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# Redesigning Pedagogy 2015



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Big Idea

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## Educating Hearts and Minds in the 21st Century

*For the first time, the Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference was held in conjunction with two other conferences: Arts, Humanities and Literature Conference 2015 and the 11th International CitizED Conference. We ask the organizers to share about the focus of their respective conferences.*

In recent years, large-scale international assessments of students have captured the attention of policymakers, researchers and the public. The latest results often make the headlines and generate heated debates about education all over the world.

Amid the cacophony generated by such rankings, some educators are pointing out that student outcomes in Science, Math and literacy alone do not make an education. There is much more to educating a child holistically. This sentiment was reflected in the themes of three conferences that were held jointly in NIE from 2 to 4 June 2015.

### Leaders, Values and Citizenship in 21st Century Education

"Schooling cannot just be about academic outcomes anymore; schooling is about the development of hearts and minds," says Dr Dennis Kwek, an NIE Research Scientist who is also part of the organizing committee of this year's Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference (RPIC).

The theme of the sixth RPIC was *Leaders, Values and Citizenship in 21st Century Education*. The committee set this theme to focus on aspects of education that are, as committee member Dr Steven Tan puts it, "not so easily measured but still very important".

A Teaching Fellow at NIE, Steven felt that the speech by Senior Minister of State for Ministry of Law and Ministry of Education Ms Indranee Rajah at the opening ceremony reinforced this point.



*Dennis Kwek (left) and Steven Tan, both from the organizing committee of Redesigning Conference International Conference 2015, believe that schooling cannot just be about academic outcomes anymore.*



An Institute of



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In her speech, Ms Rajah mentioned the cases of two Singapore youths who were self-radicalized and subsequently detained under Singapore's Internal Security Act.

"Her speech made us sit up and say, this is no small matter. Education is certainly not just about grades—it is more about the hearts and minds of the people," Steven says. "For 49 years (since independence) we've never had any students who were radicalized but now, we have two. Things are going to change."

For this conference, the organizers invited keynoters who are leading researchers in their respective fields of expertise, such as educational leadership, curriculum, 21st century learning and creativity, to address the delegates.

"Teachers and researchers who read about leadership would invariably have read Prof James Spillane's work," says Dennis. Other keynoters are Prof Michael Young from Institute of Education, University of London, Prof Erica McWilliam from Queensland University of Technology, Prof Ian Davis from The University of York and Professor A. Lin Goodwin from Teachers College, Columbia University.

RPIC provides opportunities for teachers to mingle with researchers and scholars, and share their research findings. As much as possible, each concurrent session featured a teacher, NIE researcher and international delegate presenting on similar topics. This was done to maximize their sharing of knowledge.

"Teachers as researchers are becoming increasingly important not because they can do research in schools, but because they can better understand their own practice," says Dennis. "To be able to share their practices with other people in a conference like this is important."

Steven hopes the one thing that educators take away from this conference is that it is no longer "business as usual" in the classrooms.

"We shouldn't be just teaching the way we were taught and teaching what we had been taught," he says. Times have changed, and so will pedagogies and content knowledge, but the role of teachers will always remain pivotal in their students' lives.

As Steven puts it, "As educators, our identity has got to be deeper than just being here to cover the syllabus and get a job done. It's always been more than that."

### Live(d) Experiences: Imagination, Wonder and Spaces of IM/possibilities

In a globalized world and a multicultural society such as Singapore's, our students need to be flexible in thinking and adept at seeing things from different perspectives. Humanities education, along with the Arts, has a role in nurturing such competencies, but this is not always obvious to many.

The Arts, Humanities and Literature (AHL) Conference 2015 was a platform to "push for new ideas, innovation and a more visible role for the Arts, Humanities and Literature in Singapore education," says Dr Loh Chin Ee, the conference convenor. "It is a reminder that they all are important and interlinked."

For the inaugural conference that was attended by 250 delegates, Chin Ee and her colleagues chose the theme *Live(d) Experiences: Imagination, Wonder and Spaces of IM/possibilities*.

"We want to look at what's happening on the ground; what is lived, as opposed to airy-fairy ideas," says Chin Ee, who is an Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at NIE. She explains that the Humanities are very much about what we see, how we experience the world, and what we can do about it.

"One thing we wanted to emphasize across AHL is that our students need to be connected to 21st century issues, such as technology, climate change and human trafficking. We don't want our students to shy away from these issues."

AHL also evoke our sense of imagination, wonder and possibility. "The humanities, literature, and arts help us imagine and re-imagine; to see the world differently. When you read a book, it gives you an alternative vision of how the future might be," says Chin Ee.

She and her organizing committee members, including Associate Professor Angelia Poon, Assistant Professor Suzanne Choo, Associate Professor Mark Baildon and



*Loh Chin Ee, conference convenor for the Arts, Humanities and Literature (AHL) Conference 2015, says that AHL help people see the world differently.*

Associate Professor Eugene Dairianathan from NIE, hope the conference theme will similarly inspire teachers to try approaches in the classroom that are different from what they are used to.

“I do hope they take away from the conference something in terms of the way they think about their subject, discipline and teaching,” Chin Ee says. “At the end of the day, we want to do this to inspire the teachers, to give them a sense that there are things you can try, and yes, you can do it!”

### **Citizenship, Character and Values Education for the 21st Century**

The 11th International CitizED Conference is probably its most successful ever, says conference convenor Associate Professor Jasmine Sim. Not only did it attract the biggest number of delegates, it was also the most international, with representatives from 14 countries.

Jasmine was particularly happy to see the strong turnout from Asia, as research on citizenship education tends to be dominated by the UK and US.

“For me, it’s not just about organizing a conference. It’s about connecting very seasoned, well-known scholars with new scholars from Asia so that you have new conversations, new ideas generated, and you build the community,” says Jasmine.

The theme *Citizenship, Character and Values Education for the 21st Century* was chosen because they are key concerns of every country.

“It’s a theme that cuts across all societies, whether you’re rich, poor, East or West,” explains Jasmine. “It’s something we’re all concerned about: What kinds of citizens do we want; what kinds of society do we want; and how do we educate for citizenship in an increasingly globalized context? What values and dispositions are critical?”

Held in Singapore for the first time, the traditionally scholarly CitizED conference also saw an unprecedented number of Singapore educators joining in the discussions. “What I hope is that our local teachers and even our international participants will understand the complex nature of citizenship, and that the concept needs to be understood in context,” says Jasmine.

There is no one universal concept of citizenship: This was an idea that came up often across the different conference sessions

“People have diverse perspectives and different views because citizenship is not just political, it is also personal and relational,” Jasmine notes. We will need to be aware of the different perspectives so that we can help enact a Singaporean citizenship that will bring about “a more just, more caring society”.

“If we can do so across schools in Singapore,” she says, “we can help to change the culture of learning.”



*Jasmine Sim, conference convenor of the 11th International CitizED Conference, notes that citizenship, character and values education cut across all societies.*

**Dennis Kwek** is Assistant Dean of Research Communications and Research Scientist at the Office of Education Research (OER) in NIE.

**Steven Tan** is a Teaching Fellow at OER, NIE.

**Loh Chin Ee** is Assistant Professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group at NIE.

**Jasmine Sim** is Associate Professor in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Academic Group at NIE.

## Research

# Reinterpreting Policy for Practice in Professional Learning

*Even though professional learning communities were originally a state-led idea, teachers have taken over this initiative on the ground. An NIE researcher discovers the dynamic interpretations of professional learning, from theory to policy, and eventually, to practice.*

Sometimes, things do not go as planned—but result in something even more exciting!

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were introduced in Singapore schools by the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) in 2010. It encourages teachers to engage in collaborative learning for their professional development, building knowledge through continuous cycles of inquiry-based action research.

AST then approached NIE to conduct a system-wide research study on this initiative. Over the next 3 years, Research Scientist Dr Daphnee Lee and her team found that AST’s original



*Daphnee Lee (middle) works closely with principals and school staff developers like Mrs Wong Bin Eng (right) and Tan Lee Lian from St Andrew's Jr School to promote professional learning.*

**Ultimately, students are who we care about when we teach. So when we engage in PLC, one of the key priorities would be to ensure that students learn.**

*- Daphnee Lee,  
Office of Education Research*

ideas had evolved as teachers implemented them on the ground. It was a good example of how an education initiative evolves dynamically, from conception to implementation.

### **A PLC Model for Singapore**

Through an extensive review of international scholarly works about PLCs, AST conceived a model that was a hybrid of two schools of thought in 2010. They referred to it as the DuFour–Fullan Hybrid Model.

Daphnee shares that her team looked at 3 key tenets in relation to the model: collaborative learning, a focus on student learning and reflective dialogue.

#### **Collaborative learning**

By learning together, teachers work out how tighter alignment between professional standards and individual practice can be achieved. “When people collaborate, you remind each other to keep professional standards in mind, and work towards them as a team,” explains Daphnee.

At the same time, according to Michael Fullan, professional standards are not just rules prescribed by external agencies. They are also norms and cultures developed from everyday practice. Teacher conversations in PLCs form the beginnings of teacher-led development of professional standards.

#### **Focus on student learning**

“Ultimately, students are who we care about when we teach,” says Daphnee. “So when we engage in PLC, one of the key priorities would be to ensure that students learn.”

To ensure that professional development translates into student learning, qualitative and holistic aspects of professional development outcomes are as important as quantifiable outcomes in student learning.

In the quest for professional development that has impact, the search for evidence should not distract teachers from actually making use of effective professional development to benefit their students.

#### **Reflective dialogue**

Reflective dialogue is essential for generating evidence on whether teachers are collaborating, and whether students are learning. It is also a means to engage in deep learning through which teachers attain reflective practice.

By asking difficult questions about how PLCs can be made more effective, and how leadership within PLCs ought to be like, teachers gain confidence of their professional identity within the teaching corps.

Yet, despite its importance in teacher professional development, very often, little guidance is given to teachers on how reflective dialogue can happen.

#### **Evolving Ideas**

Although the policymakers initially planned to implement a hybrid model of PLC, the way they communicated with schools became more inclined towards an outcomes-oriented and pragmatic interpretation.

Fullan’s emphasis about giving priority to deep pedagogy and school leadership was somewhat lost, notes Daphnee. “Instead, the quantifiable aspects of PLCs emphasized by Richard DuFour are what often formed the communication.”

Eventually, policy communications became even more targeted and referred to the model as the DuFour model alone.

However, on the ground, teachers in highly engaged professional learning teams took hold of the ideas and made them their own. Daphnee’s team studied 11 teams from eight schools to look into this in-depth.

“In one team, while the leader sets the agenda and has the final say, the members actually proposed new ideas that may not be aligned with the agenda. Other team members also

counter-checked these ideas, and in the end, the original idea was refined and adopted by the team as a whole,” shares Daphnee.

This showed a difference between the PLC model communicated by policy, and the model implemented in practice. Daphnee adds, “These teachers are not just meeting prevalent standards blindly—they build knowledge and create new standards for themselves!”

In another highly engaged professional learning team, Daphnee notes that the teachers took extra effort to do their own research, and through that, they came up with their own hybrid model which suited them best.

“In terms of focus on students, policymakers communicated the equal importance of both DuFour and Fullan’s models,” Daphnee says. “But the teachers in highly engaged teams adapted it to what suited them best, depending on the context.”

For example, one team decided that a qualitative and holistic approach was better suited for assessing whether students were more engaged in Science learning. They noted that if the purpose was to ensure students love Science, exam scores cannot measure their interest, compared to the passion for learning gleaned from the sparks in the students’ eyes.

### Dynamism between Theory, Policy and Practice

From her findings, Daphnee concludes that the dynamism between theory, policy and practice unfolds on two levels. While the intended vision was to produce PLCs with the hybrid characteristics of both DuFour and Fullan’s models, at the policy level, communication to schools became more focused on DuFour. However, the practitioners managed to enact a true hybrid of the DuFour-Fullan model.

Daphnee explains: “Teachers have real-time interaction as a community, so they are generally able to assess what are some of the authentic student learning needs and therefore be able to enact the hybrid model more effectively.”

In the end, policymakers and teachers are looking to improve practices to impact students positively. And if given the leeway to modify theory-informed practices to better suit their needs as well as their students’, they will certainly find more effective and innovative ways to do so.

### Reference

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**Daphnee Lee** is a Research Scientist at the Office of Education Research in NIE. This article is based on her presentation “Dynamism between Theory, Policy and Practice of Professional Learning Communities in Singapore Schools” at the Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference 2015.

## Classroom

### Learning Literature with Popular Culture

*Popular culture permeates so much of a youth’s life—except, it seems, when they are in their classrooms. How can teachers take advantage of students’ interest and knowledge in pop culture to help them learn Literature better?*

What does a music video of pop-rock band OneRepublic have to do with the modern classic novel *Lord of the Flies*? Thematically, everything!

In fact, step into Ms Angel Chiang’s Literature class and she’ll show you how movies excerpts from *The Dark Knight*, lyrics from Lady Gaga songs and even product advertisements can be linked to the Literature text.

#### Understanding Students’ Needs

When Angel first joined Serangoon Garden Secondary School (SGS), Literature was not taught as an O-Level subject. With the help of fellow literature-loving teachers, she sought to change that.

Now, they have 43 students taking the subject.

Angel and her colleagues came up with strategies to prove that they can teach Literature in a way that engages students and sustains their interest.

She noted that if students saw Literature as an academic subject in school and not a discipline, they would feel detached and stressed. “It’s a new subject in the school so students have no seniors to fall back on, no past-year papers, and nobody to give them advice except their teachers,” she says.

The students were also unable to relate to some of the themes in the set text. *Lord of the Flies* is largely influenced by author William Golding’s experiences in World War II and deals



*Angel Chiang is passionate about Literature and uses popular culture to spark her students’ interest in the classroom.*

Find out how Angel uses the understand–apply–analyse scaffold in her Literature classroom in our online version.

with abstract concepts, such as original sin and morality. Unlike the author, who lived through the period, the students lacked the contextual knowledge to comprehend it.

That was when Angel and her team decided to use the popular culture approach for their lessons.

### Providing Cultural Accessibility

Popular culture is shaped by people’s choices, and students come into contact with it via entertainment, sports, brands, beliefs and forms of expressions.

Hence, Angel believes infusing it into Literature lessons can capture students’ attention and provide them the cultural accessibility to understand the text.

“For example, we start off by covering literary devices,” shares Angel. “I’ll show the class a music video or a movie excerpt, and we discuss how colour, light, imagery and diction are used to convey thoughts.”

“Then, I prompt them with questions: How does light make a difference to products of popular culture? How does the choice of lyrics in a song make a difference in its meaning? Afterwards, I relate it back to the text and ask, how can this be used to explain the themes in *Lord of the Flies*?”

Through this approach, students realize that Literature is not merely a subject in school but can be connected to real-world issues. If they need help understanding the context in which the Literature text is written, they know to situate it in the context of the world around them.

Associating their favourite form of entertainment with their Literature text also helps them to view the subject in a more positive light.

### Becoming 21st Century Learners

When her pioneer batch of Literature students received their O-Level results, both Angel and the students were proud that they did really well despite being SGS’s first Literature students in over 15 years.

But as significant as their results are, Angel found it just as important that her students are equipped with social and emotional competencies needed in the 21st century.

With the popular culture approach in Literature, she hopes students can become self-directed learners. This is especially important because, while it is ideal, it is difficult for a teacher to help every single student in the class.

“We want the students to know it is possible to learn Literature not just by reading, writing or polishing their techniques of analysing and interpreting during lessons,” says Angel.

“We want to equip them with some skills so that they can be independent learners. If they can question, reflect and persevere by themselves, it means they have taken ownership of their learning.”

**Angel Chiang** is a Literature teacher at Serangoon Garden Secondary School. This article is based on her presentation “A Popular Culture Approach in Teaching Literature Classics” at the Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference 2015.

## People

# Dealing with Contentious Issues in the Classroom

*When a controversial issue that involves the larger society is discussed in a classroom, would teachers know how to handle it? Should they voice their own opinions? If so, how should they go about it?*

Link what you are teaching in the classroom to what is happening in the real world today, teachers are often told. This helps students see that what they learn in school is relevant to their daily life.

But this approach can potentially create a dilemma for teachers: When a contentious societal issue is raised in the classroom, how should it be addressed? Does a teacher’s personal opinion matter if it differs from the official stand?

These questions were raised by a conference delegate, Mr Kamaludin Bahadin, the Head of Department (Humanities) of Shuqun Secondary School at the 11th International CitizED Conference on 4 June.



(From left) Prof Kathy Bickmore, Prof S. Gopinathan and Thavamalar Kanagaratnam on how teachers should discuss contentious issues in the classroom.

During the panel discussion “What is the Ideal 21st Century Citizen? Perspectives from Different National Contexts”, he posed those questions to the following panelists:

- Professor S. Gopinathan, Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore;
- Dr Thavamalar Kanagaratnam, Senior Curriculum Specialist for Character and Citizenship Education, Ministry of Education, Singapore; and
- Professor Kathy Bickmore, Professor at the University of Toronto.

Mr Kamaludin said that he agreed with Prof Gopi’s observation in an earlier presentation that schools are no longer neutral learning spaces, and teachers are no longer dispassionate dispensers of the curriculum.

“All of us are now taking a position. Even inaction is a form of position, in the form of what we say or not say in the classroom,” says Mr Kamaludin.

“Instead of being mere gatekeepers, teachers are now in the forefront. It’s sometimes very challenging even for teachers to have an honest conversation with adults. In the Singapore education context, there are out-of-bounds (OB) markers, syllabuses and curricula to consider.”

Should teachers put forth their personal position on matters such as radicalization and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues?

Below are edited excerpts of the panelists’ responses:

### Professor S. Gopinathan

I think that’s a very important and interesting question and there is obviously no glib answer to that. I think the point you made is about co-construction (of discourse in the classroom). If it’s real and authentic, the participants in this co-construction will see that they are constructing and sharing. What would effective co-construction need or require? It would require a real openness. Depending on the age of the students, how much of a debate, argument, contestation would you have in a primary school? The opportunities for that at the junior college level, for example, will be much greater. So there’s the appropriate-ness of the context that we ought to keep in mind.

But I think the core principles ought to be that we’re true to our beliefs, that we’re fair, and we’re conscious that we need to be fair. In the way that we act out our beliefs, we have to mediate between what is required from the Ministry of Education (MOE), and what is required by our own conscience. We are role models; we are modelling what we would like our students to be. And if we are short on any values, certainly the students would “catch” it.

Apart from those general principles, there is no answer for every situation. But I think increasingly, there will be a greater degree of openness. It will be the case that the OB markers will become more porous, and I think that will provide an opportunity.

But I also think you have to take into account the notion of the “strong state” and the strong agenda-building view of the state. That’s not going to go away. In my view, the national narrative will be key, that narrative will remain, and those of us who work in schools as teachers will have to be aware of that.

We are role models; we are modelling what we would like our students to be. And if we are short on any values, certainly the students would “catch” it.

- Prof Gopi on the teacher as a role model

We need to be open, we need to see where things go; these are interesting times we are living in. There are no simple answers; but I don’t think there ever were.

- Dr Kanagaratnam on keeping an open mind

## Let's think about teaching as listening to students for a change.

- Prof Bickmore on listening to students' concerns

It will call for a lot more reflective teaching and thinking, and I suggest it will also require a lot more thinking in teacher preparation and professional development. We cannot just think that during times of changes, teachers will somehow be able to respond to it.

### Dr Thavamalar Kanagaratnam

When we work with teachers, this is a question that keeps coming up.

How would you facilitate a discussion in class if you're not so sure what the "official stand" is, or if you don't agree with the "official stand"? This is where we say, exactly as what Prof Gopi said, it is important to be authentic.

At the same time, we also acknowledge that there is a tension. One thing I tell teachers is, "Imagine that all the kids' parents are in your classroom. What would you do? What would you say?"

This is because you're not just a teacher here by yourself, teaching these kids. There's the whole society out there which we need to bear in mind. However, we are also pushing boundaries, and when we talk about co-construction, we talk about open dialogue in the classrooms and allowing multiple perspectives.

This can sometimes cause discomfort for teachers. They would like to know the "right" answers and be able to give the "right" answers. But really, there is no "right" answer. So it's something we all have to work out together. And there are no experts with the "right" answer either!

But we have to bear in mind the nation's shared goals. For those issues that may fundamentally rock the foundation of the nation, you may want to think twice before starting a discussion in the classroom (if you are not sure how to approach them). But at the same time, we need to be open, we need to see where things go; these are interesting times we are living in. There are no simple answers, but I don't think there ever were.

### Professor Kathy Bickmore

I certainly resonate with the idea that conflict education is worth the risk, and that it can be done well. People need support in various ways to do that.

Two things: One, let's think about teaching as listening to students for a change. Not only what we as teachers deliver or create, as if we were the kings and queens in the classrooms, but as listening to their concerns, and responding. There will always be conflicts, as long as we're alive. We can practise dialogue in the classroom with "real" conflicts in the young people's lives. We would not begin with the most polarized issues, but with issues that lend themselves to genuine inquiry about multiple perspectives—where students can develop capacities for thinking through and responding to alternate perspectives, without harming one another in the process. That helps us choose which of these difficult issues are worth airing.

The other thing is the how? For me, the critical thing is not so much whether we should address conflicts, as how, which ones, and so forth. The important question is how to do it, in ways that all the students have voices but at the same time, no one is damaged, or that damages are repaired as part of the community process. We can think about how to address the real world better in our classroom.

**Professor S. Gopinathan** is Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore and Senior Advisor at the HEAD Foundation. **Thavamalar Kanagaratnam** is a Senior Curriculum Specialist for Character and Citizenship Education at the Ministry of Education, Singapore. **Professor Kathy Bickmore** is Professor in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and Comparative International and Development Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

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