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# Inquiry in the Humanities

Big Idea

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## Educating for the Future

*In our high-tech world, the Humanities disciplines continue to be relevant and may become even more so. Encouraging inquiry-based learning in Humanities education will prepare our students for more complex and broader challenges of the future.*

Our world is becoming more complex, as are the many problems we face in the 21st century. But the more complex these challenges become, the more we have to return to the fundamentals of who we are.

The issues that confront us today are at their core about values and the kind of society we want, observes Associate Professor Mark Baildon, Deputy Head of the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group in NIE.

"They require us to really think about who we are as humans and what it means to be alive in the 21st century; to really think about the human side of different issues that I don't think can be solved by just technology or the sciences," says Mark. "It's fundamentally about values. It's really about the priorities we have."

### The Humanities Renaissance

While some may talk of a decline in the Humanities in an increasingly technology-driven world, Mark thinks a renaissance may be around the corner. The Humanities are a fertile ground for grooming critical thinkers who can comprehend our increasingly diverse world and address the range of significant issues we face in society.

At the Humanities Educators' Conference 2012, Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat spoke about how the Humanities subjects "provide multiple lenses to help students understand our world".

"They equip students with critical thinking and communication skills as well as global perspectives to become confident persons, active contributors and concerned citizens," Mr Heng said.



**Inquiry just seems so fundamental to learning, to education, and to being alive.**

*- Mark Baildon,  
Humanities and Social Studies Education  
Academic Group*



An Institute of



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**Connecting Students to the World**

**RESEARCH  
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## Online Extras!

Mark shares some pointers about inquiry in the classroom. Read more online.

### Useful Resource

Heng, S. K. (2012, May). Opening Address presented at the Humanities Educators' Conference 2012, Singapore. Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2012/05/30/opening-address-by-mr-heng-swee-keat-at-humanities-educators-conference-2012.php>

**Mark Baidon** is Deputy Head of the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group at NIE. Prior to joining NIE, Mark taught Social Studies in secondary schools in the US, Israel, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan. His scholarly interests focus on ways to support Social Studies inquiry practices and 21st century literacies in new global contexts. He is co-editor of *HSSE Online: Research and Practice in Humanities & Social Studies Education*.

There is now a keen realization that education is not just about preparing students to be productive in the workplace.

It is also about them living satisfying and meaningful lives, says Mark, and becoming informed citizens who can engage in discussion, compromise and work through differences.

### Inquiry-based Learning in the Humanities

Mark, who had been a Social Studies and Humanities educator for over 30 years, is an advocate of inquiry-based learning.

He sees inquiry as central to our understanding of 21st century issues; issues which cross not just disciplinary boundaries, but also national and geographical ones.

Inquiry is about curiosity and questioning. It is about knowing how to gather accurate and relevant information, and analysing it meaningfully through lenses that can provide new insights and understandings.

"It's about making well-reasoned, evidence-based conclusions that can be used to improve or better understand something, and to take action that benefits people," Mark adds. "Inquiry just seems so fundamental to learning, to education, and to being alive."

When applied to Humanities education, inquiry-based learning takes on a more reflective character. This is because the Humanities invite different perspectives from people and different solutions to problems.

"We really have to reflect on our own assumptions and values and to check our thinking all the time," Mark notes. We also have to think critically about the evidence being used to support different conclusions and decisions.

### Transforming the Classroom

The inquiry approach will possibly transform the way our children learn.

"It requires classrooms that are much more about questions rather than answers; much more about thinking than memorizing, and much more about different perspectives than a single perspective," says Mark.

In the inquiry classroom, the way teachers relate to students will also change. "The teacher has to be much more connected with students and where they're at," says Mark. To make the subjects matter to the students, their interests and experiences should be taken into account.

Teachers will also need to constantly make connections between the curriculum and real-world issues for their students.

"It's really important to make curriculum relevant to students to help them see that we're studying this issue because it is a significant issue in the real world. And that these are not abstract issues—they're real in their own lives, and in their own communities."

These shifts may not always feel comfortable for both teachers and students. Sometimes, they may even struggle. But Mark tells us that struggle is actually inherent in the inquiry process.

"It's a job that's never done because you have to remain eternally curious about the world and try to find some pleasure and joy in the pain, because there's a lot of ambiguity. There's a lot of uncertainty involved."

There will never be easy answers, but Mark believes important changes will come only through effort. If the inquiry experience can prepare students to be confident and adept individuals in the face of future challenges, the hard work we do now will certainly be worthwhile.

## Research

### From the Field to the Geography Classroom

*In Geography, what students learn in the field is just as important as what they learn from the textbook. This is why fieldwork, which can help students connect geographical concepts to real-life phenomena, is a crucial part of learning in Geography.*

## Making Fieldwork Purposeful

What comes to mind when you think of fieldwork? Most Geography students would remember collecting data at a site such as Pulau Ubin, and reporting their findings in class.

“But it’s got to go beyond that,” says Ms Tricia Seow, an NIE Lecturer. “Fieldwork has to be very purposeful, and the purpose can lie at different levels.”

The most basic level would, of course, be the skills needed to collect accurate data. The next level is where things get interesting. Fieldwork can be used to support inquiry-based learning.

Tricia gives an example of students collecting data about waves at a beach. They may find that the relationships between wave energy and gradient at the coast don’t match what the textbooks lead them to expect.

This is where teachers can say to the students, welcome to the real world! There can be many reasons for the difference and it is up to them to find out. One reason could be that they are at a man-made beach where sand is often added to the coast.

Here’s where the cycle of deeper learning begins. “It’s about interrogating theories and really getting students to understand the complexities of the real world and in turn, better understand the theories,” says Tricia.

## Experiencing the Big Concepts

Geography is a subject that deals with abstract concepts such as space.

“But space in itself means nothing to students. You say space or place and you might get blank looks! Students can learn the definitions but what’s the point of that?” asks Tricia. “So fieldwork is a good way to unpack these concepts.”

For example, teachers can bring their students to Chinatown and Little India and frame them for the students as tourism spaces. Students can ask questions like: Is this a tourism space? What makes it a tourism space? Who uses this space?

Through fieldwork techniques like land use surveys, they might find that for example, the composition of shops cater more to tourists along some streets and more to locals on others.

These techniques help them to understand concepts like spatial distribution or concentrations. They can also use the data to explain whether the area is indeed a tourism space.

“These are abstract concepts unless they’re actually based on something students have experienced,” says Tricia. If teachers can relate concepts to the data that students collect, Geography will come alive for them.

## Getting Back to the Classroom

For deeper learning to occur, what happens after the fieldwork makes a big difference. “What happens post-fieldwork is crucial. If it is not done properly, it won’t make sense,” says Tricia.

“So when you come back to class, you exercise reasoning skills and make sense of the data collected. This is where students present or prepare some kind of deliverable of their findings and interpretations.”

From there, the teacher can ask students to reflect on how fieldwork has helped their learning, based on all their presentations and deliverables.

For example, how does the data help students with skills development? How does fieldwork help them understand the theories better? How does fieldwork develop them as geographers? “This is really where the teacher value adds,” Tricia says.

“It’s introducing them to how geographers think, inquire, and produce knowledge about the world that we inhabit. We don’t expect them to come up with a complicated and complex theory, but something relevant to their own little inquiry.”

There is great value in learning Geography both in and out of the classroom. Tricia believes that students will one day see the benefits of fieldwork as a form of inquiry.

“My hope is that it’ll come together at some point in their lives and they’ll realize that they didn’t know it then, but way back in school, they were already thinking like a geographer.”



It’s introducing them to how geographers think, inquire, and produce knowledge about the world that we inhabit.

- Tricia Seow,  
Humanities and Social Studies  
Education Academic Group

### Online Extras!

Find out what considerations are involved in a fieldtrip online.

**Tricia Seow** is a Lecturer at the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group. She conducts pre-service courses in Geography for student teachers. Prior to joining NIE, she was teaching Geography in a junior college.

### A Learning Journey in Changi

*A field trip is a great way to combine learning and fun for students. The Humanities teachers at Seng Kang Secondary School share how they got their students to become more involved in their learning.*

If there were any teachers who like field trips as much as their students, it'd be the Humanities teachers at Seng Kang Secondary School.

"We had fun," says Mdm Wee Shen Sze, "and we were the first ones to come up with a Changi field trip!" She is referring to how there are learning packages available for places such as Labrador Park and Fort Canning Park, but not Changi.

She and Ms Joani Lim are part of the team that came up with an integrated Humanities field trip for their Secondary 1 students last year.

They found Changi ideal because places such as the Changi Beach Park and Changi Museum allow them to integrate Geography and History learning in one trip.

#### A Different Approach

Joani and Shen wanted something different from previous field trips, where students would arrive at the site and look for answers to specific questions in a thick booklet.

Such an approach limited their students' learning. It became just information gathering, instead of the students actively thinking and observing what was happening around them. They decided to try the inquiry approach instead.

Before the trip, they asked students to do research on Changi. "We deliberately didn't tell them what to research on," Joani recalls. "It was more of, 'Go and find out interesting things about Changi'. If they find ghost stories of Changi, so be it! It was basically to get them interested in the places there."

#### Active Learning

Once the students' curiosity had been aroused, the teachers revealed the inquiry-based hypothesis, "Changi is an ideal place for family gatherings", and asked them to discuss it.

For the field trip, Joani and Shen "activated" all the other teachers in the Humanities department, who stationed themselves at different locations in Changi. At each station, students engaged in a different activity instead of just taking notes.

For instance, at the Sook Ching Massacre site at Changi Beach Park, teachers tried to evoke historical empathy in students by doing a visualization exercise. They closed their eyes and imagined what had happened there during World War II. After that, they wrote a letter to an imaginary prisoner-of-war.

At the Johor Battery, students assessed whether it was a good tourist site. To do that, they interviewed people using a questionnaire they had created themselves. It was a chance for them to build their self-confidence and communication skills.

#### Learning beyond the Textbook

Besides making the activities varied and fun, the teachers also wanted to make the learning challenging for students by going beyond the syllabus.

The Secondary 1 students had not learned Physical Geography at the time, but one of the tasks they did was to observe the waves at the beach and to assess if it was a safe place for families.

"Just because they were not doing Physical Geography doesn't mean that they cannot learn it," Shen says. "It requires a lot of observation skills, and one of the things we wanted was for the kids to observe the surroundings around them."

And while you may teach students about coastal erosion, it may not mean much to them until they see it for themselves.

"If you bring them to an affected part of Changi Beach, they'll go, 'Huh, where's the beach?'" says Joani. "That's when they realize something is wrong, and they find a historical or geographical concept to articulate it. That's what we wanted them to do."



There was a shift of our understanding in fieldwork. It's something that you have to facilitate.

- Wee Shen Sze (left) and Joani Lim, Seng Kang Secondary School

#### Useful Resource

Joani and Shen conducted a workshop entitled "Integrated Humanities Learning Journey to Changi: The Use of ICT in IBL-Infused Fieldwork" with their colleagues Mdm Hartini Mohamed and Mdm Zmelda Norazlina Zulkefle at the Redesigning Pedagogy Conference 2013. For more articles about the conference, see Issue 43 of *SingTeach*.

## Facilitating Collaborative Work

Throughout the trip, the teachers were mindful that they were there to facilitate and not instruct. “There was a shift of our understanding in fieldwork. It’s something that you have to facilitate,” says Joani.

Facilitation has its own challenges. One was in facilitating collaborative work among the students.

“There’re a lot of assumptions made about students, that they’re able to interact naturally in a group,” Shen observes. “Even though you give them roles, you assume the leader will always know how to play the role of a leader, but not necessarily so.”

“We had to teach them group work skills too,” she adds. “It’s learning for both the teachers and the students.”

Teachers were not able to constantly monitor the groups during the field trip. Instead, they asked students to record the actions and conversations of their groups as part of their e-portfolio. Together with their findings and observations, these were presented to the class after the field trip.

The planning of the field trip took 2 months, which is certainly a lot of time for busy teachers like Joani and Shen. Even though the trip was a logistical and physical challenge for them, it’s clear that their students were learning more deeply. And this is certainly the kind of learning worth investing in!

**Joani Lim and Wee Shen Sze** are Humanities teachers at Seng Kang Secondary School. Joani teaches Geography, English Literature and Social Studies. She is also the Information and Communications Technology Mentor for the Humanities. Shen teaches History and Social Studies and has 25 years of teaching experience. She is also the Subject Head for Character Development.

## People

### A Conversation in Education: Practice, Research, Policy

*For Social Studies, students are educated not just for knowledge and skills, but also citizenship. To deepen students’ engagement in the subject, teachers, policymakers and researchers work together to craft the new secondary Social Studies curriculum that will be implemented from 2014 onwards.*

Like many learners today, Mr Fairoz Sugianto’s students aren’t content with just passively absorbing content in class anymore. They get restless. They need something more.

“If someone tells me something’s boring, I have to do something about it,” says Fairoz, a Social Studies teacher at Yuhua Secondary School. “I don’t want them to walk away thinking, after their 4 years of education, that Social Studies is the most boring subject.”

Instead, he wants his students to think of Social Studies as the most useful subject they study in school. “It’s the pride of the Social Studies teacher! I have to be better. I have to be relevant.”

#### Practice: Challenging the Students

It was this passion for the subject that made Fairoz an “SS Champion”, a group of teachers identified by MOE to advocate the possibilities of inquiry-based learning in their classrooms.

Fairoz and his colleagues came up with something to “stretch” their students: An inquiry project where students took on the role of a journalist and gathered public opinion on hot-button issues such as immigration and national defence.

The students certainly felt challenged. “When told they were required to interview people and conduct surveys, they felt, ‘Isn’t this something you do in polytechnics or even in universities?’ There was an initial feeling of being overwhelmed by the requirements,” he recalls.

But by the end of the project, the students were surprised by what they could do. “They said that they never knew they had the courage to interview people,” says Fairoz.

The students were sometimes amused by the very diverse perspectives of others when it came to contentious topics such as the transportation system. But this diversity of views was exactly what Fairoz wanted them to experience.

“While I may provide multiple perspectives in the classroom, the students may think: ‘This teacher purposely constructed this perspective for us in class.’ But when they went out and



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**- Fairoz Sugianto,  
Yuhua Secondary School**

interviewed a foreigner who said, 'Oh Singapore's transport system is much better than my country's!' it's really authentic. There's nothing like that in the classroom."

### **New Social Studies Syllabus: Inquiry-based Approach**

What the teachers and students of Yuhua Secondary experienced is very much in the spirit of the new Social Studies secondary syllabus that will be implemented in 2014 for the Normal (Technical) stream (NT) and in 2016 for the Express and Normal (Academic) streams.

Inquiry-based learning will be the primary focus of the new syllabus. Through this approach, students will learn by investigating a question or problem. Skills such as asking pertinent questions, collecting evidence, analysing data and crafting explanations to answer questions lie at the heart of the inquiry approach.

But doesn't it sound scientific?

The thinking processes in the Humanities can be as rigorous as the sciences. It's just that many don't realize it, says Ms Marilyn Lim So-San, the Senior Head of Humanities Branch, Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) in MOE.

The inquiry approach thus works very well for subjects like Social Studies. It gives shape to the more "fuzzy" thinking processes of the Humanities, and this in turn helps students to hone their thinking skills.

"We're looking at developing critical thinkers who have a strong sense of belief that their points of view and unique understanding of the world would create value, and would contribute towards collective understanding," says Marilyn.

### **Research: Deeper Engagement**

This is something that Dr Ho Li-Ching from NIE agrees with wholeheartedly. She was invited to be a member of several Social Studies curriculum committees because of her extensive research and experience in this area.

"Inquiry allows students to not only think about important issues from a more critical perspective, but it also teaches them how to find out the answers themselves," she says.

"It's not just the content knowledge now. I think Humanities education has moved beyond that, and rightly so."

Li-Ching's research has shown that NT students need to be engaged more fully with Social Studies. A former Social Studies teacher herself, she is especially keen to improve their educational experience.

While some people wonder if inquiry is suited for these students, Li-Ching isn't worried.

"It's my firm belief that they can do it. You might have to scaffold it a bit more, you might have to simplify it and give them a bit more support, but it's not something that's beyond them. Research has shown that young children, even in primary schools, are able to do these activities."

To this end, she has worked closely with Marilyn and her team to develop a curriculum for NT students which she describes as "very interesting and potentially challenging".

"I think it's going to be a lot more engaging as well. It's focused on inquiry and allows students to get out of the classroom to explore and acquire some of the necessary citizenship skills, but in a less intimidating manner."

### **Policy: Developing a Curriculum that Works**

For Marilyn and her colleagues at CPDD, having constant conversations with researchers like Li-Ching and teachers like Fairoz is crucial for making the new curriculum work. "There's actually no other way of designing, developing and implementing a curriculum that will make sense to practitioners!" she says.

For example, the opinions and expertise of colleagues like Li-Ching were sought and carefully considered. "The influence of research on syllabus design is direct," Marilyn notes. "What I do is also to ensure the recommendations that researchers make are feasible and realistic in the context of the classroom and the school."

Professional development (PD) is another area where research, policy and practice meet.

Last year, Professor Keith Barton from Indiana University conducted a series of workshops for the CPDD team, NIE lecturers and SS Champions. These Champions will support NIE lecturers in training other teachers in subsequent PD workshops.



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*- Marilyn Lim So-San,  
Curriculum Planning and  
Development Division, MOE*



**I think the new syllabus is more engaging because it goes beyond the traditional text-based, content-heavy instruction.**

*- Ho Li-Ching,  
Humanities and Social Studies  
Education Academic Group*

“There was that process of creating a common understanding of what we want to see happen in the Social Studies classroom and how we see inquiry panning out there,” says Marilyn. “Already, within the workshop setting, there’s interaction and conversation between the three worlds.”

She found the workshops to be extremely beneficial for everyone involved.

“What CPDD had learned from the workshops would inform the way we design our resources, and inform the way we design subsequent rounds of PD,” Marilyn notes.

The SS Champions, in turn, brought back what they have learned to share with their teacher colleagues and to inform their existing teaching practices.

### A Constant Conversation

Already, the ongoing conversation between researchers, policymakers and practitioners is bearing fruit, right in the classroom. Fairoz talks about how his students were chased away by some interviewees but continued to approach people from all walks of life.

“The students felt happy that they applied something what they had learned in the classroom to part of their daily lives. They never knew that part of Social Studies is finding out more about people’s perspectives and what their thoughts are on social issues,” he says.

A Humanities education without this kind of real-life experiences would limit the way they perceive the world, he says. To him, Social Studies is not just an academic subject.

“My personal conviction is when you talk about Social Studies, you’re talking about citizenship education, and creating students who are well-informed, so they make appropriate civic decisions when the time comes for them to do so.”

Li-Ching echoes that sentiment when asked what she hopes from the inquiry approach in the new Social Studies syllabus.

“Empowerment is a key thing here. And I think the new syllabus is more engaging because it goes beyond the traditional text-based, content-heavy instruction,” she says. “It allows students to move beyond the confines of the conventional classroom and to acquire important citizenship skills.”

The stakes are high when we are educating students for knowledge, skills and also citizenship. And this is why conversations among researchers, educators and policymakers are so important. Fairoz, Marilyn, Li-Ching and many others in education will continue to collaborate, discuss and debate, so that our students may get the quality education they deserve.

**Fairoz Sugianto** is the Subject Head of History at Yuhua Secondary School and has been teaching for 4 years. He teaches Social Studies, History and English. **Marilyn Lim So-San** is Senior Head of the Humanities Branch, Curriculum Planning & Development Division in MOE. She leads teams of Curriculum Planning Officers in the design, development and implementation of the curriculum for Social Studies and History. **Ho Li-Ching** is Assistant Professor with the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group in NIE. She had taught secondary Social Studies and Geography for 4 years before joining NIE.

## People

### Connecting Students to the World

*When Ms Elaine Lim chose to study Humanities subjects for her O- and A-levels, someone told her it was a “suicidal combination”. She went ahead anyway and excelled in her studies. Now Deputy Director of the Humanities Branch at MOE, she shares with us how the Humanities can prepare our students for the future, and why an inquiry approach in the Humanities will benefit them.*

#### Q: What is the role of Humanities education in today’s world?

First of all, the study of the Humanities offers students opportunities to really understand societal and related issues, and understand the complexities, whether it’s the ambiguity, the issues that matter, the phenomenon that we see in the world today. It’s not just at the local and national levels, but also the international.

The other fact is that students are given the opportunity to not just read but analyse a whole range of types of information. If you look at the Humanities, a wide range of data is provided—textual, media related, graphical—and it’s a lot of analysis, or making sense of information, and being able to develop our own opinions and conclusions as a result.

We’re not just talking about societies or people. It’s also the environment, the processes, the economy. Look at Geography, it’s really about understanding different kinds of environments. So it’s people and processes, the interaction and relationships that happen, and how the discussions we have about the issues that matter in the end.

#### Useful Resource

CPDD’s Humanities Branch has designed a wide range of lesson packages for teachers, which can be found in OPAL (One Portal for All Learners). To access OPAL, teachers can log in via the Academy of Singapore Teachers website: <http://www.academyofsingaporeteachers.moe.gov.sg>



With the Humanities, the connection between knowledge, skills and values is important.

- Elaine Lim,  
*Curriculum Planning and  
Development Division, MOE*

In a career in education that spans 25 years, **Ms Elaine Lim** has assumed many different roles, including teacher, head of department, vice-principal and principal. She is now Deputy Director of the Humanities Branch in the Curriculum Planning and Development Division at the Ministry of Education.

To me, it's not just about learning the content. It's also how the skills, competencies, dispositions, perspectives and ways of thinking that students have will actually influence their analysis of issues, problem-solving and approaches.

**Q: How does the inquiry approach enhance the teaching and learning of the Humanities?**

Whenever we think about inquiry, people will say it's always been in the field of science. But if you look at inquiry as a pedagogical approach, it is within a larger theory of learning and constructivism, where students are engaged and co-construct their learning, to reach a deeper understanding of learning. As a result, we developed the Humanities inquiry approach, and customize it to each Humanities subject.

If we were to look at inquiry in action, we will see questions being used, whether it's from the teacher or students, and we will see use of evidence. We would see a whole range of sources of information being used. This relates to the point I made before.

Then there is the process of inquiry, where students use questions to start their investigation, select a whole range of information, evaluate, analyse and provide reasons, and reflect on their own thinking. When we unpack inquiry, we talk about these elements. This helps with knowledge construction, which must be there because when you inquire about an issue or phenomenon, there has to be something that matters which emerges from the process.

It's also about the culture and environments you set out in the classroom, the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and students, and the continuum of how much guidance a teacher provides. We're not saying that if it's more teacher-directed, that's bad inquiry. It depends on where the students are at and what they're ready for. We do believe in an inquiry that is guided, but it could become student-led towards the end.

**Q: What kind of student outcomes do you want to see?**

When we think about the dispositions of students, we're thinking about people who are very curious, open to ideas and flexible in the way they think about things. We also want to see the way they manage ambiguity and increase sensitivity to issues that matter.

There is also the importance of being able to empathize and connect, and having a larger world view of not just themselves, not just their own personal interest and what matters to them personally but also what matters to groups of people, to community, to society. With the Humanities, the connection between knowledge, skills and values is important.

The other outcome is students being able to analyse issues from different points of view. Also, the skill of understanding multiple perspectives, and being able to engage with these perspectives while exercising a sound reasoning, all the while engaging in reflection.

And because we deal with issues that matter with society, where there are no tried-and-tested solutions, that process of reflection, making sense, making meaning is very important.

## Online Exclusives



The Makings of History



The World at Your  
Fingertips



The Big Picture in  
Social Studies



Teaching with Inquiry