

Teach productivity early

This is an excerpt of an article originally published in the online Learning Post (www.bangkokpost.com/education/index.htm), an associate publication of the English-language daily The Bangkok Post, on 12 June, written by Weena Noppakunthong. We thank the Learning Post for permission to excerpt it here. Since 2005, the Thailand Productivity Institute has been making efforts to take the productivity message into schools, and the productivity youth camp organized at the Erawan National Park in Kanchanaburi province for 80 students from 10 schools, 31 May–2 June, is an innovative recent example of those efforts.

Cooking up productivity

Although there are gazillions of activities at the camp, a group cooking activity is representative of the camp's goals. The overall idea in the activity is that students must imagine that they are in the service sector, preparing a high-quality meal at the lowest cost to keep their customers (in this case, their teachers) satisfied. They also need to prepare timely meals so as not to keep the customers waiting. The task forces students to become organized to complete assigned tasks as efficiently as possible.

To achieve the goal, students follow the Plan, Do, Check, and Act (PDCA) concept, which is a step-by-step approach to problem solving that helps to increase individual and group efficiency. Each team of students must prepare two edible (but not necessarily delicious) meals. As in every household, there's a problem deciding what to cook, and if there are no budding chefs among the group, the resulting dish might be a disaster for the taste buds. After settling on what dish to prepare, students decide on the ingredients, which they must "buy" at a make-believe auction, using points earned in games played earlier in the day as imaginary money. The ingredients range from garlic to fresh cabbages.

Planning is now crucial. Students must buy the correct ingredients, at the best prices, and in the right amounts. They must also buy everything at once; there won't be a second opportunity. The "do" step in the PDCA cycle requires students to cook the meal while frequently "checking" the quality and taste. If the meal is not to their liking, the group must "act" to improve it by adding additional ingredients, such as sugar, fish sauce, and so forth. That completes the four steps of the cycle. Additionally, however, students are required to reflect on whether they have been efficient in producing the meal. These are the same steps every business must take to become successful and to remain competitive. The four-step PDCA process is intended to address normal problems of everyday life too.

Underlying lessons

The cooking activity also teaches many important lessons in a subliminal manner. They include lessons about safety, morality, the environment, and even ethics. For example, while cooking with hot oil, operating a burning stove, and using sharp knives, issues of safety should be of paramount importance. Similarly, every member of the group must do her or his fair share of the work, and the group must properly dispose of any waste to help protect the environment. Moreover, good planning helps to reduce waste to an absolute minimum in the first place. The activities teach students to get in the habit of being efficient: avoid wasted efforts of having to make many return trips to get forgotten ingredients, separate needed from not needed materials, move foods and spices



Young campers in Erawan National Park post-PDCA cycle (photo courtesy of FTPI)

close to the stove, and generally to be pragmatic. These may be considered common sense, but they are quite often not practiced in people's personal lives, in school, or in the workplace.

Bonding with nature

Besides the games and activities, there was time reserved for the 15- and 16-year-olds to bond with nature during their hour-long climb to the different levels of the Erawan waterfall to have a refreshing dip in the cool water. Even the enjoyment of the waterfall has an underlying purpose: students who frequently bond with nature develop a greater tendency to love, share, and protect it for future generations. Accordingly, later in life when today's students are corporate presidents or factory managers, they will think twice about emitting hazardous materials into the rivers or odious gases into the atmosphere. This, of course, will make whichever industry they work for more productive.

How will I improve?

Following the experiences of the camp, Akkhanont Pradab, from Rajavinit Bangkheng School, says he has learned to manage his personal life and to make clear plans before undertaking any task or activity. "By coming here," he said, "I learned a systematic method of approaching activities and problems, starting in my personal life, with my friends, and in my workgroup." Similarly, Praew says she has learned to plan her time better. "After learning about productivity, I can improve my life by planning my agenda daily and using my time effectively," she says. Praew is a high achiever. Now that she has learned how to apply principles of efficiency and productivity to her social and academic life, she feels she can do even more.