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Author(s)	Low Ee Ling
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CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION

SECTION 3: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR HOLISTIC CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Group endeavours in service learning in the National Institute of Education: Experiential/service learning in a teacher training programme

LOW Ee Ling¹

¹ Department of English Language and Literature
National Institute of Education,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Group endeavours in service learning in the National Institute of Education: Experiential/service learning in a teacher training programme

JNUSTA: *We understand that you run the mandatory service learning project for all your student teachers at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. Could you tell us (a) what this programme does; and (b) how you ensure the right kind of outcomes that Professor Amy Tsui has alluded to and avoid lapses into what she calls “educational tourism”?*

Ee Ling: Group Endeavours in Service Learning (GESL) is an experiential learning opportunity for all NIE student teachers done in collaboration with local schools and organisations, both government and non-government. It is hoped that GESL will help our student teachers be more ready to lead service learning and Values-in-Action (VIA) initiatives when they are full-fledged teachers in schools. GESL also aims to develop character, social-emotional competencies and positive values. GESL has several key objectives, including cultivating team work, management, and leadership skills, as well as serving as a platform for inter-ethnic and inter-religious understanding.

Student teachers work in groups of 16 to 20 to plan, implement and review service learning with a community of their choice. Each GESL group is structured with one academic staff mentor, two group leaders, two facilitators, and a secretary, and two safety officers. Other members in the group are encouraged to pick up roles that align with their competencies and allow them to contribute to the group. Training is provided to staff mentors, group leaders and facilitators. The training provides them with knowledge of service learning, understanding of experiential learning cycle and basic facilitation skills to ensure their service learning experience meets the service and learning objectives. A celebratory sharing (e.g., Service Learning Day) with the NIE community caps their experience at the end of nine months.

GESL is a pedagogy in developing values, skills, and knowledge of student teachers underpinned by NIE’s Values, Skills and Knowledge model and the Ministry of Education (MOE)’s 21st Century Competencies Framework. The experience provides an opportunity for trainees to understand themselves and reach out to the community. It is envisaged that attributes such as the ability to foster care for the community, a respect for diversity, a strong collaborative spirit, and a deep commitment to the profession can be honed. Specific skills developed through service learning include reflective skills, pedagogical skills, communication skills, facilitative skills, and social and emotional intelligence.

Areas of knowledge developed through service learning experiences include gains in knowledge of self, one's pupils, the community, subject content and multicultural literacy.

The six essential components of service learning are reciprocity, meaningful service, community voice, student voice, reflection, and academic connections. Based on these essentials, GESL groups are encouraged to identify the needs of their partners and develop an intense service and learning experience. GESL conducts a midterm review with staff mentors, group leaders and secretaries to touch base on their progress.

Student teachers are assessed for their contribution to their group and project. The evaluation is adapted from MOE's Project Work for Secondary School Evaluation Format. The four areas of focus are: knowledge application (Group – Process & Product), communication (group presentation), collaboration (group), and independent learning (individual)

The staff facilitator documents the progress and observation of the group and its members. The individual is assessed on the group level for knowledge application (process), knowledge application (product), communication (oral), and collaboration (teamwork). Each student teacher is also required to submit a project reflection and an end-of-project reflection which are used to assist assessment on the individual level. The specific areas of individual assessment include attitude, leadership abilities and project management skills, among many others. Upon completion of the GESL project, the student teacher receives a GESL transcript. The GESL transcript documents the overall evaluation of the group and an individual assessment of the individual.

In order to ensure that the project does not suffer from being reduced to just another exercise in “educational tourism”, a needs analysis must be done and presented to the staff facilitator before the students can decide on which community they wish to partner with. Next, clear deliverables and end-of-project assessment ensure that the goals of the project are not lost. Student teachers need to spend at least 20 hours with the community of their choice, produce a concrete deliverable (such as a pamphlet promoting awareness of the community's needs) and they need to present how their project has benefitted the community they have worked with. Finally, each student teacher is presented with an individual testimonial that documents their contribution to the project so no one gets a “free ride” as it were.

This service-learning programme was established in 2005 and during our focused group discussions with our student teachers who have undergone the programme, it invariably becomes clear that while many started off with a spirit

of reticence, because it appeared to be an “add-on” to their heavy curriculum, they all emerged with a deep sense of purpose realising that they have learnt much more from engaging with the community of their choice than perhaps they may have benefitted that community. It helped them to build strong partnerships and to reach out to the community, a trait that will stand them in good stead as they go into schools as beginning teachers. Most of all, it also makes them ready for the Community Involvement Project, meaning they emerge knowing how to facilitate such service learning projects for their schools in the future.

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