if you had nothing to fear?"

Teaching the teachers

Multiple Oscar-winning British film-maker David Puttnam is now campaigning for teachers everywhere to stop dictating to their students and start having dialogues with them



By CHEONG SUK-WAI
SENIOR WRITER

WHEN British education policy-maker David Puttnam visited a school one day in 1998, he was aghast to find a rusty teaspoon in its staff room with a piece of plaster on it with the words: "Mr Jones. Do not touch."

Worse, says Lord Puttnam, the Mr Jones in question was not a quirky person. His colleagues wrote their names on their individual tea bags, fearful that others would nick them.

Recalling this to me last Saturday at the Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts here, the 72-year-old says: "Of the three careers I've had - advertising, cinema and education - that was the greatest shock I've had."

"These teachers were working in conditions which no other professional sector in Britain would have tolerated for a moment. Yet they thought that was the way it was."

You may know him better from his films which won 10 Oscars in all, including *Midnight Express* (1978), *Chariots Of Fire* (1981) and *The Killing Fields* (1984).

But since 1998, the Labour supporter has been helping Britain overhaul the way it teaches, after being invited by then Education Minister David Blunkett to arrest the rapid attrition among teachers.

His big idea, then, is that the entire culture of teaching as everyone knows it has to change, by getting teachers to stop dictating to their charges and start having lively classroom dialogues with them.

"It's not just about literacy and numeracy," he stresses. "It's about teaching everyone to be agile, adaptable and resilient."

He was in town last week to speak at the inaugural World Academic Summit, which was co-organised by the Nanyang Technological University and university ranking body Times Higher Education.

He also gave a talk at Lasalle-SIA, whose film school is named after him and whose stu-

dents he teaches, mainly through video-conferencing from his home in Skibbereen, Ireland.

For five years, he also advised the Media Development Authority here.

But back to teaspoons and tea bags.

"The level of infantilism was ridiculous," huffs Lord Puttnam, who began boosting teachers' morale by founding Britain's National Teaching Awards in 1998 and then the National Teaching Council in 2000. The humble married father of two notes sadly that Britain knighted its first teacher in 2008.

To change teaching culture, he organised a swish roadshow for them to spread the message that they had to change the way they taught, and the way they thought about their job. He recalls: "We gave them nice coffee and chairs. They couldn't believe that they were being treated like adults. And they were the people in whom we were placing our whole future."

He sympathises greatly with them because "they are attempting to teach a generation of people about a world they themselves don't understand".

In contrast, he says, when he put himself through night school in the 1960s, he was convinced that his skills would last him for life. These days, he notes, a person would be lucky if his skills are relevant after 10 years.

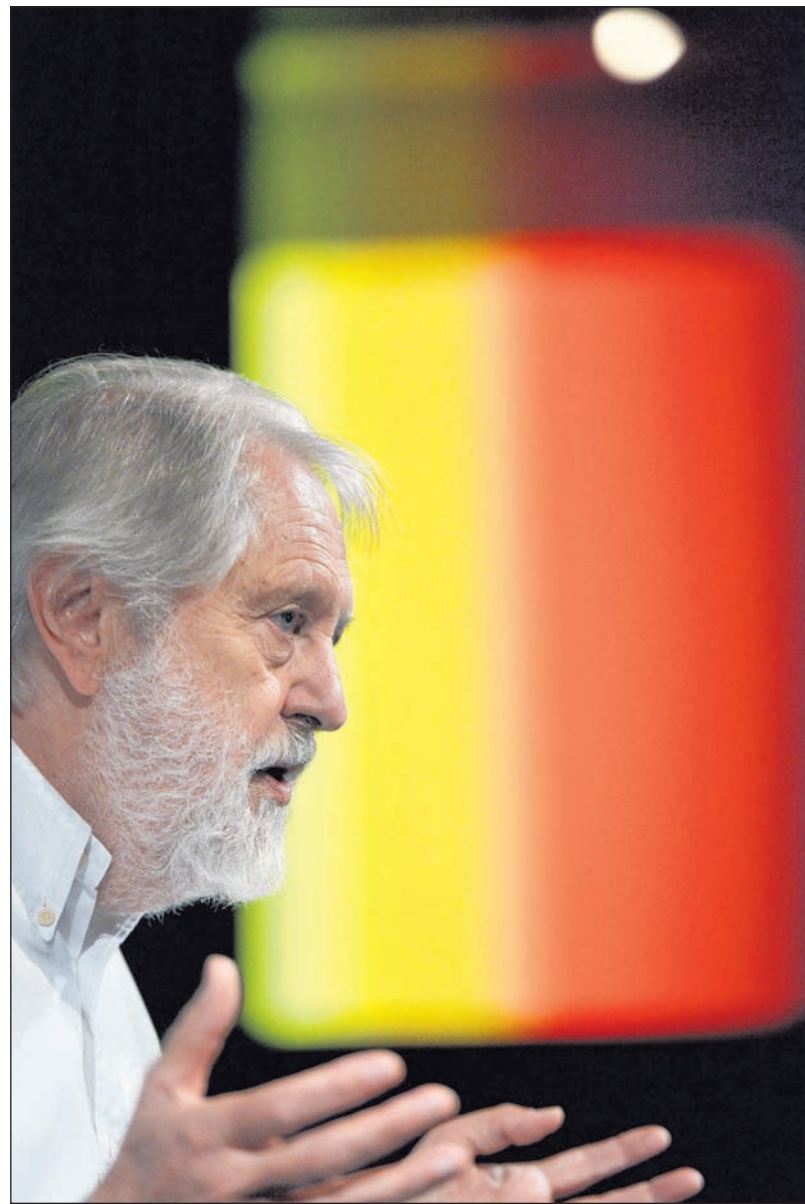
The highest hurdle by far, he notes, is that most educators - particularly those in universities - do not want change to happen on their watch.

He says: "The most dangerous thing of all that I hear from university leaders and faculty is, 'Yes, of course we need to change. But not at the moment, as it's going to affect my retirement.'"

They will not even consider questioning a don's tenure, or length of service, which in many instances can be interminable.

Worst of all, he notes, when crises hit universities, their leaders tend to just shift the assessment goalposts, claiming that changing times call for different measures of their performance.

He knows a lot about this because he has also been chancellor of two British universities - Sunderland University (1997-2007) and OU or the Open University



Lord Puttnam, who made films such as *Chariots Of Fire* and *The Killing Fields*, has been helping Britain overhaul the way it teaches. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

(2007 - September 2013).

When he arrived at newly opened Sunderland, it was a converted polytechnic and its eponymous city was "an economic catastrophe" reeling from the loss of its shipbuilding industry. He was disgusted to learn that some of his faculty were rubbing their hands, thinking they could now do more research than teaching.

He quickly focused everyone's energies on rejuvenating the city by working with new employers like carmaker Nissan to make his students job-ready and future-proof.

Similarly, the OU roped him in to help it move from giving courses via TV to teaching them online. He hired, not an academic, but Mr

Martin Bean of Microsoft to be his vice-chancellor. Last month, their online training programme Future-Lab drew 25,000 applicants in eight hours. The OU drew the same number of applicants in its first year of operations more than 30 years ago.

In both cases, he stresses, he worked in situations "ripe for revolution" and so doubts that universities in general will change without a crisis forcing them to do so.

Still, he says, those who do want to change can do so by:

- Taking the fear out of learning, because fear is for controlling, not nurturing, others. For example, the night before he began filming a new movie, he would write a let-

ter to his cast - actors are notoriously insecure - thus: "Everything you do before the camera is good. You're here because we knew what you could do is good. But leave it to the director to decide which is your best performance";

- Asking their students questions and challenging them to ask questions constantly. For example, a teacher should signal that he or she wants to learn from students by saying, "I'm insecure about some issues, so help me by questioning me". Students should be encouraged to say, "That's half-right, but from my experience, this might work too."; and

- Getting students to specialise in a passion they have that either matches a growing sector or is unlikely to disappear. For example, the married father of two says his daughter's daughter, Ms Constance Grossman, took a year off before entering New York Film School to learn cooking at Ireland's famed Ballymaloe cooking school. Now she has graduated, and she is specialising in crafting food shows on American TV.

But what do his countrymen think of his approach? He muses: "Intellectually, everyone agrees and it's a slam dunk with teachers who are 35 or younger. But those who are 45 or older tend to question whether they want to relearn the pedagogy."

As impassioned as he is about improving education, Lord Puttnam found formal schooling a bore because his teachers disregarded his interests. He never went to university, but today has more than 40 honorary degrees.

Two years ago, his left arm was smashed in a car accident and while recovering, his fashion designer wife Patricia suggested that he convert their garage into a video-conference suite. Today, he has turned that suite into an online teaching business called Atticus Education and teaches the theory of film to students in Singapore, Australia, Britain and Canada.

What's the one thing he would like all students to remember?

He says: "That their ability to adapt to and embrace the best aspects of change, and be resilient enough to deal with its negative aspects, determines how fulfilling their lives are."

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David Puttnam on...

THE CABINET AND CIVIL SERVICE IN SINGAPORE

"They're the best I have ever come across anywhere in the world. All they want to know is how they can do better. They're not interested in me being a cheerleader or slapping them on their backs."

WHY SINGAPOREANS SHOULD ARTICULATE THEIR VIEWS MORE IN A MEASURED WAY

"Politicians are not helped by thinking everything's okay, or by having to listen to taxi drivers for what the issues are."

ACADEMIA IN GENERAL

"It is the most self-satisfied culture of any that I've dealt with. Smugness stokes it. As the Russians used to say, it is a case of 'You pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.'"

GETTING OTHERS TO DO THEIR BEST FOR YOU

"Try to create with them that sense of security that a family has, where everyone can rely on everyone else. Once you do that, people will perform out of their skins for you because they are doing it for you."

WHY HE TEACHES THE WHY, BUT NOT THE HOW, OF MAKING MOVIES

"Because the Why defines who we are, whereas the How is just what film-makers do with the kit they've got."

WHAT YOUNG FILM-MAKERS SHOULD AIM TO DO

"If you can tell your own story of anxieties and anticipation compellingly on film, other young Singaporeans will say, 'That absolutely is me', and when people identify with each other's pain, you will create change in your culture."

HOW BEST TO SHOW HIM RESPECT

"Ask me questions."

THE BIG IDEA IN HISTORY: Three key tasks

THERE are, broadly speaking, three things that teachers do.

First, they pass knowledge on. Second, they show their charges how things are done. And third, they show students how to learn better.

When the first humans learnt how to talk to one another, they passed knowledge on by telling stories and reciting rhymes and sacred texts to sharpen memory power.

But although writing flourished after 3,500BC and put oral traditions in the shade, it did not spread knowledge far. For centuries, learning was largely the privilege of the rich and powerful - think of Confucius (551-479BC), who became one of the world's first private tutors when he instructed noblemen's sons, or the Greek sage Aristotle (384-322BC), who tutored Alexander the Great. An exception to this

was India's ancient universities, including Nalanda (AD500-1197), which had 10,000 students at its peak.

Entrusting one's child to a stranger for instruction was a luxury until the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s. From then on, there were mechanised ways to make things faster and so more people were needed to run assembly lines. This brought teaching's second function to the fore, and a system sprung up to get many up to speed on useful knowledge quickly. This entailed spoon-feeding and rote learning.

The current Information Age has sent all that out the window because technology now betters itself so quickly that people have to learn new ways of doing things every few months. That is why teaching's third function - showing others how to learn - has become especially crucial.

THE BIG IDEA IN ACTION: From canned food to creator of new dishes

MOST children are born curious. So why is it that they wind up asking few questions once they are in school?

Sociologist Kwok Kian-Woon, 57, says that comes from their having to focus too much on passing examinations.

The problem with being exam-centric, he says, is that it suggests that there is "only one answer" to a problem when real learning is about knowing how to think up and ask good questions.

Associate Professor Kwok, who is associate provost in charge of student life at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), says: "Learning is not only like choosing canned food in a supermarket, but about becoming a chef in your own right by bringing together fresh ingredients to create new dishes. You also have to be part of a community that can

recognise and judge one another's contributions."

Noting that Asians have long been stereotyped by Westerners as being reluctant to question teachers in general, Prof Kwok says that one need only look to the ancient Analects Of Confucius to see that Asians were used to learning by asking.

He goes so far as to say that it is good students who produce good teachers, and not the other way around. In fact, he welcomes freshmen to NTU each academic year with a speech that includes these words: "As university students, you are not passive consumers of education, or customers buying a degree and demanding satisfaction, or clients of consultants... you are co-owners, co-drivers and co-creators of your own student experience."

That approach is borne out in the "flipped" classrooms of

today, in which students first learn the basics of a subject online and then discuss and debate it with their classmates and tutor. NTU, for one, has offered such classrooms after 2008, when its leaders asked themselves how they could help people learn better, and what sort of graduates it should send out into the world.

Most importantly, Prof Kwok says, encouraging questions in class is most valuable because it helps both teacher and student appreciate the ethos of engaging others in discussion.

"In time, students realise that making a good, robust argument involves, on the one hand, discipline and rigour in thinking and on the other, respect and a generous spirit.

"One yields to the force of the better argument, while making the effort to assess that which is valid about other views."

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