Encouraging Youth Engagement in the Public Square

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The hopeless apathy of our youths is an urban myth. In our students’ worlds, such as the blogosphere, they feel strongly about some issues and energetically engage one another, even as some may seem indifferent in our classes.

A motivational speaker has suggested that employers who grumble about their employees’ lack of motivation should observe what sort of persons their employees are in their other pursuits. After work, employees who looked ready to go home and crash come alive when they get into their sports gear. Most teachers, too, discover students are different outside the classroom.

The surprising insight that most people are not unmotivated ‘by nature’ has encouraging implications. If we can challenge our students to redraw the boundaries of their worlds to include the classroom, we could stretch their capacities. We have to begin by making the classroom less alien to the students, and by believing that their lives are significant, that they can go on to impact others powerfully, and that we can make a difference to their lives.

I teach two modules in the Faculty of Law which allow me to encourage students to make a difference in debates in the public square that ultimately affect public decisions and law-making: LC1002B “Introduction to Legal Theory”, a first year core subject, and LL4404 “Jurisprudence”, an upper year elective. I get students to think about how law is related to justice, morality, liberty and politics, and encourage students to reflect upon their future roles in the legal process. What is the legitimate basis of law in a pluralist society? In making legal arguments as lawyers, should they question the justice of particular laws? What influence can they have in the law-making process?

Philosophical courses, especially in a professional school, are reputedly difficult and abstract. This may be due in part to the pragmatic tastes of the average Singaporean, who wants what she learns to be directly applicable in her future work. Further, many readings are difficult to master as the language is dense, or the contexts in which the issues arise belong to another era.

I endeavour to help students realise that abstract issues may be concretised in culturally current contexts. Where equivalent local debates are available, I require local readings in addition to those coming from other jurisdictions. For example, the Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution from the United Kingdom in the 1950s is a classic reference in jurisprudence texts in England, but our parliamentary debates on similar laws are a more familiar topic for students. I aim to demonstrate how one’s opinions on the matters covered in the course are relevant in specific issues debated in the public square in Singapore. An example is the current debate on euthanasia. Do people have the right to decide when and how to die? Is this a question of personal liberty? On what basis should countries regulate this?

I participate in the public square by writing commentary pieces in the local newspaper, The Straits Times. I have written on topics that engage philosophy such as the role of religion in pluralist
Numerous articles written by my students have into the ‘real’ world. Pedagogical reasons aside, I hope to make philosophy accessible to the general public, influence public opinion (and the views of decision-makers in society) on particular issues where I believe that knowledge of philosophy is useful in shedding light on the interests at stake, and test my opinions as I follow the debate that ensues. Shortly after I wrote a piece on abortion which was hotly debated in the public square, for example, questions were raised in parliament on the government’s stance towards abortion laws.

I require relevant readings of these articles in my courses, and encourage my students to write. In Academic Year 2006/2007, two students taking LC1002B wrote to The Straits Times Forum during the reading week just before their examinations. In subsequent years, I included such public square participation as a component of the assessment of ‘class participation’ for my courses. Apart from gaining points by speaking up in class or online, in LC1002B for example, students may write to the press or some equivalent media. Class participation counts for 30 per cent of their overall grade. They are rewarded for submission of relevant letters which are assessed for the degree of connection with the subject matter of the course, without a need for publication as the latter may be an editorial decision.

Rewarding students in this manner is useful for several reasons: Firstly, as students think about issues in the public square, the classroom is connected with the ‘real’ world, demonstrating philosophy’s daily relevance; second, I draw upon contexts familiar to the students, making them more comfortable with the otherwise abstract subject matter; third, I harness students’ continued encounters with public square issues which will trigger their continued thinking and talking; finally, my teaching achieves practical impact as my students take what they learn into the ‘real’ world.

Numerous articles written by my students have been published. They have informally thanked me for helping them take the first step in participating in the public square, as well as appreciated it in official student feedback on the course. One student remarked on the inclusion of current issues:

By including current affairs in our readings, she has allowed us to bridge the gap between abstract theories of law and reality. This allows us to grasp the difficult theories better. Her inclusion of controversial topics and constant challenge to us to think critically about the issues around us rather than accept them at face value has helped cultivate an analytical mindset for me.

Not all students will continue participating when assessment is over, but some will. Some would not have begun writing without the carrot of marks. If some become involved citizenry who care about issues around them, I am heartened that the course assessment facilitated their baby steps and helped in the cultivation of a habit of civic participation. May they value integrity and find the courage to put their views to the test and stand up for what they truly believe in.

Endnotes

2. True believers or moral absolutists, The Straits Times, November 15, 2004; It’s all right to be wrong, sometimes, The Straits Times, May 5, 2005.
6. Questions raised by Mr Christopher de Souza and Mr Siew Kum Hong, “ Abortions and Adoptions”; Oral answers to questions, Parliament No. 11, Session No. 1, Volume No. 84, Sitting No. 19 (August 27, 2008).
8. Do not forsake the ideals of going into law, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 25, 2008; SDP’s unsolicited visit: NTU management’s ban on student media coverage, The Straits Times, October 9, 2008; Euthanasia: Should doctors not be influenced by their personal beliefs and morals? The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, November 4, 2008; Sex education: Letter writer was not neutral, The Straits Times, November 10, 2008; Don’t scrap exams, Today, February 6, 2009; Allow judges more leeway in sentencing, The Straits Times, March 9, 2009; Pro-payment, The Straits Times, March 27, 2009; Law’s purpose to maximize scarce land, Today, April 10, 2009; Give a more holistic view of euthanasia, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 14, 2009; Scholarship holders are only human, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 14, 2009; Hawker centre hygiene, not air-con, is the main issue, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 15, 2009; Focus on grades makes tuition so important, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 15, 2009; Does this signal a shift in public policy?, The Straits Times, April 16, 2009; If they’re unwilling to work for free, I don’t see how they can complain, The Straits Times, April 16, 2009; Euthanasia robs terminally ill and their loved ones of precious moments, The Straits Times Forum—Online Story, April 16, 2009.
When it comes to promoting interactive teaching and learning, a little change goes a long way.

Recently, I read an article describing how teachers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have gone back to basics, to using blackboard to teach physics by employing a method called Technology Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL). In this article, Rimer (2009) detailed how introductory physics has traditionally been taught "in a vast windowless amphitheater", accommodating as many as 300 undergraduates to the shift towards smaller classes that has been instituted in an effort to teach science better. According to the report, MIT has gone the way of "smaller classes that emphasize hands-on, interactive, collaborative learning". What began as an experiment that faced much resistance, even from students in the early years, has now become an accepted practice, welcomed by the majority of students and professors. Attendance is said to have improved enormously and failure rate has dropped significantly (from 12% to 4%) since the introduction of such interactive, student-centric teaching methods. This trend is adopted in many other institutions in the US, but in the case of MIT, what has resulted is described as below:

At M.I.T., two introductory courses are still required—classical mechanics and electromagnetism—but today they meet in high-tech classrooms, where about 80 students sit at 13 round tables equipped with networked computers. Instead of blackboards, the walls are covered with white boards and huge display screens. Circulating with a team of teaching assistants, the professor makes brief presentations of general principles and engages the students as they work out related concepts in small groups. Teachers and students conduct experiments together. The room buzzes. Conferring with tablemates, calling out questions and jumping up to write formulas on the white boards are all encouraged.

To a large extent, even though classes are just as big in NUS, and often bigger, many of our colleagues here already practise some form of interactive, collaborative teaching and learning method in their classrooms. I can cite a number of examples. One, the successful use of buzz-group activities in lecture settings as big as 300 to 400 students have been reported by various colleagues, including Associate Professor Millie Rivera from the Communications and New Media Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). Millie says she does a ‘buzz moment’ (refer to her article on p. 5) on the very first day of the semester with her 450-student lectures. In her words:

I love doing this! At first students are not sure that I really mean it when I tell them to talk to one another in the lecture session, but once they realise I am serious, they enjoy it. The activity takes no more than 5–7 minutes, but it creates a real opportunity for interaction in the big lecture. It’s one of the things students in my large lectures enjoy most.

Two, where the TEAL classroom has employed wireless personal response clickers, mobile phone technology has been exploited to enable an instant student feedback system during lectures in the Faculty of Engineering in NUS. Associate Professor Arthur Tay from the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering says:

The use of this real-time feedback system using SMS technology has provided us useful feedback on student’s understanding of key concepts from lectures. Both the students and lecturer can see the results instantly via the computer or their mobile phones. The participation rate is usually about 80–90%, much more than the usual ‘show of hands’.

And three, an FASS colleague, Associate Professor John Richardson, recently showed me a specially designed classroom with white boards mounted all round the seminar room, and tables configured in the style of an oval meeting room seating format to facilitate interactive teaching and learning.

I wish to make two simple points. One, a little change can bring about amazing transformation in
classroom dynamics. Just mounting white boards on all available wall space around a room can do wonders to one’s teaching and our students’ learning. John (and his co-lecturer, Professor K.P. Mohanan) testified to the effectiveness of such a simple move in an email:

I was never entirely convinced by the argument for the advantages of boards on different walls, but I am now… The different walls broke up the front-to-back direction of the teaching and really got the students involved.

Of course, these classroom settings worked not simply because white boards were positioned on all available wall space. The physical arrangement of the boards, the deployment of specific technology such as mobile phone feedback system, and the round-table seating arrangement in these classrooms would mean that the teachers involved have thought through how a particular teaching methodology could work for the class (i.e. one that privileges group work, dialogue and active exchanges, students’ participation and feedback), how best to present and teach the material, and that the whole thinking behind such a methodology is the emphasis on teacher and students discovering the learning process together, interactively and collaboratively.

My other point is, in spite of various kinds of physical and financial constraints (we do not enjoy donations to the tune of US$10 million like what MIT reportedly received to equip its two state-of-the-art TEAL classrooms), many of our NUS colleagues are able to achieve an impressive level of interactive, active learning in their classrooms. Those of us who have been teaching for some time know that to effect good teaching, and therefore learning, both affective and physical barriers have to be reduced and student involvement is crucial. The more involved students are in their own learning, the more likely students will learn well and will also enjoy learning. Going the way of the blackboard or white board in most cases today, where the doing/demonstration is a central part of the learning, is therefore a winner.

The set up of classrooms today (without the benefit of a wireless microphone or a clicker) literally straps us to our computer station and this prevents us from moving freely around the classroom. It is perhaps time to go back to basics—to think about how we can inject student interaction and active learning in our classroom. And if mounting a few more white boards on all available wall space in each of our seminar rooms is all it takes, why not do it?

As for moving towards smaller classes like what MIT has done, this is of course a familiar and long-standing issue at NUS. Many of us would, I am sure, welcome a reduction in class size; but we also acknowledge the difficulties in making that a reality in all classes. But if this other ‘little’ move can reap countless rewards in improving the quality of our teaching and the quality of education NUS students receive, again, it is a goal that is worth actively working towards. Debates about resources and student numbers however, are perhaps issues best handled by our senior administrators. As teachers, it is our duty to highlight good teaching and learning experiences we see in our classrooms so as to make an argument for alternative, if more basic ways of teaching and learning.

Reference

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Let’s face it, many undergraduate students view large lectures as the ideal setting to fade into an anonymous mass, relax, catch up on their emails and touch base with friends using various online platforms. Oh, yes, they also text on their mobile phones, surf the Internet and take notes on whatever the lecturer is saying. I have no idea how they manage to do all these things simultaneously, but they do! I saw it with my own eyes when I sat at the back of a lecture theatre to watch a colleague’s lecture some time ago.

The truth is that your passion for the subject, charisma and a lively style of lecturing can only get you so far. Our students’ ability to focus on only one thing is challenged constantly by all the electronic gadgets they carry, and the large lecture format offers the perfect set up for them to practice ‘multitasking’. After all, since the lecturer is busy talking at the front of the room, it is easy for students to become invisible.

This is why I make it a point to have at least one interactive moment in every lecture. It does not cost much—it can be done in about 10 minutes—but the benefits are worth it. These interactive moments can be called anything you want; I am warming up to ‘Quick-in’ (quick interaction), but I have also used the ‘Buzz Moment’. It does not matter what you call it, but I assure you that Quick-ins will help draw students out of their passivity and engage them in discussion even if your class comprises several hundred students.

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I usually choose an interesting or controversial issue for my Quick-ins. It should be something that will capture students’ interest or a concept you think needs additional discussion. In my class, I have a slide (see Figure 1) which students recognise as the prelude to a Quick-in or Buzz Moment.

I introduce the slide to students on the first day of the semester and have a Quick-in to give them a taste of what the activity entails. I also explain to students that my co-lecturers and I will not be ‘picking’ on them, but actively engaging them in the class discussion. When the slide is shown in subsequent lectures, students usually perk up and are eager to interact with each other. I get lots of positive comments about my Quick-ins from student feedback, such as:

• “Though lectures start at 8 am, she never fails to liven up lectures and make them engaging and interesting through initiatives like breaks and Quick-ins. She has taken lectures to a whole new level altogether.”

• “She made lectures very lively and fun to attend as there is interaction between students.”

Figure 1. Slide used in the first day of class to introduce the concept of a Quick-in or Buzz Moment

One catch is that you must be able to get students to be quiet after the time for interaction is up—once they get going, they sometimes do not want to stop. I usually give them a one-minute warning so they can wrap up the discussion and then firmly ask them to stop so we can hear from some students in the class.

A Quick-in can last anywhere from four to six minutes. If you let students talk for too long, they may slowly gravitate to discuss things unrelated to the class, but if you do not give them enough time, they are unable to have a meaningful discussion.

After the discussion is over, I ask student to share their views with the rest of the class. Do not expect
volunteers! Instead, be ready to ask students at random. Make sure you call on students across the entire lecture theatre and not just those seated in front or centre for instance. In fact, I make a point to call on students who sit at the back. Your discussion with students after the Quick-in can be just a few minutes; but if you do it right, you can easily move on to the next subject and continue your class.

You can do a few variations of the Quick-in. For example, you can have students write down their views on the subject and collect the sheets so they can receive credit for class participation. I used to do this in a 450-student lecture and it created a huge amount of work for my teaching assistants. You can also have each segment of the lecture theatre discuss a different question/issue. Another good use for a Quick-in is when you are showing a video and want students to extract key issues. You can show students a slide with the questions before the video so they know what to look for in the video, and allow a short discussion after the video is over. Students will pay more attention to the video that way. Finally, if you are discussing a difficult concept, use a Quick-in. You can introduce the concept, give students an opportunity to discuss it or answer some questions, and then use their feedback to explain the concept further and clarify the common doubts or misconceptions.

It is important that you walk around the lecture theatre when students are interacting. This will keep their focus on the subject and allow you to engage students who resist the activity (you will always have a few of those). I usually approach the disengaged students and discuss the issue with them, letting them know I will call on them during the sharing session. The next time I do a Quick-in, these students will start talking with the others right away because they do not want me to zero in on them again!

Building at least one interactive moment in large classes allows students to learn from each other, reflect on the subjects/issues discussed in class, and makes the lecture more enjoyable and a more meaningful learning experience. Since students are fully engaged in the discussion, they will remember the concepts better.

So try a Quick-in! The benefits for you and your students are worth it.

Learning Spaces

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The layout of a teaching room cannot determine the nature of the interaction and learning that take place in it, but it can exert a considerable influence. There is more likelihood of discussion in a room in which students face each other, than in a room in which they all sit looking at the lecturer and other students’ backs. Moreover, the existence of large numbers of rooms of the second kind sends a message to students as they walk round the campus—the message that learning is a process by which a lecturer actively transmits knowledge and students passively receive it.

All this is well known. What is not quite so obvious, however, is the influence of specific details of classroom layout. Before this semester, I had heard of rooms with white boards on different walls, but had not been convinced that this could make much difference. My mind changed when I taught in such a room.

Just before the beginning of the semester, Professor Mohanan and I conducted a research workshop for 18 junior college students about to embark upon H3 research in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). Our learning outcomes were modest. We wanted students to acquire some sense of a research question and understand that the research approach—methodology—must be adapted to the question. In order to achieve this, we had a number of tasks for the students to perform.

The workshop was held in a recently refurbished room in FASS. The room has five hexagonal tables so that the students sit in groups of five or six. It also has two white boards on each of the three walls without windows. But the white boards were not why I chose the room; I simply wanted the students to sit around the round tables.
The students worked in four groups of four or five, and halfway through the workshop, we asked each group to choose one research question from their earlier applications for the H3 scheme. We planned to discuss the questions, and in particular, to think about how to refine them and about the kind of methodology each would require. While the groups were discussing, we decided, off the cuff, to use the white boards on facing walls.

The decision had consequences which I had not anticipated. As soon as we started eliciting the questions and writing them up, the students had to look back and forth across the room at us and at each other. Similarly, as soon as we started discussing the questions, they had to make comments in the direction of other students. The result was that they began talking not just to us but to each other. As one student threw a suggestion across the room, another would catch it, consider it and throw it back. A discussion developed which was still directed by the teachers at some points, but which was driven and shaped by the students.

The position of the white boards was instrumental in fostering this discussion. The students had to move to see the different boards, and in doing so they caught the eye not just of the students near or opposite them, but of students all over the room. This had the effect of creating considerable crosstalk.

The workshop was not an unadulterated success. I finished by giving tips from the front about bibliography and writing, and the students' attention visibly waned. However, the middle part went well as students engaged with their tasks, with each other and with us. A good part of that success was owing to the room arrangement and the facing white boards.

Maximising Opportunities for Experiential Learning at NUS

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Studying at NUS definitely has its perks. Apart from the core requirements that leads to a degree, NUS also has various programmes to augment the undergraduates’ learning experience. Some of the more beneficial programmes are those that centre on experiential learning. Undergraduates often praise the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP) for providing them with an avenue to put theory into practice. They also talk about how the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) experience has benefitted those with an entrepreneurial inclination.

With a myriad of experiential learning programmes, how can NUS undergraduates fully maximise the opportunities available in NUS during their three to four years here? It is helpful for undergraduates to map a path for experiential learning, so as not to get lost in this plethora of experience-based learning opportunities. Here, I highlight three main motivations that could guide fellow undergraduates in mapping a path for experiential learning.

1. Cultural Immersion
Nothing beats widening one’s horizons through an overseas exchange opportunity. Embarking on the Student Exchange Programme (SEP), a Summer School or an Overseas Internship are just some ways to grow in maturity and achieve a greater sense of cultural and international awareness. In addition, participation in these programmes contribute to students’ ability to thrive in a foreign environment. This is definitely an experience to which every undergraduate should aspire.

2. Working Experience from Internships
An internship with a company is a sure way to practise skills learnt in the classroom. In addition, students get to hone their interpersonal and communication skills while picking up new skills on the job. This experience will also go a long way in preparing students for their first job after graduation. Although internships may not be compulsory for
every student, the benefits of such experiences should be highlighted to all undergraduates.

3. Co-curricular Activities

Perhaps one of the most overlooked areas is participation in the university’s co-curricular activities (CCAs). Students who do not live in hostels may not have a direct incentive to participate in CCAs which provide excellent avenues to make friends who share the same interests, and develop time management and leadership skills.

All these experiential learning programmes enhance NUS undergraduates’ learning experience. However, to derive maximal enrichment in one’s undergraduate experience, how should one manage these opportunities? I suggest using either of the following two strategies: (1) to specialise or (2) to complement and diversify, in mapping a path for experiential learning. As such, students should either seek to enhance their understanding of a particular domain of knowledge and its related intricacies, or broaden their awareness of different disciplines and the world in general.

Personally, I have opted for the ‘complement and diversify’ approach and found it to be extremely enriching and useful in increasing my understanding of science beyond the core requirements.

I hope that this short commentary will shed light on how we can map a path for experiential learning and the key motivations that could be possibly used to guide undergraduates to achieve a holistic learning experience, culminating in a well-rounded university education.