

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FORUM (ELF) DIGEST (ISSUE 2)



Initiated by the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE), ELF serves as a platform where faculty members share their expertise with the SMU academic community in experiential learning and/or its related topics.

Comparing Approaches to Experiential Learning: Study Mission to Rural China versus Public Policy Task Force 12 April 2017

In this second issue of ELF-Digest, we feature Associate Professor John Donaldson, who shared the joys and tribulations of designing and teaching two different experiential learning courses: (1) Study Mission to Rural China and (2) Public Policy Task Force.

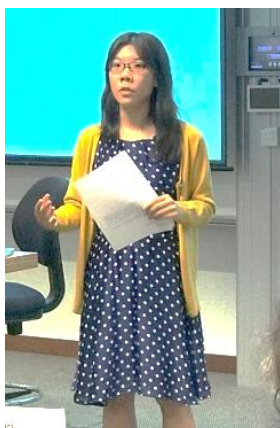


Study Mission to Rural China

The Study Mission course presented students with a first-hand experience to study the rural development of China. It adopted a bottom-up approach whereby students organized and designed the study mission, and John's role was largely that of a mentor.



The Study Mission course encapsulated both aspects of classroom learning and community service. All students participated in regular classes with readings, assignments, homework and presentations. They were also members of student-led overseas community service projects.



Shona Tan Hui Shan, a final-year student at Lee Kong Chian School of Business who took the Study Mission course in 2015, was invited to share her experience. Despite the challenge in aligning the expectations of an overseas community service project with the course requirements, she viewed that the pros greatly outweighed the cons. Looking at poverty from a real-world perspective shaped her view of the world. Shona attributed the positive learning experience she had to John's excellent teaching in research design methodology. Despite a stumbling block which necessitated a change of research question, she was able to do so effortlessly due to the sound research design method created. In fact, Shona enjoyed the course so much that she actually signed up as a student leader the following year.

Public Policy Task Force

The Public Policy Task Force course presented students with the opportunity to undertake true-to-life public policy analysis. Offered as an SMU-X course, 20 senior year undergraduate students had to work with the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) to examine the impact of Singapore’s education policy on low-income post-Normal (Technical) students. Students put forth recommendations on changes that could be made, either in reforming current institutions or in designing new interventions, to support Normal (Technical) students in helping them meet their identified unmet social needs.



Jolyn Khoo Kiah Min, a third-year student at School of Law, took on the role of the “futurist” in the Public Policy Task Force course. She shared that she benefitted greatly from having ownership in her own learning and the opportunity to co-create content: initiating what topics to be discussed during class rather than have John dictating the content. Despite having uncertainty about the goal of the Task Force at the beginning of the course, she opined that it was a memorable and impactful learning experience.

Joys and Tribulations

John shared his joys of designing and teaching the two experiential learning courses as:

Study Mission to Rural China	Public Policy Task Force (SMU-X Course)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tons of “Aha!” moments for the students (including his own) through experiencing parts of China not seen before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tons of “Aha!” moments for the students (including his own) through experiencing a class of Singaporeans with lower economic status
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transformative experience for students; being “student-run, student-led” contributed towards their character building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transformative experience for students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impactful difference made to the local rural community in China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impactful difference made to the Malay youths through RIMA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First-hand data (rather than secondary data) collected honed students’ research skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First-hand data (rather than secondary data) collected honed students’ research skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two co-authored papers submitted to peer-reviewed journals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One book with findings will be published

John shared his tribulations of designing and teaching the two experiential learning courses as:

Study Mission to Rural China	Public Policy Task Force (SMU-X Course)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three courses in one <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Introduction to China's Politics and Society ◦ Rural poverty and development ◦ Qualitative Methods; fieldwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three courses in one <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Singapore Politics and Society ◦ Comparative Education Policy ◦ Qualitative Methods; Semi-structured Interviews; Process Tracing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncontrollable variables: Government, student leaders, and student recruitment - in addition to running a course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncontrollable variables: Uncertainty about the lesson plan in the upcoming week
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour intensive for student and professor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour intensive for student and professor (Akin to sprinting and running a marathon concurrently)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty made students uncomfortable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Puzzle-driven research ◦ Data availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty made students uncomfortable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Puzzle-driven research ◦ Instructor was not even sure what topics were key for the course (Dyslexia? EM-3? Allied educator system?) ◦ Data availability ◦ Process tracing mystifying to many students – even smart ones

The participants were intrigued by John's sharing which sparked off an interesting conversation after his presentation. Mr. Wong Yuet Nan, an adjunct faculty member with School of Information Systems, also exchanged pointers through sharing his experience with designing and teaching the SMU-X course "Advanced Seminar on IS Management: Managing Information Systems for Business Value".



Advice for Other Colleagues



John also provided some advice to other faculty members who were keen to adopt this approach for their courses:

- Keep an eye on the benefits – *outweigh the problems*
- Be ready to accept problems – *Stay sane; remember/remind, this is reality (experiential)*
- Be prepared to engage in active mentoring of students
 - The messiness is part of your clients' world
 - Small class size (20 students) made the course easier to manage



Please contact us at cte@smu.edu.sg to feature your stories and insights on best practices in designing and teaching experiential learning courses. We welcome your feedback!