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Educator's success is all in the brain

After setbacks and a bold career shift, Ricky Chan has joined the world's very select ranks of brain-based learning trainers



Wong Yat-hei

The education reforms aimed at training students to analyse issues from different angles have caused a stir in the academe as teachers and students have found it hard to cope with the new examination system. Ricky Chan, a veteran teacher and chairman of the Association of Brain-Based Learning in Education in Hong Kong, attributes the confusion to the gap between the current training system for teachers and the requirements of the new education policies. As one of the few certified brain-based learning trainers in the world, Chan says he is determined to help educate teachers the right way to enable them to teach in this new era of learning, where creation is far more important than memorisation.

What's the story behind your passion for teaching?

I have taught in secondary schools for more than 20 years. I love interaction with students. I was in charge of counselling a handful of mischievous students who were frequent troublemakers in class. I asked them to help clean the campus. They were reluctant at first, but all of them felt very happy after seeing the campus looking spic and span with their help. These students, who are considered to be academic underachievers, are not helpless. Through other activities, I was able to boost their confidence and

instil in them a sense of responsibility. The experience taught me that a teacher can have a huge impact on the lives of students.

So I began to study adventure-based counselling and attended many workshops organised by the education bureau to equip myself with the knowledge to communicate with and guide students.

When did you hear about brain-based learning?

In 2002, I attended a workshop organised by the education bureau, featuring Eric Jensen, a pioneer of brain-based learning. I was very much inspired. He highlighted the fact that students who are not interested in learning in class can learn effectively and happily in camps and through different activities.

I thought it was something I should explore myself, so for three straight summers, my wife - who is also a teacher - and I travelled to the United States to attend Jensen's workshops.

How did you become a certified brain-based learning trainer?

Jensen taught me a lot about strategies to arouse students' interest in learning, as well as the right way to learn. To be certified, I had to demonstrate to him that I have mastered all such strategies. I had to do a written test on brain biology, and submit a 20-week teaching journal and a videotape of me teaching to show that I have mastered the strategies he

had taught. Finally, two of my colleagues had to write letters of recommendation stating that I was a good teacher.

It was quite a complicated process. There are around 40 certified brain-based learning trainers around the world now - five of them in Asia, including my wife and me.

Why did you decide to quit your teaching post to pursue a career as a brain-based learning trainer?

In 2005, the education bureau was keen to expand its collaboration with Jensen on more workshops for local teachers, and I was involved in the planning. After months of hard work, we came up with a three-year training programme. But before any workshops could take place, the bureau called to inform me that there was no budget for the programme and it had to be cancelled.

I was devastated. All our hard work went down the drain and I had let Jensen down. I have always told my students to pursue their dreams, so I promised to do the same. I made the hard decision to quit my job and used my savings to launch and run the three-year programme on our own. It was never my intention to leave teaching.



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