

Teachers told to “Get Out”

With the amount of time our kids spend in school, it’s hard to believe that their “education” can actually be incomplete. However, research is now saying that there are limits to what students can learn inside the classroom. *SingTeach* takes a step outside with this special issue on Informal Learning Environments (ILEs).



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Inspire

Get Out of the Classroom

Here's the good news: Education today is a lot more interesting than it was a decade ago. And it's all because teachers are now bringing kids out of the classroom instead of keeping them in.

From its lowly roots of noisy bus rides, packed food and 2-hour visits to the local museum, today's school field trips have evolved to creative workshops, museum treasure hunts and even overseas immersions.

The reason? Informal learning environments (ILEs) such as museums, parks and historical sites are now beefing up their programmes to cater to schools. This includes interactive guides, workshops in line with school curricula, and exhibits aimed at making art and history accessible to children.

However, while some have praised these changes as new ways to help kids learn, others see it as a forced attempt to stretch the educational capabilities of places that are really meant for leisure.

And while teachers today may seem spoilt for choice in terms of what students can do outside the classroom, the task of ensuring that they learn from such experiences has not become any easier.

SingTeach presents some of the important issues on ILEs and what teachers can do to make the most of their students' learning experience outside the classroom.

What do we get out of it?

An important issue for ILEs is the question of what students stand to gain from such an experience. Although today's ILEs have definitely improved their educational programmes, defining what the students learn from such encounters is not always easy. This is because while quizzes and exams are normal in the classroom, it's a whole other matter to "test" the benefits of a trip to the zoo or a visit to the art museum.

It's not that there have been no efforts to connect ILEs to classroom performance. Studies from Harvard University's Project Zero team have found that allowing kids to make meaning with works of art improves their reasoning and critical thinking skills. Other studies have also indicated that ILEs improve students' self-direction because of the absence of strict schedules or lesson plans found in formal classrooms.

Yet, there is still not enough research on whether ILEs really do influence the way students learn or whether it can improve academic performance. As a result, teachers wonder whether it is worthwhile to take advantage of ILEs given the time-consuming logistics of planning an out-of-school trip.

Just leave them alone?

Another issue is whether the current focus on "education" distracts students from enjoying the experience of exploring an ILE on their own. After all, places like museums and parks are not just meant to be teaching institutions. Hundreds of visitors go to such places to relax and enjoy themselves, so why should it be any different for students?

In the case of Singapore, field trips usually occur at the end of the school year when students have just gone through days of gruelling exams. As a result, making them attend workshops, listen to guided tours or participate in activities is almost like implementing formal teaching activities in an informal environment. It is then no wonder that ILE educators often face the challenge of engaging their students.

Do teachers have to play a part?

So how and when can teachers utilise ILEs to their advantage? According to ILE supporters, doing so is simply a process of defining what kind of "learning experience" they want for their students and finding ways to make that happen.

What do we want them to learn?

The first thing teachers must understand is that the purpose of an ILE does not always revolve around getting students to remember facts or acquire knowledge (Paris, 2002).

Outdoor activities such as camps and nature trips can develop teamwork and leadership while community involvement programmes can be driven towards social and civic responsibility. In the United States, a campaign entitled “No Child Left Inside” is even pushing for outdoor education as a way to combat childhood obesity and a growing “couch-potato-generation”.

While dismissing ILEs may not mean anything in terms of your students’ test scores, they may miss out on learning opportunities that are just as valuable. A camping trip may be one of the rare times your students really encounter nature while a trip to a World War II fort can help them realise that history can be quite interesting when it’s not read from a book.

At the same time, teachers themselves can learn from ILEs. Taking students out of school and presenting them with real-world problems can help teachers discover a lot about their students, which would have gone unnoticed in the classroom. For example, *SingTeach’s* feature on a primary school’s trip to China shows how an ILE experience led to a revamp of the its entire Character Development Programme.

What can we do to make the most of it?

Another important aspect of an ILE’s success is in preparing students for the experience. While ILEs emphasise the freedom to explore and learn, this doesn’t mean that students should just be left to “absorb” things on their own.

A number of research studies have found that the way students are prepared for an informal learning activity can influence their motivation to learn from it. For example, a study by John Wang from the National Institute of Education shows that outdoor education

has a more positive effect on female students when teachers are able to help them understand the benefits of the experience even before they actually go on the trip.

What should we expect in the end?

Yet perhaps what we all must understand is that the most important benefits of ILEs are those that are not evident until much later in a student’s life. While a trip to the Asian Civilisations Museum may not get your students interested in Asian history right away, some of them might recall the experience years later when they are old enough to travel around the region.

In a way, this is why ILEs have also been associated with concepts such as lifelong learning. The basic idea is that we are looking for experiences that will help students grow into well-rounded individuals— not just people who can score well in their exams. In the end, perhaps this is the best way ILEs complete one’s “education”.

References

Paris, S. G., & Hapgood, S. E. (2002). Children learning with objects in informal learning environments. In S. G. Paris (Ed.), *Perspectives on object-centered learning in museums* (pp. 37–54). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.



Ideas

Let’s Learn Outdoors!

An NIE study has found that outdoor education helps improve students’ leadership, interpersonal and social skills. However, their satisfaction with the programme depends on how well teachers prepare them.

Outdoor education is defined as learning activities that take place outside of the classroom. This can cover a variety of activities, from an afternoon of rock climbing

to a 5-day obstacle course organised by groups such as Outward Bound Singapore (OBS).

Usually subsumed under the Physical Education curriculum, outdoor education has become a compulsory component in many Singapore schools. And while there has been renewed attention on how these impact student learning, much remains to be seen in terms of understanding how students experience outdoor education programmes.

A recent effort in this has been undertaken by Associate Professor John Wang from the National Institute of Education. In a study which focused on female students' experience, John and his research team surveyed 149 students aged 13 to 16 before and after a 5-day OBS course.

His findings reveal that the OBS experience led to significant changes in the students' leadership, social and interpersonal skills. Their satisfaction with the course could also be predicted based on their motives for participating in the programme. *SingTeach* talks to John about what this means for teachers.

What are the benefits of outdoor education?

In line with other studies on outdoor education, John's study showed that there was a significant increase in the female students' leadership, social and interpersonal skills after going through the OBS course. Among these, interpersonal skills had the highest improvement.

However, there were also interesting findings on many things we often take for granted. One such finding was the link between the girls' levels of satisfaction and their intrinsic motives for participating in the OBS course. Students are intrinsically motivated when they engage in an activity for its own sake and not for external reasons such as grades or rewards.

How can teachers motivate students?

Given these findings, John suggests that if teachers want their students' satisfaction levels to be high, they need to be extra careful in the way outdoor education programmes are presented.

"We have to do a lot of background preparation work in order to prepare the female students before they go for the OBS course," he explains. "You have to slowly let them 'buy in', convince them of the benefits, and the moment when they choose to go willingly, that is when they will reap the full benefits of the course."

While this may all seem like common knowledge, John's study reminds us of what to prioritise—especially when the pressures of planning and implementing an outdoor course start to pile up. After all, it is easy to assume that students should be naturally motivated to take part in these activities—often discounting the fact that a programme's success is also dependent on how students are prepared for the experience.

Tips for teachers

So how do we get students to enjoy an activity for its own sake? John has some helpful tips for teachers thinking of taking their students on a similar course:

Rationale

John stresses that giving students the rationale behind the need to attend an outdoor course is very important. "They need to understand why they have to go through a course like this and what benefits they will derive from the experience."

Understanding

He also advises that teachers be understanding towards their students' needs. "Most of our students live under very comfortable conditions with air-conditioning and beds. To send them to an unfamiliar place to stay for 5 or 6 days will cause them to have uneasy feelings and anxieties."

Choice

The final step in the preparation work is for teachers to provide choices to their students. John says, "They should not feel coerced to go for a programme. If they choose to go for the course willingly, then they will definitely gain the full benefits of the course and enjoy the experience."

For teachers who are unsure what choices can be made available to their students, here are some examples:

What? Students may be allowed to choose which types of courses to attend. For example, they have a choice of between a 3- or 5-day OBS programme.

When? Students can be allowed to choose when they want to attend the programme.

Who? Students may also be allowed to choose who they wish to participate in the programme with.

For more information on outdoor learning, check out:

Wang, C. K. J., Ang, P. R., Teo-Koh, S. M., & Kahlid, A. (2004). Motivational predictors of young adolescents' participation in an outdoor adventure course: A self-determination theory approach. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 4, 57–65.

Wang, C. K. J., Liu, W.-C., & Kahlid, A. (2006). Effects of a five-day Outward Bound course on female students in Singapore. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 10, 20–28.

John Wang is an Associate Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has a PhD in Sport and Exercise Psychology and he is also a BASES accredited sport psychologist working with coaches and athletes. His main interests are in motivational and emotional aspects of physical activity and exercise. His recent publications have been on sport ability beliefs, achievement goals, intrinsic motivation, emotion and self-esteem.



Voices

Learning in the Real World

An overseas trip with their students leads teachers from Chongfu Primary to an important lesson about how to prepare children for a globalised world.

Learning can occur in situations where you least expect it. For Chongfu Primary teachers Mrs Wong Mei Lin and Mrs Chu-Tan Kim Yan, this can be the case for students and teachers. In a school trip to Beijing, teachers were shocked to discover how students were unable to adapt to a new culture and environment. This led them to critically evaluate the school's various programmes to prepare their students for future challenges.

The learning journey

In May 2006, Mei Lin and Kim Yan brought 40 Primary 5 students for a 1-week trip to Beijing, China, as part of the school's Overseas Immersion Programme (OIP). During the trip, students were hosted by Chinese families and attended classes along with their Chinese peers. The school's main objective was to expose students to different cultures and experiences beyond Singapore.

"Besides academic development, character development is one of our school's focuses," says Kim Yan. "We are hoping to prepare our children for the globalised future so it's important that they are able to face challenges in the globalised world."

However, far away from their families in Singapore, the students were terribly homesick. They were unable to adjust to the long days at school and the language barrier was a bigger problem than the teachers anticipated. English lessons were too simple for the students, while other subjects were too difficult to comprehend in Mandarin. They were also not used to the food and some of the students fell ill because of the weather in Beijing.

“We always thought that the children would be very happy to have a chance to stay away from their families as this was what we felt at their age. We come from bigger families so it seemed fun to be able stay away from them,” says Kim Yan. “But for these children, most of them come from nuclear families and have very sheltered lives. So, having to stay in a new, foreign environment and alone, they experienced cultural shock.”

Processing the learning

For the teachers, their students’ reactions on this trip were a real eye-opener. In particular, the students’ inability to cope in China revealed the gaps in their Character Development Programme (CDP), of which the OIP was a component of. This drove Mei Yin and Kim Yan to conduct an action research study adopting the Teachers Network’s Learning Circles Cycles method (http://sam11.moe.gov.sg/tn/pro_devt.html#4).

Using observations, interviews with the students, and discussions with other parties involved in this trip, they prompted the school to review several areas of their curriculum. Not only did the CDPs and pre-trip preparation need tweaking, but improvements were made to the Co-curricular Activities (CCAs) and Physical Education curriculum as well.

The original pre-trip preparation included a briefing on the classroom and home stay experiences, while emphasising to their students the importance of learning from their Chinese peers at the same time. After the 2006 Beijing trip, the teachers added photos of previous trips to the briefing. Participants from previous trips also had “sharing sessions” with other students who had gone on similar trips, and blogs were set up so that students could update their parents while they were abroad.

Applying what was learnt

Today, Chongfu Primary’s CDP include monthly talks on the school’s core values—responsibility and anger management.

Dialogues on friendship and respect were also encouraged to allow students to interact with one another while embracing their differences. Community Involvement Programme (CIP) have been expanded to include classroom and/or canteen cleaning sessions, which emphasise teamwork and food donation drives charity.

Additional CCAs like *wushu*, cadet scouts and recreational table tennis were developed so that students would be encouraged to develop self-discipline, learn to work in teams and interact in social situations.

The school begins to offer different camps for students from different levels under the Physical Education curriculum.

These camps create opportunities for students to develop skills in leadership, independence and sportsmanship.

With all these new programmes in place, students on subsequent trips are able to cope better with their new environments. While the first Beijing trip was definitely stressful, both Mei Lin and Kim Yan are grateful for the experience.

“I think we have improved,” says Mei Lin. “I think that this sharing of experiences helped a lot in the sense that the learning curve is not so steep because we really learn from each other.”

> To read Mei Lin’s and Kim Yan’s research paper, go to <http://conference.nie.edu.sg/2007/paper/papers/AFE442.pdf>

About the Teachers

Mrs Wong Mei Lin is Head of the Science Department and Mrs Chu-Tan Kim Yan is Head of the Mathematics Department. Both teachers are from Chongfu Primary School.



Share

Learning Beyond Classrooms

Informal learning activities can range from educational tours to hands-on workshops. With so many to choose from, SingTeach picked out a few of the more interesting activities for your students!

“In contrast to the usual chalk-and-talk humdrum, this year’s Kids’ Biennale (www.singaporebiennale.org/kidsbiennale.html) promises to be a hit with visitors with its wondrous line-up of activities. Be it student or teacher, this artistic celebration promises to be a learning experience that will leave both children and educators wide-eyed with wonder. From a designated Kids’ Zone at City Hall where children’s artworks are displayed, to an art competition and a treasure hunt under the *Kids’ Day Out* series of events, the Kids’ Biennale features numerous activities for our young talent to unleash their creative energies and enjoy the wonders of art. Visit our website to find out how the Kids’ Biennale is all set to inspire, instil and engage through participation.”

~ Low Kee Hong
General Manager
Singapore Biennale

“Don’t miss our annual year-end *Post Exam Museumania* where students can take part in a mega treasure hunt. Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) designs all museum visits with experiential learning and Asian cultures in mind. Teachers can opt for free storytelling tours, sign up for interactive curriculum-based tours, or customised hands-on workshops. Throughout the year, schools can book complimentary educators’ tours or co-design workshops for staff development. We also offer sponsored programmes for students with special needs. Check out our online resources at www.acm.org.sg!

The Peranakan Museum helps students understand the past by looking closely at our Straits-born communities. We have specially designed a *My First Museum Visit*

workshop for students aged 5 to 8. There are also self-guided trails and weekly fun tours for primary school students as well as curriculum-based tours for those from secondary school. Our galleries have braille and tactile images for students with special needs. Every Wednesday, schools can pre-book complimentary educators’ tours. Check out our *Post Exam Peranakanmania*, which includes a search for the elusive Bibik Neo. Find out more at www.peranakanmuseum.sg!”

~ Karen Chin
Education Manager
Asian Civilisations Museum

“Science teachers may be keen on *Science Communicators*, a workshop that explores how one can interpret and communicate complex science concepts to laymen. Using exhibits in the Singapore Science Centre (www.science.edu.sg/ssc/index.jsp), this workshop is designed to provide opportunities for students to engage in positive experiences in science exploration and discovery, and to equip them with a natural curiosity to engage in science activities in the future. Students not only hone their scientific knowledge, they will also be trained on the finer points of science communication and public speaking. On the final day of the workshop, teachers and schoolmates will be invited to the centre where, they will be hosted and led by these newly minted science communicators.

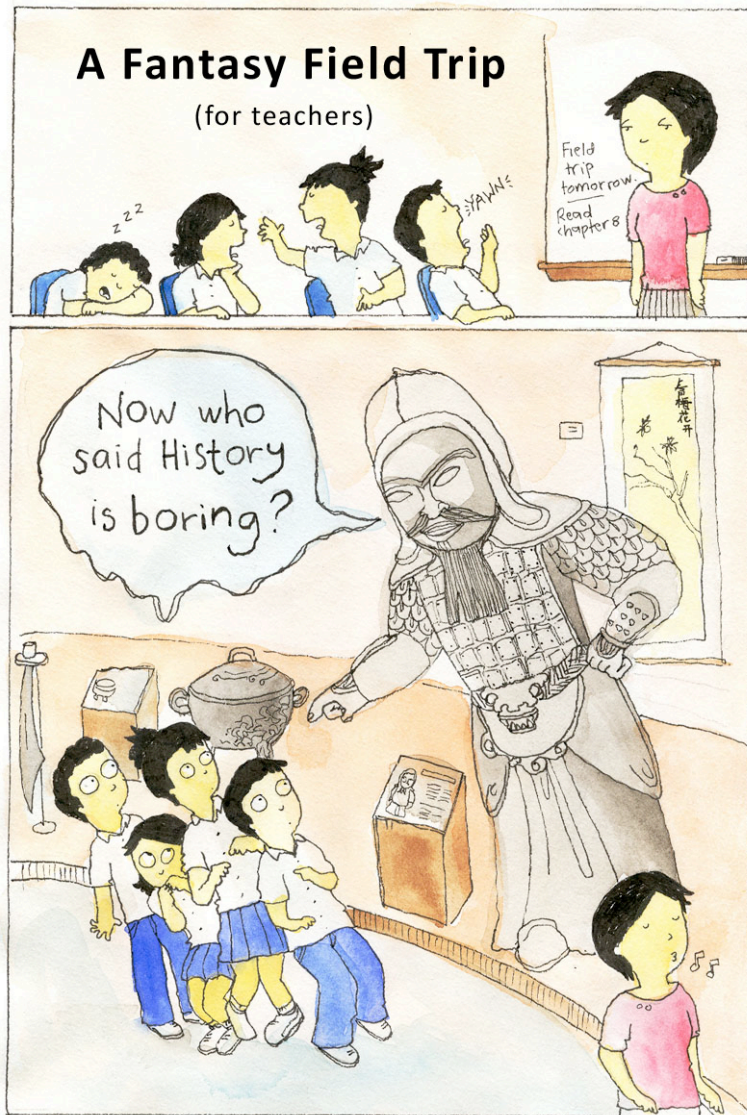
Kindergarten and primary school teachers may be interested in *Out of the Box!* This activity uses artefacts from the National Museum’s (www.nationalmuseum.sg/) handling collection and two popular Asian legends, *Ramayana* and *Journey to the West*, to stimulate debate and discussions about our common values and ideals. Students will also develop their motor skills and creativity through learning how to stage a puppet performance accompanied by developed scripts and selected music.”

~ Angelina Tong
Head of Curriculum Development & Evaluation
with HandsonLearning Strategies



Relax

Fantasy
Field Trips



Artwork by Yasmin Ortiga