<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Experimental learning, evidence and reconstruction of Singapore’s history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Wilson Jacob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source</strong></td>
<td>Regional Seminar on Teacher Education: The Challenges in the 21st Century, 18 – 20 November 1991, Penang, Malaysia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Copyright © 1991 The Author

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.


This document was archived with permission from the copyright holder.
EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING, EVIDENCE AND RECONSTRUCTION OF SINGAPORE'S HISTORY

MR WILSON JACOB

Paper presented at the Regional Seminar on Teacher Education The Challenge of 21st Century organized by the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, from November 18-20, 1991
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, EVIDENCE AND RECONSTRUCTION OF SINGAPORE’S HISTORY

WILSON JACOB
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY, SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of history in the 21st century will pose serious challenges if outmoded and unimaginative methods continue to dominate classroom teaching. The frequent memorization of inert and often irrelevant historical data have raised questions about the validity and efficacy of history as a school subject. To resolve this problem more innovative teaching strategies must be adopted. Pupils must be taught the skills of the historian - to examine and use primary sources, to imaginatively reconstruct the past, to make tentative conclusions, etc.

Fieldwork within the framework of experiential learning can serve as a meaningful vehicle for this skills-based-approach. Based on this assumption 2 separate field trips to Fort Canning were conducted for 30 pre-service Postgraduate Diploma in Education students and 30 in-service teachers. The site was originally a hill with a history going back to the 14th century when Singapore was Temasek. The reminders of the
past - the Iskandar Syah Kramat, Christian Cemetery, the remains of Fort Canning and the Bunker Gun Site are all historical evidence reflecting different periods of Singapore’s history.

The approach adopted in the field involved essentially an explanation of the "reminders", reference to information based handouts, examining and using historical evidence and working through field based exercises. The sequencing of the different learning activities was to a large extent inspired by the Kolb Experiential Learning Model.

The Kolb Experiential Learning Model

Kolb (1984) has postulated that learning involves a cycle of 4 process. It begins with the learner’s personal involvement in a specific experience. The learner reflects on this experience from many view points, seeking to find its meaning. Out of this reflection the learner draws logical conclusions (substract conceptualization) and may add to his or her own conclusions the theretical constructs of others. These conclusions and constructs guide discussions and actions (active experimentation) that lead to new experiences.
Figure 1. Experiential learning cycle

Concrete Experience

Active Experimentation  Reflective Observation

Abstract Conceptualization

Its application to the 2 field trips situations particularly "history based" instructional activities are indicated below:

**Concrete Experience**

- listening to oral explanation
- reading handouts and sources in the field
- reading primary sources

**Active Experimentation**

- empathetic reconstruction of the past

**Reflective Observation**

- discussion
- answering recall type questions

**Abstract Conceptualization**

- extrapolation
- making tentative conclusions
- concept of change and continuity and development
The actual instructional activities reflecting the above was preceded by either an oral explanation or reading primary or secondary sources related to 4 chosen historical sites. The sites reflect 3 important periods in the history of Singapore – Temasek, Early British Rule and the Japanese Occupation.

**TEMASEK**

Archeological findings, the Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu, Javanese records and Chinese sources provide evidence of the existence of old Singapore.

Wang Ta Yuan, a Chinese trader, writing in 1330 describes Temasek thus:

"... the soil is unfertile and yields only a little rice. The climate is warm and in the 4th and 5th months there are heavy rains. The people are accustomed to pillage. At one time in the past, the chief dug the earth and found a crown made of jade. In the beginning of the year, people looked for the new moon to determine the New Year's Day, when the chief would wear the crown and put on dress to receive greetings. This custom is still transmitted down to the present generation. Both men and women, even those Chinese dwelling there, have their hair tied in a knot and wear a short jacket with sarong of blue stuff. The country produces rough lakawood and tin blocks. The merchandise for trading consists of pure gold, blue stain, pattern cloth, porcelains ..., iron pots, .... When the vessels sail to the west sea, and natives are quite at ease, but on their return voyage the crew have to put up arrow shelters and curtains, and sharpen their weapons to guard against pirates, .... Two or three hundred boats of the pirates would come on
silently and fight for several days. It would be fortunate if the travellers could meet a fair wind; otherwise the crew would be butchered and the merchandise would be looted."

From the passage quoted above we know that Temasek was then a pirate-infested area; that there were Chinese living among the natives.

This early multi-racial population was ruled by Sultans who lived on the upper reaches of the hill. A recent inscription on the commemorative stone at the site of a ruler's grave sheds further light on certain aspects of Temasek.

**Kramat Iskandar Syah**

"Since 1822 this terrace has been regarded as a kramat. According to local belief, kramat are auspicious places to visit, particularly for specific favours. Kramat places are often tombs. In 1822 it was claimed that this site is the burial place of Raja Iskandar Syah.

According to a Malay tradition Iskandar Syah was the last of the 5 kings who ruled Singapore during the golden age in the fourteenth century. Temasek fell to an enemy attack but Iskandar Syah escaped into the forest and 2 years later founded another great kingdom Melaka.

Chinese records of the early Melaka mention Iskandar Syah and report that he died there around 1420, but no sources give his place of death. Traditional Malay chronicles state that the king of the Malays, Sri Tri Buana, and his Chief Minister, Demang Lebar Daun, were buried on this hill.

When the forces occupied Singapore in 1819, Malay residents refused to ascend this hill. They did not
ascribe thus reluctance of the fear of disturbing the dead, but to the belief that the palace of their kings once stood here.

The forest covering the hill was soon discovered, whereupon many ruins of brick buildings were discovered on the north and east slopes. One of the largest ruins stood on this terrace.

The origins of the belief are unknown but by 1822 the site was already regarded a kramat and venerated by Muslims, Chinese and Hindus. The original structure has vanished but archaeologists have discovered pottery and other 14th century artifacts.

Majapahit attacked and ended the existence of Temasek.

Learning Activities

1. Read the relevant handouts and the explanation on the commemorative stone.  
   (Concrete Experience) Skill of the Historian (i) studying evidence

2. What did the people of Temasek do for a living.  
   (Reflective Observation) Skills of the Historian (i) recall (ii) extracting, selecting and using evidence

3. Based on the evidence available describe 14th Century Temasek.  
   (Abstract Conceptualisation) Skill of the Historian (i) historical explanation (ii) reconstruction

4. What features of Temasek have changed over the years and what features still persist in present day Singapore.  
   (Active Experimentation) Skill of the Historian (i) extrapolation (ii) applying concepts of change and continuity
EARLY BRITISH PERIOD

The founding of Modern Singapore by Stamford Raffles marked the beginning of British rule in Singapore. The Christian Cemetery and the remains of Fort Canning are reminders of early British rule.

Christian Cemetery

Under British rule, the European dead were buried at first near Raffles bungalow which was located at the summit of the hill, and later, at a more suitable site at the foot of the hill. The Christian Cemetery, with its Gothic style gateways, was used from the 1830's to 1865, when a new cemetery was opened at Bukit Timah Road.

The headstones, now mounted on the surrounding walls, provide a variety of historical evidence, including occupational diversity, ethnic origins, medical and social development of early Singapore.

Among the important people buried there were Dr Jose' D'Almedia, Cuppage and George Dromgold Coleman.

George Coleman

George Dromgold Coleman was born in Ireland towards the end of 1795. Coleman's father was a businessman and a builders' merchant and may even have been a builder.
George Coleman received a sound architectural training and worked for an established architect for a few years. In 1815 at the age of 19 he left Ireland for India and practised in Calcutta. Later he sailed to Java where he surveyed sugar plantations, designed sugar mills and residential buildings.

Coleman made his way to Singapore sometime in June 1822. He built Raffles' official residence. Coleman also built the Church of St. Gregaroy or The American Church in 1835 and the first St. Andrew’s Church. In addition Coleman also built a number of impressive private homes for the European community, including the present day Parliament House, orgiginally owned by a trader called Maxwell. The main structure of Raffles Institution built around the 1830’s was the work of Coleman.

Coleman was also an excellent surveyor and town planner. Working well with local contractors and Indian convicts he surveyed large areas of the island and built a network of roads and bridges. Street plans and the physical development of early Singapore, including land reclamation were the products of his labour.

Coleman died in 1844 at the age of 48. The Singapore Free Press reported:
"... To his good judgement and tutoring energy were mainly owe the great extent of good roads on this Island, and to his taste and skill as an architect we are also indebted for many of the elegant buildings, both public and private, which adorn Singapore ..."

The inscription on Coleman's tomb reads:

"... For many years the Superintendent of Public Works in this Settlement. The important duties of which Department. He was acknowledged to have discharged with zeal and ability. While the many public improvements. Which he originated and carried into effect will long attest the value of his services."

Coleman Street and Coleman Bridge in Singapore are named after him.
REMAINS OF FORT CANNING

British concern for the defence of Singapore was the main reason for the construction of Fort Canning. For the first 40 years since its foundation in 1819 Singapore prospered as a main centre of trade between the East and the West without any system of defence. In May 1845 a top military officer "expressed grave concern over the defenceless state of Singapore" any warship, he said, could sail or steam up to the harbour and open fire with impunity, "knocking the town about our ears."

The need for a fort became more serious after the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The British felt that a fort was necessary for the protection of British officials and their families should the local people rise in rebellion.

Colonel Collyer was responsible for the layout and construction of the fort. The fort was fitted with pounders and mortars but this was never used against the local people because the feared uprising never took place. But the guns were used for a different purpose. Each morning at 5.00 am a gun was fired and the day would begin for the local people. It was also fired at 12.00 noon when clocks in the sailing ships in the harbour were checked. Finally at 9.00 pm another shot was fired when peace loving citizens were expected to be off the streets.
Learning Activities

1. Review the notes on Coleman and study the headstones and the remains of Fort Canning.

   (Concrete Experience)  
   Skills of the Historian  
   (i) examining primary and secondary sources  
   (ii) reading for understanding.

2. List the names and ages of 5 people who were buried at the cemetary.

   (Reflective Observation)  
   Skill of the Historian  
   (i) extracting relevant historical information

3. In which 3 countries did Coleman work before coming to Singapore.

   (Abstract Conceptualisation)  
   Skills of the Historian  
   (i) deductive thinking  
   (ii) making tentative conclusions.

4. Give 2 reasons why Fort Canning was built.

   (Active Experimentation)  
   Skills of the Historian  
   (i) extrapolation  
   (ii) applying concepts of progress and development  
   (iii) then and now

5. Why did many die young in Singapore between the 1830’s - 1865.

6. Assess Coleman’s contributions to present day Singapore.
JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The banker gun site is an excellent starting point for the introduction of the next phase of Singapore’s history - the Japanese Occupation from 1942 - 1945.

While the Japanese under General Yamashita were invading Singapore, General Percival and his top military commanders used the banker gun site to draw up hurried last minute military strategies to counter the Japanese offensive. Everything failed and the Japanese conquered the island. From about 1942 - 1945 Singapore became known as Syonan (Light of the South).

The Japanese Occupation brought in its train widespread suffering, ruin and dislocation. People who were anti-Japanese and believe to be so were cruelly "examained" by the Chinese. The Japanese had been fighting the Chinese in China. They were aware that the Chinese in Singapore had contributed money to help China against Japan. A group of Chinese Volunteers had also taught the Japanese. In trying to get rid of the Chinese who were against them, the Japanese went all out to punish the Chinese population of Singapore.

All Chinese between 18 and 50 years of age had to report at certain centres to be "examained" by the Japanese. Conditions at the centres were oppressively terrible. Masked collaborators in hoods identified
Chinese who were anti-Japanese. They were taken away and shot. Others were allowed to go home.

The Japanese demanded 50 million dollars from the Chinese community. After much difficulty Dr Lim Boon Keng, the leader of the Overseas Chinese Association, managed to raise 29 million from the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore. The rest was borrowed from a Japanese bank.

To complain about anything was dangerous. Wartime shortages and the unlimited "banana" notes caused spiralling inflation. Despite strict rationing of essential goods a black market flourished. Electric bulbs which had cost less than 45 cents in December 1941 could not be bought for less than $210 in August 1945. A Parker pen worth $15 in pre-war days fetched $500 in 1944 and about $5,000 a year later. Rice sold at $4,000 a pikul in June 1945 whereas it had sold for only $5 in December 1941. By the end of the war a teachers monthly salary could buy only 1 kati of pork in the black market. Rentals also skyrocketed as people moved into the city in search of employment.

The average family subsisted on a diet of broken rice grains made into a porridge - with sweet potato, tapioca and few fragments of ikan bilis. Cornmeal, ragi and sago replaced the almost unattainable wheat flour.
Food was always scarce. Everybody planted topocia, sweet potatoes, maize, yam, bananas and vegetables. Women and school children went out to clear, dig and plant on an available vacant land. Tennis courts became mini-vegetable gardens. Gardens were dug up and criss-crossed by rows of topocia or furrows of sweet potatoes. Even the grass verge along main roads were turned into vegetable plots. Staff employed by every organisation had prescribed hours for gardening.

The suffering of the people, the harshness and brutality of Japanese rule had a tremendous political impact on some, particularly Lee Kuan Yew. Looking back at the Japanese Occupation he said:

"My colleagues and I are of that generation of young men who went through the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation and became determined that no one ..., neither the Japanese nor the British - had the right to push and kick us around. We were determined that we could govern ourselves and bring up our children in a country where we can be a self-respecting people".

With the Japanese defeat and surrender in September 1945 and the return to British rule, the PAP under Lee Kuan Yew made steady political gains, winning independence for Singapore in 1965.
Learning Activities

1. Read the handout relevant to the Japanese Occupation.
   (Concrete Experience) Skill of the Historian (i) studying evidence

2. Why were the Japanese harsh and cruel to the Chinese and Eurasians but not to the other races.
   (Reflective Observation) Skills of the Historian (i) explanation in history (ii) extracting reasons from sources (iii) analysis

3. Imagine you are a 14 year old living in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. Describe what life was like then.
   (Abstract Conceptualisation) Skills of the Historian (i) imaginative reconstruction (ii) empathising with people in the past

4. What lessons can we learn from the Japanese Occupation?
   (Active Experimentation) Skills of the Historian (i) assessing impact (ii) making the past relevant to the present
CONCLUSION

A simple questionnaire to gauge the effectiveness of the fieldtrip was administered to all 60 participants. The collated responses (vide appendix) indicate that well over 95% of respondents feel that fieldtrips can be used effectively as a teaching strategy to enhance pupils understanding and appreciation of history. More importantly the skills of the historian such as reconstructing the past, selecting and using evidence and making tentative conclusions can be mastered in field situations.

Needless to say fieldtrips in history often offer tremendous possibilities of making the subject more interesting, more meaningful and more relevant to pupils.
1. The purpose of this form is to obtain feedback from you on the fieldtrip to Fort Canning Hill.

2. Please complete the form by giving your responses frankly and objectively.

3. There is no need to write your name.

4. THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE.

Part A

Please indicate your response by putting a tick in the relevant box against the following items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Fieldtrips can be used to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history among secondary school pupils.</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Content-based history can be taught effectively to pupils outside the classroom through fieldtrips.</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Pupils will be able to use primary sources to learn history if and when learning activities are meaningfully planned and carried out.</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Pupils can be taught, through fieldtrips, to make tentative conclusions about the past.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Historical concepts such as change and continuity can be taught effectively through fieldtrips.

6. Periodization can be taught through the use of actual evidence in the field.

7. Pupils can be taught to make valid comparisons between what happened in the past and what is happening now (then and now) in fieldtrip situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Historical concepts such as change and continuity can be taught effectively through fieldtrips.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Periodization can be taught through the use of actual evidence in the field.</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pupils can be taught to make valid comparisons between what happened in the past and what is happening now (then and now) in fieldtrip situations.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


