

What Have We Learnt This Year?

How can teachers teach in order to help their students understand? Research shows that teachers who share actually end up learning more about themselves. In this issue of *SingTeach*, we invite you to reflect and recharge. Find out what other teachers have learnt and how some of their lessons could help you.



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Inspire**The Dangers of
“Doing School”**

We all learn from experience. However, being able to do so can be more essential for some than others. And for teachers faced with the issues and challenges of 40 students, it has become vital to not only learn on the job but make adjustments fast enough to stay afloat.

The reality is that teachers today are finding it increasingly difficult to stop and think about what they're doing and what they've learned from their students. This *SingTeach* article is a brief look at the dangers of “doing school” and what some educators are doing about it.

When “doing school” is like doing laundry

In countries such as the United States, 3 out of 5 teachers leave the profession within 5 years and cases of professional burnout is common — especially in public high schools with limited funding. While Singapore schools are better off, the problem of teachers leaving the profession is not uncommon. It seems that whatever the context, teaching is a tough job that just doesn't get any easier.

However, Karen Durica, a teacher for 35 years, believes that there is another source of danger that threatens the teaching profession. This is when teachers “do school” like they do their laundry. Just like they sort, wash and dry their laundry, teachers can get so bombarded with their work that they end up going through the motions of teaching, testing and grading their students without really thinking about how and why they do so.

This is rationalised with the idea that “school is done that way” and changing things will just be too difficult, time-consuming and draining. As a result, everything is accepted without question and nothing new is learned from the job.

When being alone is a disadvantage

Given this situation, one would assume that the best thing to do would be to provide teachers with enough time to reflect and think on their own. True enough, a lot of

programmes on teacher professional development have encouraged journal-writing, extended leaves, and even finding outlets for reflection such as poetry.

However, some educators believe that this may not be the only solution. Teachers today have become too isolated and are often left to deal with classrooms issues on their own. Whether it be due to limited time or simply an undermanned and overworked faculty, whatever one teacher gains from his or her experience is unlikely to be shared with others. Stacie Valdez, a veteran teacher, describes the importance of fighting against this isolation when she herself decided to mentor new teachers:

I wasn't sure that I was ready to accept the mantle of sage, ready to offer wisdom, ready to suggest better ways. Regardless, my time has come. My goal is to see that no new teacher works in isolation only to become one of the forgotten. Our job is hard enough — it shouldn't be done alone (Valdez, 2006).

While it is true that each teacher deals with a different group of students, leaving them to “do their own thing” can actually waste time and prevent them from learning something new about their work.

When reflection can be done with others

These issues have inspired a movement from individual teacher reflection to more organised programmes for groups of teachers to share problems, frustrations and yes, possible solutions.

For example, Singapore's Teachers Network has been helping schools form Learning Circles where teachers work in groups to define and address problems through action research. Past *SingTeach* articles on action research projects have shown that teachers can be quite unaware of what their colleagues are going through. Herda, a primary school teacher, discovered this when she led a Learning Circle at her school 2 years ago:

We do have common worksheets but some classes need more help in a particular topic. One teacher may prepare extra worksheets to help her students

without knowing that other classes are also facing the same problem. Two teachers then end up making extra worksheets for the same issue!

Alternatively, teachers from Victoria School took an online course in an effort to not only improve their teaching but also get colleagues to work together. Because they all embarked on the same course, implementing what they learned became a group project — instead of one teacher’s individual effort.

At the National Institute of Education, personal reflection is combined with group sharing in the Leadership in Education Programme (LEP). Here, journal-writing is a key component of a 6-month course where principals and school leaders are encouraged to both reflect and share on their experiences.

So teachers, it’s time to take a break from “doing laundry”. At times, the load may be heavy but your burden can be lessened when you share. A dose of sharing mixed with a dollop of reflection will go a long way into making us better teachers and educators.

References

Durica, K. M. (2007). *How we “do” school: Poems to encourage teacher reflection*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Valdez, S. (2006). The veteran and the rookie. Retrieved October 9, 2008, from <http://lessonplans.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/09/13/the-veteran-and-the-rookie/>



Ideas

Learning Through Journalling

Journalling can be an effective “check and balance” for teachers. SingTeach shows you how.

The best tool a teacher can have is experience. While it takes time to build up a body of experience, what we do with them is also important. Journalling is an effective way for teachers to voice their thoughts and reevaluate their teaching

practices, so as to understand themselves better and be better teachers.

What can we learn from journalling?

Two programmes at the National Institute of Education currently use journalling as one of the key components of their participants’ learning journey.

The Leadership in Education Programme (LEP) is a 6-month programme for selected education officers which will prepare them for taking on leadership roles in schools. The second programme, the Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS), lasts 17 weeks and aims to develop middle-level leaders by expanding their roles and taking on direct leadership for teaching and learning for the innovative school.

Both programmes emphasise the importance of collaborative learning, of which journalling is a key component of the learning process. We speak to Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Leadership Studies, David Ng, to learn more.

ST: How does journalling help in the learning process?

DN: Learning takes place through the process of “discovering” knowledge from different experiences including lectures, international visits and journalling.

A lot of participants will take what was discussed in class and reflect further about their own management practices.

This reflection process presents an opportunity for participants to assess what they are currently doing and challenge their assumptions. Armed with the new knowledge from the class, they are then able to reaffirm their assumptions or refine their practices. This may even lead them to introduce new practices when they go back to school.

For example, when most of us make decisions, we almost never make decisions based on facts alone. A lot of times, it is our values that help us make decisions. In journalling, our participants have the opportunity and time, to clarify their own values.

ST: How have the participants responded to the journalling component?

DN: Not everyone likes to write or put their thoughts into words or journals. While journalling is a requirement of the programme, we do understand the diversity in everyone's abilities, as well as the depth of their reflections. Our role as a tutor is to encourage and offer alternative perspectives. We guide them along in thinking through critical issues as well as encourage them to write.

We have had so many participants who have gone through the programme who encountered problems with the journalling but as they moved along, they realised that they could do it. So we have had no issues from participants regarding the journalling.

ST: In journalling, how can teachers distinguish between reflections and complaints?

DN: Make sure that when you write your journal, you don't defame somebody. If it becomes defamation, you could be sued. Talk about the issue, and not about the person's character. Write about the challenges, the facts surrounding the situation and how the decision was made or the outcome.

The goal of reflection is not find a solution or answer to the problem. Most of the time, you won't be able to have an answer or solution immediately. But it helps to put things in perspective by looking at factors and challenges leading to the current situation.

We also encourage teachers to consider their role within the situation. What autonomy or authority do they have to exercise change? Reflect upon this and work within that sphere of authority.

The beauty of journalling is that teachers take charge of their own learning.

Not sure what you should do to get started in journalling?

Here are some tips from David:

1. Keep it personal

Because an opportunity or time for reflection could take place anywhere or any time. Do what feels most natural to you. Instead of following a fixed time for reflection, teachers should understand their own preferences.

2. Keep a diary

Teachers should also know that journalling is not a deliverable you need to meet. David advises that to cultivate this habit of reflection, teachers can start by keeping a diary. Through writing, reading and reflection, teachers can improve their knowledge and practices.

3. Keep it online

You may also choose to blog about your thoughts and experiences. Blogging is not just a way to communicate with the rest of the world but it is also an opportunity to reflect, think through your issues.

4. Keep on learning

As a teacher, if you don't have a habit of being a lifelong learning by reflecting, then you might find yourself "left behind" which will make you less effective as a teacher.

For more information and tips on journaling, visit Writing and Keeping Journals from the infed.org website.

Taking it one step further...

If you are looking for an avenue to channel your journalling, you might want to explore the possibility of undertaking a teacher action research project. Do check out David Hobson's "Action and Reflection: Narrative and Journaling in Teacher Research" in *Teachers Doing Research: The Power of Action Through Inquiry* (Burnaford, Fisher, & Hobson, 2000).

References

Hobson, D. (2000). Action and reflection: Narrative and journaling in teacher research. In G. E. Burnaford, J. Fisher, & D. Hobson (Eds.), *Teachers doing research: The power of action through inquiry* (pp. 7–28). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

David Ng is Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Leadership Programmes, Policy and Leadership Studies, at the National Institute of Education. His research interests include principalship, school leadership, curriculum management and leadership, learning technology including computer simulation programming, intelligent tutoring system design and programming.



Ideas within your reach

Voices

Teaching for Understanding... Together

The teachers at Victoria School show us how teachers can actively work together, forging communities of learning, to guide students beyond just mere knowledge, towards true understanding.

We are all aware that to know something is not quite the same as understanding something. After all, just because a student understands the concept of overpopulation does not mean that he also understands how this may contribute to environmental deterioration or why this could lead to the extinction of certain native plants and animals. He may know a great deal but he has failed to understand its implications — a scenario that teachers have encountered all too often in the classroom.

Added to this is also a more established awareness of the culture of isolation among teachers: a culture where a lack of shared knowledge and peer support is endemic. Simply put, teachers just don't share their skills and experiences with each other, and there is no support among the faculty. And so, teachers' capacities are often sorely constrained as a result, as they try to fight a seemingly lonely battle against unmotivated students, a relentless workload, and the heavy responsibility of shaping the next generation.

To combat both of these trends, Mrs Lee Hwa Phiak, together with the teachers at Victoria School <<http://vs.moe.edu.sg>> have turned to the Teaching for Understanding (TfU) framework¹, developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Teaching for Understanding

In line with the Ministry of Education's (MOE) "Teach Less, Learn More" focus, <<http://www3.moe.edu.sg/bluesky/tilm.htm>> the TfU framework asks four main questions that teachers need to ask themselves before they even begin to teach:

1. What shall we teach?
2. What is worth understanding?
3. How shall we teach for understanding?

4. How can students and teacher know what students understand and how students can develop deeper understanding?

These questions help teachers to understand why they teach what they teach. It acknowledges teachers' true role as facilitators of understanding—they are no longer just mere providers of knowledge. This framework also helps teachers understand how what they teach contributes to their students' understanding.

...Together

To learn how to implement the TfU framework in their own subject areas, the teaching staff completed an online professional development programme (WIDE World²). By working in small teams, they were able to try out new strategies, discuss and obtain feedback. This also helped to combat the problem of teacher isolation through extensive collaborative learning and active peer review, which provided a rich and purposeful learning experience.

This supportive process continued even after the course was completed. The teachers remained dedicated to applying the TfU framework to the curriculum, as part of their shared responsibility for their students' learning. Combining their experience and resources, they worked together on lesson plans and assessment activities. Teachers also sat in on each other's lessons and reflected upon their own as well as others' teaching practices.

The result

This greater exploration and experimentation in teaching practice, using the common language of the TfU framework, not only increased teacher motivation and morale but also student engagement in class. Lessons become more enjoyable and meaningful, and students demonstrated a positive gain in their subject performance.

Not only have the teachers at Victoria School managed to inspire greater understanding in their students, but they have also deepened their own knowledge and understanding of content and pedagogy through shared awareness and effort.

Notes

1. *Teaching for Understanding*

<<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/>> is an instructional framework that focuses on the “performance perspective” of knowledge. It aims to view “understanding” as a matter of “being able to do a variety of thought-provoking things with a topic, such as explaining, finding evidence in examples, generalizing, applying, making analogies, and representing the topic in new ways” (Blythe & Perkins, 1998, p. 12).

2. *WIDE World* <<http://wideworld.pz.harvard.edu>> is an online development program for educators and school leaders. It is focused on the learning and application of teaching and/or content strategies, including the Teaching for Understanding framework. Its online courses enable teachers to work in small teams, giving them opportunities to try out new strategies, post reflections in the online discussion, and receive feedback from their coach and peers.

> Mrs Lee Hwa Phaik is the Master Teacher for Geography. She works with teachers in the East 7 School Cluster to impact on teaching and learning.

> To learn more about how this collaborative learning approach helped to bring Victoria School’s teachers out of their classroom isolation and made lessons more enjoyable for their students too, download the full paper at <http://conference.nie.edu.sg/2007/paper/html/CUL431.html>

References

Blythe, T., & Perkins, D. (1998). Understanding understanding. In T. Blythe (Ed.), *The teaching for understanding guide* (pp. 9-16). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



Learning from Our Teachers

As another year comes to a close, SingTeach asks some teachers what they’ve learnt.

“Every teacher must have a very good oral and written command of the language, especially grammar and accurate usage of vocabulary. Be persistent in pursuing teaching goals until evidence of achievement can be seen in students’ work. Teachers must do their part in achieving overall department success and read to upgrade themselves.”

~ Ms Ameline Sia,
a teacher for 28 years

“I see, I think, I wonder...’ — This is one of the many thinking routines that teachers at River Valley High School used to promote a ‘thought-full’ classroom. Short and simple to implement, these routines are a set of questions or procedures that can be used to get students to ‘think visibly’, so as to create and nurture a thinking culture. Since the beginning of 2008, teachers have caught on this very simple yet powerful way to engage our students to deepen and extend their thinking beyond what they see. Based on the *Visible Thinking* project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, thinking routines have definitely changed the way we teach.”

~ Mr Choy Ban Heng,
a teacher for 8 years

“To give your students more practice at speaking fluently, make them take turns to present a subject of their choice at the start of each English lesson. Set some guidelines but give them enough freedom to share something of interest to them. And do prepare a ‘Topic of the Day’, for the benefit of students who may have conveniently ‘forgotten’ that it was their turn to present. This would give them something to talk about anyway. If possible, try to assign some marks to this exercise or reward them for the best presentation made. This will encourage them to take this activity seriously.”

~ Mrs Lim,
a teacher for 6.5 years

“It is always good to have a few games up your sleeve. This would help your class combat sleepiness in the middle of the day. Try and remember the more interesting ice-breaking games you have played and get your class to work through it with you. I find that the best ones are those that require some form of movement. After that, everyone will be awake and refreshed!”

~ Mr Chronos Kwok,
teaching for 3 years

“Opening up students’ horizons to the communicative capacities of the English language through lessons is a challenge and joy. I am inspired when students gain satisfaction from being able to translate the value of the language from the classroom to their everyday lives. The key to success is

passion, constant self-reflection and the belief that every small improvement in our students matters.”

~ Ms Joy Koh,
a teacher for 3 years

“Students, like anyone else and yourself, love to be heard. Spend some time listening to them and you will see an improvement in their learning attitude. The personal time you sacrifice is definitely worthwhile when you see them raising their hands eagerly to answer your questions and when they hand up their work on time.

~ Ms Yanling,
a teacher for 4 months



Share

SingTeach Recommends

SingTeach looks at Sharon Draper’s candid but heartfelt work, *Not Quite Burned Out But Crispy Around the Edges: Inspiration, Laughter, and Encouragement for Teachers*.

It’s the end of the school year and the madness has come to an end. Sure, there’s still some marking to do, next semester’s lessons to plan for, and assorted additional activities to complete but essentially, the burdens of the semester are almost over and one feels entitled to put up one’s feet for a bit.

And so, with great relief, teachers throughout Singapore slowly relax. Most deservedly so, too. After all, their burdens are undeniably heavy, their hours long, and their duties almost unending.

More than one would undoubtedly also ask themselves: are the rewards still as great?

For the answer would be an unequivocal “Yes”. Draper is an educator, young adult novelist, motivational speaker and a poet. She was one of the first teachers in the United States to achieve National Board Certification in English/Language Arts and is actively involved in encouraging and motivating both teachers and students.

Teachers are people who “tread upon a rocky path. Pebbles of limitations, restrictions, and regulations get between our toes, stones of apathy, failure, and futility trip us and make us fall, and huge boulders of violence, prejudice, and inequity block the path completely” (p. 57). Despite this, teachers struggle on, hoping to find diamonds in the rough and trying to turn them into polished gems.

For many, “it’s hard to see the big picture — how we figure in the vastness of educational goals and curriculum concepts” (p. 83). We feel like “a pie that has been left in the oven a little too long. [The] crust, which was once baked to perfection, is starting to show signs of being overcooked. Too much heat and too much pressure for way too long” (p. 9).

And so, we’re “not quite burned out, but [we are] getting a little crispy around the edges” (p. 9).

Draper’s book of inspirational stories helps us remember why we chose to become teachers. With laughter and the occasional tear, she points out that teachers should never forget that they are the ones who reach out and touch children in a way that even their parents do not. She acknowledges that though the road is long and the journey difficult, there is always hope and joy along the way.



Make Your Abstract Submission Stand Out

The abstract is the first impression you give at any conference and often the decision to accept your paper will be based on that. So, what are the things you should look out for to create that good first impression?

SingTeach speaks to Dennis Kwek, a member of the organising committee of Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference 2009, for tips on making your abstract stand out.

1. *Choose the right title*

A good title is brief but comprehensive. It is what other conference participants will look at when they are deciding which session to attend.

2. *Tailor your abstract to the conference and its review criteria*

Your abstract should address all the key points found in the call for papers. Consider using key words found in the call for papers to link your research to the conference theme. It is also useful to refer to the review criteria as a guide.

3. *Be precise and clear*

Try to summarise the main ideas of the paper as precisely as you can. An abstract should be a comprehensive summary of the subject matter you wish to present. If you can demonstrate your ability to write clearly and highlight the relevant points within the word limit, the organisers will assume the rest of your paper is equally well-written.

4. *Proofread*

Typographical errors detract from your content and leave the reviewers wondering about the quality for the rest of your paper. Also, if your paper has more than one author, it's useful to read each other's sections. Lastly, if English

is not your first language, it is wise to get a native speaker to review your abstract.

5. *Take note of deadlines*

The deadlines for the submission of the abstract and the paper are different and it is vital that you stick to these. If you miss the deadlines, you lower the chances of being accepted.

If you are still unsure or are in need of inspiration, check out the Redesigning Pedagogy 2007 website <<http://conference.nie.edu.sg/2007/>> to see how previous participants have put their abstracts together.

Good luck!

Looking for a platform to share your research or findings from or research projects in your schools? Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference is the perfect place!

Held in Singapore, this international conference will bring together researchers, practitioners, educational leaders and policy makers between 1 and 3 June.

To submit an abstract, go to <http://conference.nie.edu.sg/2009>



Relax

The Maze of Marking



Artwork by Yasmin Ortiga