School of hard knocks

STREET smarts, a cunning mind and being business savvy are some habits that can be associated with the trait, guile. It is no books-only learning, but knowledge gained from experience. Guile is also a skill that is practical, but mastered when applied, over time, and with constant innovation.

It encompasses exposure to real-life situations, and may involve failure in the process – like objects in an experiment which behave differently in various settings.

Outside the hot-housing of a top school and being closer to the ground puts student subjects in a situation which forces them to explore every opportunity in order to succeed.

It’s sneaky, but isn’t it also true that you can only defeat your enemy when you know and can anticipate his next move?

Euphemia Lay, 24, is a second-year social science student at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

A lifelong learning experience

ACADEMIC qualifications are a measure of business acumen if guile can be picked up in school.

Warren Buffett and Ho Ching graduated from university and may have picked up their business guile through their experience at school.

Is it then where did Steve Jobs and Sir Richard Branson, successful entrepreneurs in their own right, pick up their business acumen?

They may lack the paper qualifications, but their sharp business acumen is undoubted. They must have had picked those skills of judgment somewhere else.

As epitomised by Jobs, who once asked “Why join the Navy if you can be a pirate?”, guile can only develop by viewing the world in a different light.

This perspective change is achieved through the various lessons we learn through our life experiences. The possibility that guile can be learnt in school should not be underestimated, but it is necessary to view school life simply as one of many life experiences.

Owen Yee, 19, has a place to read social sciences at SMU.

Schools have no choice but to relentlessly rejuvenate their education today in order to keep up with the demands of the new world.

Schools of to-day are so much different from the Chinese-medium schools of the past. Youthink writers speak up.

Does a school environment nurture guile?

Can top students develop guile outside traditional hot-house schools? Mr Ngiam Tong Dow, a former civil servant and currently chairman of Surbana Corporation, suggested they might. Youthink writers speak up.

Family upbringing is vital

I REFER to Mr Ngiam Tong Dow’s proposition that Chinese-educated students have more “guile” and tend to be “shrewd” relative to their English-educated counterparts. This is a largely archaic generalisation that is irrelevant in today’s world.

Increasingly, as schools become obsessed with differentiation through unique programmes and initiatives, it is the parents and families of students who shape their values and character, thereby instilling such traits.

Moreover, a child’s defining attributes are often influenced at a tender age, when children spend more time at home than at school, thereby making them more impressionable when they are away from the classroom.

While the Chinese school environment may encourage qualities often associated with the Chinese, it is the family’s role as our foundation for growth, development and support which remains clearly influential.

Sanjeev Nayar, 20, is reading philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford University.

Lessons learned: One Youthink writer feels real life is the best teacher, another says the family is important in instilling values, while a third says that today there is little difference between English and Chinese medium schools.

Competition is king

FORMER United States president Herbert Hoover once said: “Competition is not only the basis of protection to the consumer, but it is the incentive to progress.” Instead of placing the onus on students to compete, why not let the schools compete instead?

With competition, schools, in their pursuit of improved results, credibility, and status at preferred institutions, will have to vie for talent by developing attractive and rigorous programmes for their students.

Schools are encouraged to relentlessly rejuvenate themselves, with the ultimate consumers of education – the nation – benefiting directly from the improved quality.

If Singapore wants to genuinely advance the ideals of a meritocratic society, it cannot afford to buy into protected notions and flawed beliefs. Guile, and all other academic qualities, can characterise schools and teachers, too.

Sanjeev Nayar, 20, is reading government and economics at the London School of Economics.

Little difference between schools

MY LATE grandfather would tell me anecdotes of how privileged the English-educated were compared to those who came from Chinese-medium schools. Back then, proficiency in English was an indispensable prerequisite for a comfortable and well-paying job. Many of the Chinese-educated had to settle for lower paying jobs.

The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools of today are so much different from the Chinese-medium schools of the past. Youthink writers speak up.

Not only has the divergence in the curriculum and quality of education in both types of schools narrowed, there are many students from SAP schools who are effectively bilingual.

Whether we send our children to English- or Chinese-medium schools, they will have equal opportunities to succeed in a society that thrives on meritocracy and hard work.

Kenny Tan, 22, is a second-year economics student at SMU.