

# Learning to Transform

JIX SZE



Modern-day sociologists describe stratification in the form of socio-economic status (SES). SES measures a person's position according to education, occupation and income, and together as a combination they form an indicator of that person's socio-economic status in comparison to others.

The subject of stratification was much discussed earlier this year in Singapore and I followed it with interest. Hence, this led me to decide to share my story — through my own lens as someone who has been at the lower end of the status spectrum.

I hope that this will also inspire individuals to consider making personal efforts to improve their own social mobility. And that it will also encourage policymakers, academia, social service organisations and public members driven by altruism, to continue playing their part in equalising opportunities to support these individuals in levelling up and narrowing this disparity.

In January 2018, during my book launch speech, I quoted this famous saying, "Give me the first seven years of a child and I will give you a man."

Sadly, for my situation it was dreadfully different; I gave seven of my adolescent years over to delinquency and heroin addiction. And in return it gave me a prospective wretched adulthood; so, in 1978, when I embarked on my new life at age 20, my future as an adult was bleak.

I only had a Primary School Leaving Examination certificate and my proficiency in the English language was poor. That dreadful period

also cultivated my distaste for studying and tainted my mindset, and furthermore predestined that I continue being an odd job labourer. As a result, from the start I knew it was going to be a long and demanding journey in improving my socio-economic condition.

Over 40 years, among several gratifying things, "learning" played a significant role in the transformation of my life.

## Learning Must Matter

According to sociologists, individuals cannot be blamed for social inequality because it is the broader system of society as a whole that forms and buoys stratification, so realistically disparity will always exist. However, one does not have to resign oneself to one's lower socio-economic status as an inevitable and destined outcome — *if* one is willing and committed to work on his situation.

Many people generally believe that they can enhance their social standing with diligence in work and a good education. I share that belief except with an additional factor, which is learning to manage and live one's life well.

Therefore, lifelong learning as it is aptly termed is not just about formal education and neither is it just an evident trail of paper credentials. Notably, it is also about other forms of learning (non-formal learning) like experiential learning and self-exploration, as learning engages one's purpose in life as well. And through learning, a person's value increases and likewise if he stops learning, his value decreases.

The landscape of this 21st century's fluid and dynamic economy makes situations more challenging and demanding so that learning becomes even more important and consequently, *learning must matter* to an individual. And many things do matter in one's life.

The learning I knew in 1978 had that simple consideration: learning must matter for it to be relevant to whatever I do if I want to achieve success in life. With that in mind, I set out on a learning and development journey. There were three obvious, immediate aspects that mattered and required learning and development.

### **English Language Significance**

One aspect was the English language. Being at the bottom rung of society, it was easy for me to perceive language as an indicator that distinguished the different levels of social status and prestige. Back then, it was fast becoming essential when finding jobs and establishing a career. In daily communication, it helped me to achieve better interaction and integration with the rest of society.

However, most tellingly, it played a critical role in my acquiring of knowledge; without it I would not comprehend any of my learning for self-empowerment. Being able to learn and gather knowledge is fundamental as it equips me to discern and explain my own situations and challenges so that I can deal with them.

### **Dealing With Change**

The second aspect was dealing with change. While I was willing in spirit, I was not convinced of my resilience. There was a worrying lack of confidence in my own capacity and capabilities to respond and perform under pressure and in the face of challenges. That trepidation was like a cliff-hanger; fearing I would relapse into my past, yet hoping that I would "bounce back" and even thrive in spite of the odds and demanding situations in my new life. Why that premonition? Perhaps I was feeling like an underdog in society.

Fortunately, I acknowledged the need to learn to accept change. I learned that I could neither change the world around me, nor have people change to meet my expectations. I can only change what can be changed and accept what cannot be changed. Over time, I became convinced that with change comes learning and growth and I began appreciating it as part of living, reducing one's disadvantage and progressing in life. By my experience, the finest strategy in change is changing oneself first.

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### Purpose and Meaning-making

The third aspect was learning to be driven by purpose and meaning in life. As such I began learning to set goals and take decisive actions in the pursuit of my purpose. Many of my goals and activities equipped me; for example, work and life skills, qualifications and especially my values and mind-set. Being driven by purpose helps me to envisage possibilities; it shapes my mind-set into being “hopeful and future-minded”.

In November 2017, in partnership with the Lifelong Learning Institute and SkillsFuture Singapore, I conducted an informative workshop on the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). I advocated that CSR is not just for organisations but also for individuals to weave environmental, economic or social aspects and interests into their individual altruism.

An enduring altruistic intent that arose from my life transformation over the years is inspiring people to learn for self-empowerment; so I spend time giving talks and doing advocacy work.

And to further and appropriately measure up to my intent, in 2014, I studied for a degree to enhance my capability and qualification. Even though pursuing a degree has never been a goal for the longest time of my life, I heeded that need to change my perspective. Finally, in 2016, at age 58, I successfully earned a master’s degree in training and development.

Not every individual would feel excited or have the desire to learn even if a need exist, particularly even more so with formal learning that comes with the stress of assignments and examination. That’s why individuals deriving meaning out of their learning in relation to

the things that matter are important, and that importance becomes their impetus to learn.

Even though I came from a family with a humble background, I was disadvantaged more by my irresponsibility. That exacerbated my situation and placed me in a low social standing. My socio-economic status has improved substantially now and the sense of being an underdog has long dissipated as well. Notwithstanding that, my learning continues, more so for me to measure up to my ongoing purpose and meaning-making in my life.

Learning plays a pivotal role in one’s life because it goes beyond acquiring qualifications, knowledge and skills. It brings hope as well and when an individual feels that there is hope he would be encouraged to aspire for a better life. Learning shapes and empowers that individual’s human spirit and provides wisdom and direction, thus future-proofing his life.

With various well-intended avenues of support available and a willing and committed self-effort approach, I believe an individual can learn to transform himself or herself. ■

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*Jix Sze is managing partner at Jix Sze & Partners LLP (Inspiring Learning for Empowerment), which offers inspirational talks, training, learning and development consultancy for different sectors, including the early childhood education sector. He authored Chasing the Dragon Out – an inspiring story of a drug addict’s altered destiny.*

