

WHAT WE STAY ALIVE FOR

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1: Teaching is about sharing one's passion for learning

My relatively uncommon surname ('Ow Yeong') often attracts attention from students. Once, during my first week with a class, one rather boisterous boy asked me loudly, "Eh 'cher, why your name so weird one hah? Is it 'cause people poke you and then you say 'ow'; that's why your name start with 'Ow'?" The student was clearly unaware that his remark, though said in jest, could be regarded as rude, impudent, and even offensive. Yet, instead of launching into an angry tirade against his impertinence, I replied with a question, "If someone gave you a poke, would you say 'ow'?" He pondered for a while before answering, "But 'cher, I don't want people to poke me." In response, I asked quietly, "Then why are you poking me with your words?" The class laughed, with some commenting, "*Wah... so cheem* (deep)", and I took the chance to teach the class about empathy. It was a golden opportunity to impart old-fashioned values of respect and understanding, by underscoring the need to put oneself in others' shoes.

WHY TEACH?

If I had to sum up why I teach in one sentence, it would be this: teaching is for me the noblest and most enjoyable means to change the world for the better. Amongst the various professions – medicine, law, business, and so on – it is teaching that holds for me a certain exceptional quality of selflessness and nobility. There is something almost magical about the ability to convey one’s love for a subject, the capacity to pique the curiosity of the young, and more importantly, the power to impart values, beliefs and attitudes to a new generation of learners. Personally, I have been blessed with the opportunity of meeting truly outstanding teachers who have communicated the sincerity of their pursuits and the genuineness of their interests. In particular, I am especially grateful to teachers such as my drama teacher in secondary school and my literature teacher in junior college for sparking my love of English language and literature.

My decision to teach is a way of paying it forward – I seek to emulate the extraordinary service that these teachers have undertaken. I have learnt from them that effective teachers do not merely teach communication skills or subject-specific techniques, but also imbue in their students lifelong values of empathy, social responsibility and continuous learning. Such values are conveyed not through bland recitation but through direct modeling from every fibre of the teacher’s being, and in every gesture and utterance. Teaching, after all, does not involve the mere transmission

of ideas to passive auditors or the regurgitation of mundane propositions. Rather, it is the kindling of a passion, driven by a conviction that effective teaching depends on close engagement with students’ lived experiences.

‘Great teachers,’ as the novelist Pat Conroy writes, ‘fill you up with hope and shower you with a thousand reasons to embrace all aspects of life’ (Conroy, 2002, p. 63). On the face of it, such a depiction of ‘great teachers’ may seem overly lofty. Today it is almost passé to regard educators as towering beacons, lighthouses of inspiration ready to guide students towards the illumination of knowledge and understanding. Yet it would do us well to recall that teaching is itself a vocation of ideals, one practised by visionaries who believe in their students and demand the best of them, regardless of the obstacles encountered. As an educator, I strive to resemble the ‘great teacher’ that Conroy describes in his memoir—the teacher whose words were ‘oxygen, water and fire’ (Conroy, 2002, p. 63) to him.

MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Underpinning my teaching philosophy—related to my subject of English language and literature—is the firm belief that the study of literature is the study of life. Literature is not an impractical course of study but a discipline that is directly useful and applicable to our lives. Whether in terms of understanding others through character analysis, detecting authorial bias, recognising the roots of conflicts around us, or articulating our innermost emotions, literature is practical, and can

even be therapeutic. It is not merely because studying literature allows one to develop a spectrum of skills and abilities needed in the 21st century, such as creativity, communication skills, as well as analytical and critical thinking. It is also that, as the commentator Ana Sampson notes, literature endows one with a mighty personal armoury against the slings and arrows of life – words that soothe and comfort in the midst of illness, anguish, or even just the annoyance of a delayed train. In a sea of troubles, words can give one the greatest company and the wisest guidance throughout one’s life. Literature, then, provides an unparalleled means of both exercising the mind and nourishing the spirit.

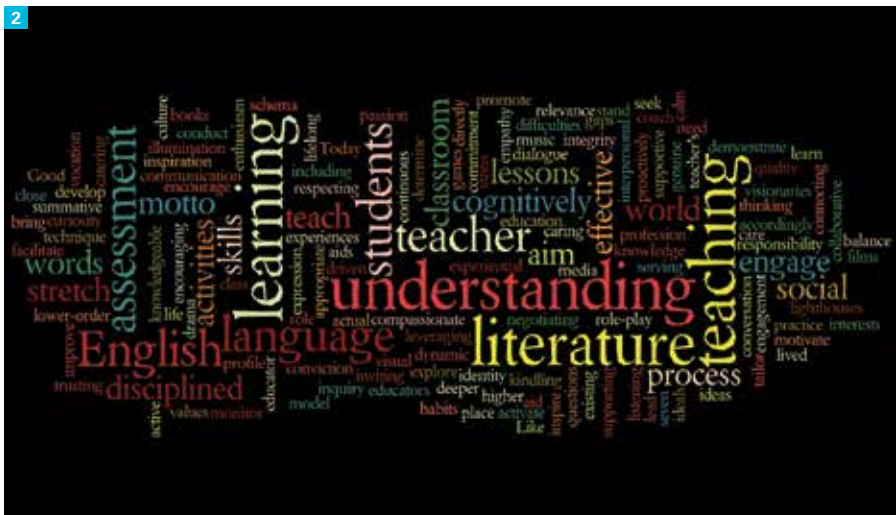
How can this passion for literature be effectively shared with students, and translated into actual practice in the classroom? I suggest three main ways.

Firstly, I strive to facilitate effective

teaching and learning by catering specifically to the profile of the class that I teach. By leveraging on students’ interests – including books, music, films and social media – I can bring their world into the classroom to activate their existing schema and demonstrate the relevance of literature. Through activities such as drama games and role-play, as well as the use of captivating visual aids, I engage and motivate students to learn about the possibilities of language. As far as possible, I conduct collaborative activities that directly aid experiential learning and improve students’ interpersonal skills. To this end, I work proactively with colleagues to share resources and expand my repertoire of teaching techniques.

Secondly, I aim to encourage a supportive learning culture by serving as a role model for students. Based on William Glasser’s model of discipline, I make a conscious effort to practice

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2: Wordle of my teaching philosophy

"Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique but must come from the identity and integrity of the teacher (Palmer, 2007)."

3 Teachers' Pledge

We, the teachers of Singapore, pledge that:

We will be true to our mission to bring out the best in our students.

We will be exemplary in the discharge of our duties and responsibilities.

We will guide our students to be good and useful citizens of Singapore.

We will continue to learn and pass on the love of learning to our students.

We will win the trust, support and co-operation of parents and the community so as to enable us to achieve our mission.

3: The Teachers' Pledge (MOE, 2015)

the seven connecting habits: caring, listening, supporting, respecting, encouraging, trusting, and negotiating difficulties (Glasser, 1986). The ethical impulse in literature is paramount; to my students, I constantly reiterate the need to empathise with others. Being a role model also demands that I stand by the Teacher's Pledge (Ministry of Education; MOE, 2015)—to me, the pledge is not mere rhetoric but a genuine expression of commitment to the profession. Like a life coach, I seek to be disciplined but not harsh, compassionate but not passive, calm but not aloof, and knowledgeable but not pretending to omniscience.

Thirdly, I monitor students' understanding and promote quality assessment. While summative assessment has its place, I would stress the need for consistent formative assessment to determine gaps in understanding and tailor lessons accordingly. To stretch students cognitively, I aim to engage them with an appropriate balance of higher and lower-order thinking questions. In practice, this

would mean that I regularly ask students difficult probing questions about the texts they study and the world they live in, and documenting their responses as a qualitative measure of their intellectual growth.

Ultimately, as Parker J. Palmer would remind us, good teaching cannot be reduced to technique but must come from the identity and integrity of the teacher (Palmer, 2007). In my classroom, learning is contingent on a disciplined but dynamic process of dialogue and inquiry. It is an active conversation, inviting students to explore ideas, to stretch each other cognitively, and to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world.

AT THE FRONTLINES: AN INQUIRY PROCESS

For my practicum, I taught at Bukit Batok Secondary School, a neighbourhood school in the west of Singapore. My English and Literature students were

mainly in the Secondary 3 Express classes: generally intelligent and creative, even while individual students represented the whole gamut of the behavioural spectrum—from quiet and obedient to rowdy and rambunctious. Two key issues concerning classroom management soon arose.

Firstly, I discovered that it is often challenging to keep students on task and prevent them from becoming tired and restless. Such difficulties arose particularly during certain timings in the day, such as just after Physical Education (PE) or during the last lesson in the afternoon. During those times, students—especially in academically lower-end classes—were often sleepy and fidgety, unable or unwilling to focus on assigned tasks.

In response, my School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) suggested that tasks assigned during those periods should be adjusted based on their aptitude and level of tiredness at that point in time. It was vital to check whether the assignment task is too difficult: indeed, as he pointed out, any worksheet of more than four pages is clearly too ambitious. Long worksheets tended to induce students to 'switch off', and when answers were discussed, they would merely copy blindly. Instead, if providing worksheets, they should be limited to no longer than two pages long. I learnt that it is necessary to take differing rates of learning into account by ensuring adequate scaffolding and differentiation, for instance, by including low-to-high levels of response questions in a worksheet—because in every class,

some will naturally finish faster and others slower. Another idea is to have a rubric for students who have finished more quickly to check their answers. Overall, a wide repertoire of strategies is required in order to engage students, and the particular strategy chosen depends on the particular class profile.

Secondly, there was the problem of disruptive behaviour. Some students would chatter constantly even after being told to pay attention, or would suddenly arise from their seats in the middle of class to throw objects at each other. Indeed, as I was told, in every tail-end Express class, there will almost always be some students who will not be engaged, and who remain recalcitrant in their lack of cooperativeness.

One technique is to separate these disruptive students by re-allocating their seating, or to have them stand at the back of the class. It should be noted that the threat of detention—though occasionally an effective disincentive to prevent misbehaviour—may not always be a sufficient deterrent for upper secondary students because many stay back in school till late almost every day anyway. Giving extra work may also be problematic, because it is more sustainable (and less painful) over the long run to mark only essential items—especially for teachers of language and literature, since essays can be very time-consuming to mark. Maintaining a system of rewards and penalties—and adhering to it faithfully—can be useful in deterring students from engaging in disruptive behaviour.



4: Screenshot of my e-Portfolio

Over the course of the practicum period, I continued to arrange and shuffle my lessons based on the receptiveness of students. In terms of keeping a class engaged, key strategies also included stretching exercises, short games, countdowns, or visual signals. Instructions had to be bite-sized and specific (e.g. 'sit down', 'take out the book and turn to pages 91-92'). Students could then adhere to instructions more easily, and thus remained more engaged with the lesson.

At regular intervals during the semester, I also consulted my Cooperating Teachers (CTs) to seek advice and feedback about the lessons that had been covered. In terms of handouts, I ensured that my graphic organisers and worksheets were as succinct as possible, so that students would not

feel discouraged by the length of the work required. Given that the schemes of work of both the English Language and Literature departments demanded several class tests, I used the test scores as part of my data to ascertain whether my approach was feasible. Besides tests, I also based my judgment on their performance in class, for instance during fun online quizzes (using an app called Kahoot!) that I created for the students. Finally, I secured feedback from students themselves through informal conversations to check whether there were any other means for me to improve the quality of their lessons and support their learning process.

IMPROVING TEACHING PRACTICE

Based on the data from my Assessment

of Performance in Teaching (APT) forms, lesson observation notes, consultations with my CTs, students' test results, as well as after-class conversations, I gleaned a better understanding of the students' learning needs. By documenting such artefacts in my e-Portfolio, I managed to articulate my learning points with greater clarity and precision. The e-Portfolio platform was thus instrumental for my learning, not only by providing my supervisors a clearer picture of my progress over the term, but also in allowing me to reflect on my own teaching practice in greater depth. The versatility of the e-Portfolio platform also meant that it facilitated multimodal representations of my ideas and insights (e.g. not just text but also pictures and even videos). In short, having an e-Portfolio allowed me to better communicate to others what truly mattered—my students' understanding.

The accuracy of data was particularly crucial, considering that my teaching practice varied, depending on what the data presented. For example, the results from the students' first few editing tests alerted me to their weaknesses in grammar and the significant variation in language standards between members of the class. Accordingly, in order to maintain their engagement with the material, I adapted my grammar lessons

to suit their learning styles better by targeting only key areas that they were especially weak in. I also uploaded YouTube videos that I created (e.g. about subject-verb agreement—a particular area of weakness) so that students could view them even after the lesson and refresh their memory about the topic.



5: My YouTube video on subject-verb agreement

Furthermore, given my earlier observations that students tended to be tired and disengaged during classes in the afternoon (especially the last class of the day), I introduced breaks so as to allow them to freshen up and engage with the material better. During these breaks, I spoke to students on a personal level and taught them simple stretching exercises and mindfulness practice. These exercises were also especially helpful for students reading unseen poetry and prose during Literature class, given that they needed

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a fresh and clear mind in order to engage with new texts that they had never previously encountered. The activities during these sessions were also kept short, while any graphic organisers and worksheets used were relatively brief and succinct (at a maximum of two pages in length). Finally, based on my findings that students needed clear instructions in both visual and auditory dimensions, I maintained the practice of writing down key words (as well as the agenda for the day) at a fixed location on the board. I received positive feedback that this promoted clarity and ensured that the class was on task.

DEVELOPING THE GRADUAND TEACHER COMPETENCIES (GTCS)

Engaging in an inquiry-based process

has allowed me to become more effective in developing and promoting professional practice by providing for quality learning. For instance, after I found that students' interest had to be sustained by both visual and auditory stimuli, I incorporated as many relevant pictures, videos and Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as possible to support the delivery of the content of the lesson. Nevertheless, not every student was able to understand the material at the same rate. For slower students, I had to give them extra attention and provide them with individual support outside class time. Some students, furthermore, are vocal and receptive to oral feedback, whereas others are shy to the extreme and will close up if they feel embarrassed by the teachers' comments. Hence, I recognise the vital importance of catering to



6: A colourful slide showing how to structure a paragraph (using the analogy of a sandwich)

diverse learning styles by taking their individual needs into account, since every student is unique and demands different strategies in order to be nurtured holistically.

Recognising individual needs also entails knowing how to harness students' maximum potential by allowing them to attain accomplishments that they can be proud of. It is a matter of developing students' confidence in themselves. For instance, as part of the school's public speaking programme, I had the opportunity to coach students to deliver oral presentations in front of the entire school. I was heartened by how the students were inspired to develop their sense of poise and style, until they could speak with conviction and composure in front of hundreds of their peers. Such achievements may not be quantifiable, but they are no less significant in marking the pivotal importance of developing students' self-confidence.

Another point that I have realised is that it is essential to cultivate and demonstrate subject mastery, honed by reflective and analytic thinking. Particularly in the higher-end Secondary 3 Express classes, some students will ask sharp and pertinent questions (e.g. about different kinds of modal verbs, or the motivations of different characters in the play studied), which demands that the teacher is fully able not only to respond

to such questions but further prompt students to ask deeper questions that will trigger higher-order thinking. The skill of responding to complex questions with depth and sophistication is a rare but vital one, and as teachers, we need to cultivate it amongst our students in order for them to become truly mature thinkers.

Finally, in terms of personal and interpersonal effectiveness, I have discovered that it is critical to keep learning from one's peers and senior teachers in order to develop one's skills to the fullest. From observing other teachers at first hand, I have realised that effective classroom management depends on setting firm rules from the beginning and being consistent in maintaining a system of rewards and penalties. When planning activities, key traits of adaptability and flexibility are also particularly crucial, since it's rare for any teacher to have more than a few days' notice about schedule changes and other sudden announcements that affect lessons or classes. Being subjected to last-minute changes has been good practice for the unpredictable and challenging – but ultimately rewarding – world of teaching.

"We shall not cease from exploration," as T.S. Eliot puts it, "and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first

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time” (Eliot, 1943, p. 39). The journey of my practicum has been less of an excursion to hitherto untapped realms of knowledge than a voyage of self-discovery and self-actualisation. Along the way, precious gems of experiences have graced my path. On the last day of practicum, before I bid farewell to my Lit class, I showed them a favourite quotation of mine from the film *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989), as my parting words:

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.

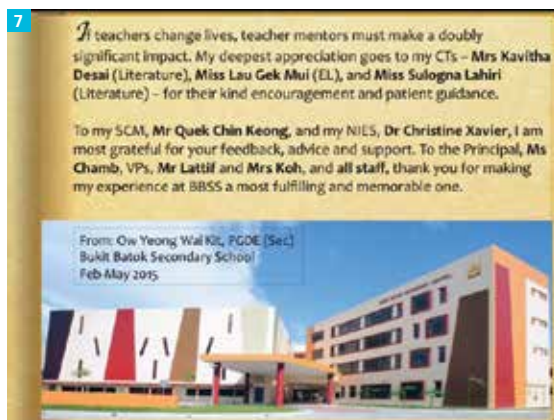
The class went “ooh...” with interest, and I proceeded to explain why they should sustain their passion for literature: everyone needs both

sustenance and purpose, bread and beauty. Then one boy who was waiting outside the classroom (he was not from the Literature class, and was known for heckling other teachers), shouted in: “But ‘cher, if it's ‘Dead Poets Society’, that means the poets all dead one, that's why lit so useless!”

The class, taken aback, turned towards me to observe how I would respond to this affront. “Ah, but young man, you're forgetting,” I riposted quietly, “that the dead poets never really die – they have ‘thoughts that breathe and words that burn’, and so they live on even after death.”

The class erupted into raucous applause as they began chanting, “Lit, lit, lit...” at the heckler, who slinked away.

To date, I have never had a prouder moment in the classroom. Such sterling instances of passion—fuelled by enthusiasm, fervour, and zest for learning—are truly what we teachers stay alive for.



7: A note of appreciation!