

NIE lecturer Dr Loh (front row, second from left) with Enl'ght contributors (front row, from left) Siti Mariam Abdul Hakeem and Judith Lam, and (back row, from left) Yeo Zhi Wen, Ow Yeong Wai Kit and NIE lecturer Ken Mizusawa. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG



Treasure trove of ideas to light up literature lessons

Trainee teachers set up online resource to share alternative ways of teaching subject

Amelia Teng

It started with a group of enthusiastic trainee teachers at the National Institute of Education (NIE) who were itching to do something more.

Dr Loh Chin Ee, an assistant professor in NIE's English Language and Literature Academic Group, said: "They wanted to do something useful outside of the classroom. I asked them if they were interested in coming up with a literature resource for teachers."

The idea was to produce an online publication to discuss ways to engage students in literature and inspire teachers - in training and in schools - to think of better ways to teach the subject.

About 3,000 students have taken pure literature at the O level each year in the last few years.

The first issue of the publication, Enl'ght (pronounced Enlight) - focusing on local writer Jean Tay's Boom, a text used in schools - was

published in January 2011.

Since then, another five issues have been produced on a range of topics, from local poetry to understanding literary texts in the context of place.

The publication, of which Dr Loh is the adviser, also provides teachers with recommendations, such as how to use Facebook to teach characterisation and where to find local poetry resources.

Mr Yeo Zhi Wen, who graduated from NIE's four-year Bachelor of Arts degree programme in May last year, wrote an article about "reel" pedagogy, or using film as a teaching tool, for last year's edition.

The 27-year-old, who now teaches literature and English language at Kent Ridge Secondary School, said he saw Enl'ght as part of efforts to keep literature alive.

"It also gave me time to think about issues in teaching even before I entered the service," he said.

"Using films and movies was something we talked about in class (at NIE) - about engaging youth with

a medium they are familiar with."

His articles gave tips such as using movies to teach the use of literary devices like metaphors.

"Sometimes students react better to a visual metaphor than reading it in a poem or book. We can discuss why the image was used to represent something," he said, adding that comparisons can also be made across media.

For instance, students can explore the theme of the American Dream - the set of ideals including freedom and prosperity - by comparing the similarities and differences between American playwright Arthur Miller's Death Of A Salesman - a text used in secondary schools - and the 2006 film The Pursuit Of Happiness, both of which portray working men struggling to find their place in society.

Mr Ow Yeong Wai Kit, who graduated from NIE last year and now teaches at Bukit Batok Secondary School, wrote an article on reimagining literature, based on an interview with NIE literature educators Suzanne Choo, Ken Mizusawa and Dennis Yeo.

"Students need to recognise that literature is more than just about taking exams and writing essays," said the 27-year-old, who has used YouTube videos, pop music and social media in his literature classes.

"I've also brought in examples of Singapore literature to inspire my students to think about local issues with direct relevance to their lives."

Every year, a different batch of five to seven trainee teachers volunteer to work on the publication, which takes about six months to produce, from brainstorming and doing research to designing and laying out the content.

Dr Loh said that the journal's

next issue will be given out in hard copy for the first time to educators in August at the Literature Seminar organised by the Ministry of Education. The issue, to be ready by the end of next month, will feature Dr Mizusawa as guest editor and focus on performance poetry and creative writing.

Among the pieces in the new issue is a section by Ms Judith Lam, 24, on how students can develop creative writing skills outside the classroom, such as through local writing workshops and festivals.

Ms Lam, who will graduate from NIE this year and will teach at Cedar Girls' Secondary School, said: "We want to raise awareness of external resources available so that teachers and students can be kept updated on what's happening in the literary scene."

Dr Loh added: "We hope to give teachers some ideas and resources, and we've had good feedback from some who have received it."

"What's important is that the student-teachers who produce it learn a lot from it - writing it up, working out the ideas, reflecting on their own teaching... It takes a lot of work and they're doing this out of pure passion."

Ms Lam added: "Personally, I've had excellent literature teachers in my school days and I was mentored well in and outside of the classroom."

"I learnt the importance of reading and imagination. There's value in the learning of literature and articulation of meaning."

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For Enl'ght's past editions, visit <http://bit.ly/ruiWJU>

Recommended texts

Last year's edition of Enl'ght recommended literary texts that carry important global themes for study in the classroom. Here are a few of them.

CONFLICT

Shadow by Michael Morpurgo: Aman, 14, and his mother struggle to survive in Afghanistan and try to escape to England. At the checkpoint, their dog, Shadow, runs away and although Aman and his mother make it to England, they continue to hope for Shadow's return.

A Bottle In The Gaza Sea by Valerie Zenatti: An Israeli teenager throws a bottle with a letter in it into the Gaza Sea. It is picked up by a Palestinian boy who responds to her via e-mail. They begin a conversation as they try to understand the turmoil affecting their communities.

CULTURAL OUTSIDERS

Malay Sketches by Alfian Sa'at: Offers a glimpse into the experiences of the Malay community and the realities of life as an ethnic minority in Singapore.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini: Tells the story of an unlikely friendship between Amir, the son of a wealthy Afghan businessman, and Hassan, the son of his father's servant and a Hazara, a despised and impoverished caste.

HUMAN RIGHTS

A Hand Full Of Stars by Rafik Schami: A teenage boy records his adventures of living in modern Damascus, Syria, amid a coup and the toppling of the government. His friends begin a subversive underground newspaper and face various risks and dangers as a result.

Sold by Patricia McCormick: A 13-year-old girl is sold by her uncle to a trafficker, who takes her across the border from Nepal to India.

CHANGE AND PROGRESS

I'm With The Bears: Short Stories From A Damaged Planet by Martin Bill: This book features 10 short stories on the global climate crisis and deterioration of the planet.

Here And Beyond: 12 Stories by Ethos Books: An anthology of 12 stories from Singaporean voices featuring protagonists trying to find meaning amid changes between the local and global, past and present.

For the full list of young adult titles on global themes recommended by Dr Suzanne Choo, refer to <http://thirdspaces.wix.com/literature>

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