

COMMENTARY

“Good Practices of Living-learning Programmes”[†]: Perspectives From An Asian Location

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INTRODUCTION

In her paper in the May 2016 issue of the *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (AJSOTL), [Inkelas \(2016\)](#) gives a concise yet comprehensive overview of the revived living-learning programmes (LLP) in North America. The paper highlights the motivation for the revival of the LLPs, principles undergirding the LLPs, variations of the LLP model and their respective characteristics as well as drawing from empirical evidence in sharing the extent of the effectiveness of the LLPs in colleges in North America. This paper aims to critically reflect on three key aspects discussed by Inkelas (2016), namely motivation, intended learning outcomes and evaluation of the effectiveness of LLPs, and relate them to the Singapore higher education context.

MOTIVATION

As noted by Inkelas, Soldner and Szelényi (2008), while LLPs have been in existence in different variations and models for many decades at universities around the world, the last two to three decades have seen an increased interest especially in relation to undergraduate education. This is evident not only in North America but also in Asia as observed from the growth of residential colleges, for example, in Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore.

In making a point on the impact the learning environment has on learning outcomes, Inkelas (2014) reflects on Einstein’s quote “Everything important that I learned in the college, I did not learn in the classroom” and argues that while students do learn in the classroom, they also learn, if not more, equally from their interaction with others, participation in co-curricular activities, and experiences beyond the formal classroom. She further relates this to the residential college setting where she asserts that the influences of a seamless intentional integration of learning and living spaces could be harnessed for an enhanced student experience and learning outcomes. Besides this philosophical take, Inkelas (2016) shares that the current LLPs were a response to mounting concerns about the Year One transition into college, appreciation for diversity, civic engagement, sense of belonging, behavioural issues such as alcohol use, and attrition risks.

While this is true and important in the context described in Inkelas’ paper, in the Singapore context, in particular and elsewhere in Asia, the motivation for LLPs may be different in that there have been shifts from a broader educational perspective that have contributed to the increased interest in LLPs. In re-visioning the purpose and idea of a university, questions about what is the value of an undergraduate education and how its impact can be measured have been raised. What follows is an increased focus placed on competencies demanded by the 21st century workplace. This leads to an intensified transformation process in the undergraduate education curriculum at traditional research-intensive universities, through a re-think of what should be taught at universities, what constitutes learning, and how teaching and learning are viewed and approached. Issues discussed in this re-thinking movement resonate with two key debates posited by John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (Newman, 1852; Turner, 1996), which brings forth core considerations of how universities address the education of values, and the tension between liberal and market-driven education.

The discussion has also prompted vital questions on what the 21st century workplace competencies are. Top leaderships (Andersson as cited in Wong, 2016; Tan, 2015) of comprehensive and research-intensive universities in recent years have talked about making appropriate connections, cultivating interdisciplinary thinking in an increasingly complex world (Andersson as cited in Wong, 2016), and strengthening fundamental pillars and values in a “fast-paced, competitive and less predictable future” (Tan, 2015, p. 10). These competencies and values are arguably most effectively cultivated through experiential learning and application of knowledge within respective learning communities. This is where LLPs, with an intentional effort to integrate physical space, academic and co-curricular environments, a model adapted from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Inkelas, 2016), can make a powerful impact on student learning.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Globally, it could be observed that places for students to pursue tertiary education are on an upward trend, especially in the Asian region where governments are putting in a lot of investments in facilitating more opportunities for students to receive higher education. In Singapore, for example, the percentage of Singaporeans who are enrolled in institutes of higher education has seen an increase from 20% in the early 2000s to the existing 30% in 2015 (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2014). One of the key considerations of a growing undergraduate population is how quality education can be delivered and sustained, in terms of academic rigour and student life experience.

Relating these considerations to LLPs, Inkelas (2016) highlights three intended learning outcomes: (1) transition from pre-university to university which essentially means from home to university, (2) academic achievement and retention of learning, and (3) learning and development. These broad learning outcomes are similar to the Singapore and presumably the Asian contexts. The difference is primarily in the approach that different institutions take in effecting the intended learning outcomes.

Broadly defined as residences that have both living and learning components (Inkelas, Soldner & Szelényi, 2008), the more than 600 LLPs involved in the National Study of Living-Learning Programmes (NSLLP) were categorized into 17 themes with different budgets, programme structures, population sizes, issues, academic and co-curricular intensity, and faculty involvement. While they differ in many of these aspects, they are similar singularly in that there is an encompassed learning component in the LLPs. At various degrees, most resonate with the type of residential experience that Shushok, Scales, Sriram and Kidd (2011) strongly call for, namely one that incorporates, instead of separating academic and student life, in and out-of-class experiences.

In the past decade in Singapore, residences in higher education are moving towards this model of residential experience. While still in existence, the “sleep and eat” model (Shushok, Scales, Sriram & Kidd, 2011) is gradually being replaced by residential colleges with an integration of academic, co-academic and co-curricular pursuits. The National University of Singapore’s residential college philosophy and implementation framework is a reflection of such residential experience. The traditional hall of residence model which has been historically strong in cultivating personal, interpersonal, team and social effectiveness has increasingly built in meaningful scaffolding and critical reflective considerations to capture valuable learning moments. Such an effort reflects a recognition and concerted effort in surfacing (experiential) learning in an intentional and systematic manner. An added and new dimension to the residences is the perspective on ecology (Strange & Banning, 2001) that takes into consideration how the physical design of living spaces contributes to the dynamics of interaction, as observed in new residential halls at the Nanyang Technological University (Ho, 2015), and the National University of Singapore’s University Town College Programme (2016).

Among the three intended learning outcomes for LLPs that Inkelas (2016) shares, learning and development is prevalent in the residential environment in the Singapore context. For residential colleges, the academic dimension is central to the programmes. These intended outcomes are mainly articulated in the rhetoric of intellectual engagement, assimilation and synthesis of cross-disciplinary knowledge, and multi-perspectival thinking (University Town

College Programme, 2016). For the halls of residence especially as well as residential colleges, programmes and activities aimed at individual growth, interpersonal effectiveness and social cohesiveness have outcomes that lead not only to a sense of belonging to the learning community and institution, but also competencies as demanded by the 21st century workplace.

Whether it is academic, co-academic or co-curricular, engagement refers to a certain level of commitment to and participation in activities, conversations and academic endeavours. Engaged learning occurs at various levels such as cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic and social-cultural. It is also contextualized depending on the learning environment or situation. As such, for engaged learning to take place, the learning space must be seen as first, a knowledge-building learning community (Fletcher, 2005) and second, as contributing to the “whole student experience” (Coates, 2006, p. 29). This “whole student experience” perspective as proposed by Coates (2006) postulates that in the current higher educational scene, a student’s learning experience extends beyond his/her academic pursuit. It involves non-academic and social, in-class and out-of-class experiences. In fact, both the academic and non-academic experiences contribute to an expected learning outcome of high-quality (Coates, 2006).

The Year One transition experience is an intended outcome that is embedded in the residential contexts in Singapore. The fundamental motivations are to help students develop a greater sense of community and to capture memorable out-of-classroom learning experiences that may not have been feasible had the students not stayed on campus. The exposure, opportunity and experience are even more important if these students are enrolled in large comprehensive universities. Orientation programmes, peer learning schemes, senior-junior mentor-mentee collaborations are among examples commonly observed in residential colleges and halls of residence. In studying Year One transition, Shapiro and Levine (1999) present four categories of learning communities such as paired/cluster, interest group, team-teaching, and residential programmes. Another model of learning communities is Lenning and Ebbers’ (1999) categorization based on curriculum, modules, residential, and student-type. Whichever the categorization may be, research has primarily looked at academic-focused learning communities whereas studies on residential learning communities have been less prominent until the early 2000s (Inkelas, Soldner & Szélenyi, 2008). While this is a potential area of research that could be further explored, it should be noted that many of the LLPs in Inkelas’ context offer only one-year transition programmes. In the Singapore context, however, students may stay with a residence from one year to the end of their entire candidature of four or five years.

EFFECTIVENESS

In investigating the effectiveness of LLPs, the seminary work of Inkelas and colleagues in 2004 and 2007 that involved 49 colleges and universities in the United States in a longitudinal study methodology has provided rich insights (Inkelas, K. K., 2008; Inkelas, Soldner & Szelényi, 2008; Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Brown Leonard, 2008). The study found that the most significant impact of LLPs is in helping Year One students transit better into university. The associated positive influences could be observed from reduced alcohol consumption and an increased sense of belonging. All these lead to a positive impact of a higher retention rate of students. Besides this, although impact is low, the study found students in LLPs enjoy the pursuit of academic challenges more than their counterparts in residence-only environments. The impact of LLPs on cognitive growth, appreciation for diversity, and motivation for life-long learning is not significant.

While still scanty, scholarship investigating the effectiveness of living-learning experience is gaining traction in Asia. In an internal report on a small study surveying students' university experience conducted in NUS (Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, 2013), the findings suggest that compared to students who had not had residential experience, students who had such experience had a greater involvement in academic conversations. They also reported to express thoughts and ideas in a more confident manner, to have a greater sense of identity for the institution, and a stronger and more cultivated team effectiveness. In another recent study conducted at one of the residential colleges at NUS, namely the College of Alice and Peter Tan (CAPT), preliminary results from two surveys (total of 484 respondents) show positive learning outcomes associated with the academic environment, the diversity of the community, community engagement, and the connectivity between formal and informal learning (Tambyah, 2016).

In another recently concluded study in Korea (Byoun, 2016, this volume) that compared LLPs to the traditional “sleep and eat” model (Shushok, Scales, Sriram & Kidd, 2011), the findings indicate that LLPs have a more positive impact for students in disciplines related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) on student engagement, especially in response to academic challenges and transition to the university community. Interestingly, although results show that the respondents did not feel a greater sense of inclusion in their respective communities, they indicated a greater intention to contribute back to the colleges.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Inkelas’ caution about LLPs not being a “panacea for all that ails higher education” (2016, p. 73) is a timely reminder that critical changes in effecting compelling student learning outcomes must be aligned with the university’s strategic goals and informed by sound empirical evidence. It is also crucial to recognize that while research in LLPs does show positive aspects on student learning and experience, the results are not conclusive in terms of the intended learning outcomes. What is clear is best practices are the reflection of effective integration of academic, co-academic, co-curricular engagement and physical spaces.

“The value of a college education is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think.”
– Albert Einstein ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LEE Kooi Cheng is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication. She is also Master of King Edward VII Hall. Her current interests are in learning beyond the classroom and living-learning programmes. She contributed a conversation on experiential learning in the May 2013 issue of *JNUSTA*.

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