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Post-Project Reflective Essay: From "Giving" to Witnessing

(Maison Chance, Vietnam | Intercultural Workshops, Service Learning Ethics, and Teacher Identity)

I entered Maison Chance with an assumption that felt almost professional: if I planned carefully, scaffolded clearly, and executed my lessons smoothly, learning would happen. I also carried a quieter assumption that felt moral: service learning is fundamentally about "giving"—I bring resources, energy, and knowledge; students receive. Within days, both assumptions became unstable. Teaching in a low-shared-language classroom forced me to confront communication as a design challenge rather than a speaking challenge; and living inside a short-term service-learning relationship forced me to confront the ethics of care, fairness, and separation.

This essay reflects on two critical incidents—one centred on communication and pedagogy, the other centred on ethics and relational boundaries. I use Kolb's experiential learning cycle to show how specific moments led to changes in my beliefs and practices as a prospective education professional. I also integrate cultural considerations and reflect on what these experiences suggest about education in a globalised society—where mobility is uneven, service trips are brief, and power can hide inside good intentions.

During the trip, I adopted a more deliberate reflective method: recording incidents and emotions, identifying value conflicts and power relations within those incidents, and then translating observations into actionable hypotheses. This process did not provide a single "right answer," but it allowed me to face a tendency I had been avoiding: when attachment rises and separation becomes inevitable, I manage it by emotionally stepping back to stay in control. It also helped me convert emotional confusion into educationally meaningful questions: In short-term service contexts where you cannot stay, what counts as ethical care? When a shared language is limited, what kinds of structures make teaching effective? And when attention is scarce, how should "fairness" be institutionalised?

1) Context: Intercultural Workshops in a Low-Shared-Language Setting

Maison Chance is a renowned professional NGO in Vietnam dedicated to the welfare of children with disabilities and disadvantaged children. The campus we visited (in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City) supports learners who are often excluded from mainstream educational pathways—children who are orphans or from low-income families, and adults with disabilities. Our group of HKU education students planned and delivered intercultural workshops: "Games around the world," "Festival Day" (Chinese New Year comparisons, zodiac, red packets, lanterns), food-related lessons adapted for different grades, and additional sessions including a SEN class.

From the first day, the communication reality was clear: most students did not understand English. We relied on bilingual materials, simplified language, visuals, gestures, and local

Vietnamese teachers' support. I had anticipated "language barrier" as a practical challenge. I did not anticipate how quickly it would become a mirror reflecting my beliefs about teaching: I had unconsciously equated good teaching with clear verbal explanation and faithful execution of a plan.

2) Critical Incident A (Communication Issue): The "Visual Anchor Effect" and Pedagogical Power

Concrete experience :

During the lesson of "Festival ," our group designed a lantern activity. To protect student creativity, we first asked students to draw for 1–3 minutes a "lantern in your mind." Many students froze. They held pencils but did not begin. I sensed confusion and hesitancy, amplified by limited English comprehension. To lower anxiety, I then demonstrated 4 different lantern styles (e.g., lotus, rabbit, round, octagonal) and showed possible ways to decorate them. Participation immediately increased and the room visibly relaxed.

At the time I felt proud: the task was moving, students were engaged, and I had "solved" the communication problem. Later, looking across student work (and noticing similar clustering in food-drawing demonstrations), I realised something uncomfortable: even multiple exemplars can become a powerful visual "magnet." Students gravitated toward what I showed, as if the demonstration were a hidden answer key. I began to name this phenomenon as the "Visual Anchor Effect": in unfamiliar tasks, especially across language barriers, students may treat teacher examples as the safest—and therefore the most legitimate—path, which can unintentionally narrow creative outcomes.

Reflective observation:

This incident surprised me because it challenged a belief I did not know I held: that showing examples is purely supportive and value-neutral. I had assumed that more examples automatically equals more freedom. But I saw that examples also carry authority—particularly when the teacher is foreign, temporarily admired, and positioned as the "knowledge-holder." I began to ask: When I demonstrate, what am I teaching besides the skill? Am I also teaching what counts as "good," and who gets to define it?

This question felt larger than a single activity. It became a microcosm of intercultural education: even when my intentions are inclusive, my pedagogical choices can still reproduce hierarchy—my aesthetics, my "correctness," my way of doing becomes the centre.

Abstract conceptualisation

I now conceptualise this as a tension between "scaffolding" and "creative agency":

- In cross-language environments, imitation is often the first bridge to participation, not a lack of imagination.

- Visual exemplars function as scaffolds that reduce cognitive load and anxiety.

- Yet exemplars also function as normative signals, suggesting what is valued and "right," which can narrow student agency.

In other words, the communication barrier did not simply require "more support." It required ethical awareness of how support can turn into control—especially when students have strong reasons to seek certainty.

Active experimentation (what I will do next time) :

This incident changed my understanding of teaching and learning: effective intercultural teaching is not explanation-heavy; it is "structure-heavy and agency-aware". In future, I will:

1. Keep the "blank page" moment, but add a micro-prompt

   - Instead of "draw any lantern," I will offer starter choices: choose a shape, a colour, and a pattern. This reduces paralysis without imposing a model.

2. Use tiered entry points (choice-based scaffolding)

   - Tracing outlines (high support), semi-guided templates (medium), free creation (low). Students self-select.

3. Explicitly de-authoritise my exemplars

   - I will state: "These are ideas, not answers," and publicly celebrate unexpected student approaches.

4. Treat visuals as communication design

   - Use step-by-step visual sequences; minimise verbal load; embed time cues through visual timers and rituals.

🌟 Artefacts:

⬆️ Festival Day lantern exhibition. This artefact evidences how visual scaffolds can lower language barriers and increase participation, while also illustrating the 'Visual Anchor Effect'—the tendency for student outputs to cluster around teacher-provided exemplars.

⬆️ Bilingual, picture-led instruction materials used to reduce verbal dependence in a low-shared-language classroom.

3) Critical Incident B (Ethical Issue): Fairness, Scarce Attention, and "Exit Ethics" in Service Learning

Concrete experience:

While transitioning between activities, several girls rushed to hold my hand. I only had two hands. A competition emerged: four children pulling toward me; some pushed others away. The "winner" was often whoever persisted most. My immediate reaction was discomfort and urgency: if I let this continue, I am rewarding forcefulness and allowing quieter students to be displaced.

Then the deeper ethical incident arrived through letters. On Tuesday—only the second day—students began writing messages that anticipated separation. One Grade 3 student wrote (translated and anonymised): "I am a poor and vulnerable girl. I have nothing to give you. I draw this castle for you! Please do not be sad." When I struggled to hold back tears later on Friday, a child smiled at me and made a "peace sign," as if she were the adult assigned to keep the atmosphere light.

That moment also made me revisit another scene from the goodbye day: some HKU students cried openly. My first internal reaction was not to judge their sincerity, but to feel uneasy about what the moment might ask of the children: I worried it could unintentionally shift emotional labour onto the children. So I swung to the opposite extreme. I told myself: "I already cried on Tuesday—quietly, later that night, alone in my room while reflecting; I do not want to cry on Friday." Later I realised I was not trying to control tears; I was trying to control the risk of emotional role reversal—of turning my vulnerability into a burden students had to manage. Over time, my question shifted from "Should teachers cry?" to "How can crying become a responsible form of emotional modelling?" I began to see that tears do not necessarily equal collapse or unprofessionalism. Crying can be an unhidden, even beautiful expression—if it is anchored in gratitude and blessing, kept within a stable frame, and does not invite children to take care of the adult.

A Grade 5 student (received by my friend) offered what I came to call the "Moon Philosophy": when you cannot continue, look at the moon—distance does not erase connection.

I was shocked by how early they were preparing for goodbye and how emotionally directive they were. They were modelling a presence-focused resilience I felt I did not possess.

Reflective observation:

This incident forced me to reflect on myself in ways I did not expect from a teaching placement.

First, I realised I had equated "care" with "closeness" and "continuity." But service learning is defined by discontinuity: we arrive, we teach, we leave. In a globalised society, this discontinuity is not evenly distributed—we have the mobility to exit; students often do not. That asymmetry creates an ethical responsibility I had not sufficiently considered: "exit

ethics"—how to enter and leave relationships without creating emotional debts, false hope, or performative intimacy.

Second, I recognised that my pursuit of fairness in the hand-holding moment was not only professional—it was also personal. When children's affection intensifies, it can "pull" me emotionally. Part of me wants to give more, stay longer, be special to someone. Another part of me fears what happens when I must leave. In other relationships, I have coped with that fear through distancing: shifting attention, maintaining emotional space, and at times not responding—not because I do not care, but because I care too much and fear the pain of separation. Maison Chance exposed that pattern in a new domain: teaching.

Third, I wrestled with a practical ethical decision: whether to leave personal contact details. I chose not to. My reasoning was imperfect but sincere: if students later reach out with hardships I cannot solve, the helplessness could become unbearable for me and misleading for them. I still feel the ache of that choice. But I now understand boundaries not as coldness, but as a form of respect—refusing to convert short-term warmth into long-term promises I cannot ethically keep.

Abstract conceptualisation:

This incident changed my beliefs about service learning and education:

- Service learning is not primarily a narrative of the volunteer's impact. It is a relationship field shaped by power, mobility, and temporariness.

- Fairness must be designed, not improvised. In scarce-attention contexts, the loudest can dominate unless routines protect quieter learners.

- Ethical care is "warmth with boundaries." It includes honest language that avoids false promises, and practices that leave students with internalised strength rather than dependence on continued access to me.

"The Moon Philosophy" helped me reframe separation: love does not need permanence to be real. But it also demanded responsibility: I cannot romanticise students' maturity as if hardship automatically produces wisdom. I can admire their resilience while still recognising the structural realities that require children to practice goodbye early.

Active experimentation (what I will do next time):

This incident shaped how I will behave differently:

1. Systematise fairness during high-affection moments

   - Establish turn-taking rituals (helpers, rotation) rather than relying on my impulse.

   - Use simple phrases + gestures: "Everyone gets a turn."

2. Practise "witness care" rather than saviour care

   - Respond to letters by naming strengths and agency, not pity.

- Treat students as co-teachers of resilience, not recipients of my generosity.

3. Use "no false promise" language that still honours truth and hope

  - Appreciation + honesty + affirmation:

    - "Thank you for asking."

    - "I do not know when I can come back."

    - "But what I learned from you stays with me, and I believe you can keep growing."

4. Model emotion without role reversal (goodbye practice)

  - Allow visible feeling (even tears) while staying regulated and keeping language clear.

  - Translate sadness into gratitude + blessing, so students are not recruited to comfort me.

  - Use grounding symbols (e.g., the moon) to hold connection without making promises I cannot keep.

  > Eg. For future farewells, I will name my emotion briefly without handing it to children, and pivot back to their agency. For example, I might say: "I feel a bit tearful because I'm grateful, but you don't need to look after me." Then I would re-centre them: "Our time was brief, but I have seen what you can do—you can learn, you can try, and you can keep moving forward." I would also use the moon as a shared symbol of continuity without making promises of return.

5. Personal practice: presence without avoidance

  - I cannot guarantee I will never struggle with separation again. But I can refuse to let avoidance be my default. At Maison Chance, I stayed present even when tired—playing during breaks, writing replies late into the night—because I began to see myself as a role model: not of perfection, but of showing up responsibly.

🌟 Artefacts:
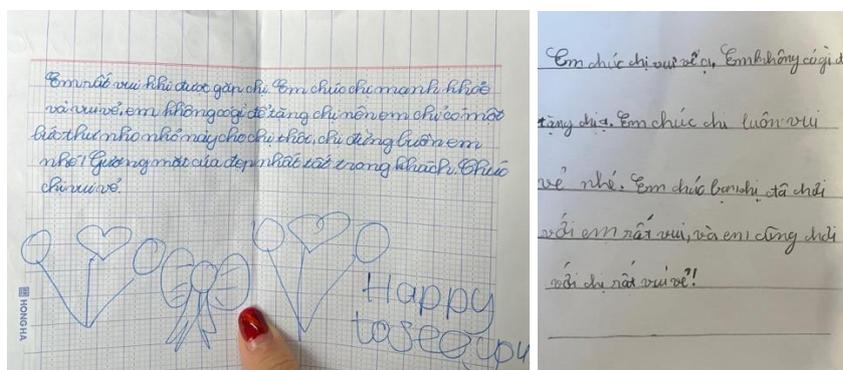
⬆️ Anonymised letters documenting students' early farewell practice.

⬆ My reply letters represent an attempt to practise 'witness care': affirming students' strengths without making promises I could not guarantee."

⬆ Post-trip continuation artefacts: tangible reminders designed to extend warmth without creating false expectations of ongoing contact.

4) Intercultural Education Planning: Culture Beyond Checklists (The Head-Touch Question)

Before departure, I repeatedly heard a claim online: in Vietnam, touching a child's head brings bad luck and should be avoided. In the field, I observed variation in practice, and a student told me local teachers also do it. This did not "disprove" the cultural guidance; it revealed a more complex truth: culture is not a single rulebook uniformly enacted.

This became an important cultural consideration in my professional growth. I unearthed an assumption that "cultural competence" means memorising do's and don'ts. I now believe cultural competence is better understood as an ethical stance: act conservatively when harm is avoidable, verify with local partners, and resist turning culture into a stereotype. In a globalised society, students and teachers are not merely representatives of a nation; they are individuals living within diverse and changing practices.

5) SEN Reflection : Equity Under Scarcity and the Invisibility of Quiet Learners

In the SEN class, chronic resource limitations were not theoretical; they were embodied in time and attention. One teacher managing seven SEN students with diverse profiles made sustained one-to-one support extremely difficult. The most visible consequence was an equity problem: quiet, compliant students received less personalised support because they did not demand it, leading to slower progress.

This reinforced a critical professional insight: inclusion is not only placement; it is design. Equity requires routines that prevent "silent stagnation." In future classrooms—SEN or mainstream—I plan to:

- Rotate scheduled check-ins so support is not purely reactive.

- Provide choice-based activities (modality options) to increase engagement.

- Use simple formative markers to notice who is progressing quietly and who is stuck quietly.

☀ Artefacts:

⬆SEN activity artefacts showing modality choice and differentiated entry points, highlighting both engagement gains and the ongoing need for structured teacher attention to protect quiet learners from invisibility.

6) Most Significant Learning: What I Learned About Myself (and My Unearthed Assumptions)

My most significant learning is personal and uncomfortable: I discovered how strongly I tend to manage impending separation through emotional distance. I knew this pattern in close relationships, but I did not realise it would be activated so powerfully in a teaching context. The students' letters revealed a maturity that made my avoidance feel visible. They seemed to practise a philosophy I struggle to live: cherishing what is present without demanding permanence.

I also unearthed prior assumptions:

- "Good teaching equals executing a plan." I learned that professionalism is often responsiveness under constraints, not strict adherence.

- "Service learning is about giving." I learned that service learning can unintentionally centre the volunteer; reciprocal learning requires humility and restraint.

- "Culture is a checklist." I learned culture is negotiated, contextual, and best approached through local relationships.

- "Care requires continuity." I learned ethical care can be real without long-term contact, if it is truthful and respectful.

7) "Ah-ha" Moments and Surprise (Linked to Previous Experience)

Three "ah-ha" moments stand out:

1. Communication through design, not explanation

   I was surprised that adding more words did not solve confusion. Visual sequencing, gestures, routines, and co-teaching did more than translation. Compared with my previous teaching in Hong Kong, where language is shared and instruction-heavy teaching can succeed, Vietnam showed me that learning can be built through structure that is visible, not verbal.

2. The double edge of scaffolding (Visual Anchor Effect)

   I was surprised that even diversified exemplars could narrow outcomes. This changed how I view "help." I now see that every scaffold communicates values and power.

3. Students as emotional educators (Farewell culture and Moon Philosophy)

   In earlier service experiences (e.g., rural contexts where farewells were silent and tearful), separation felt like an unspoken rupture. Here, students prepared early through writing, affirmation, and presence. I was surprised because they did not deny sadness; they held it alongside gratitude. This reshaped my belief about emotional education: it is not an "extra," but part of the curriculum of human life.

8) Change in Me as a Person and Prospective Education Professional

I have changed in belief and in practice.

- I have shifted from a "saviour orientation" ("what can I give?") toward a "witness orientation" ("what strengths do I see, and how do I honour them responsibly?").

- I have shifted from viewing teaching as performance (executing a plan) toward viewing teaching as ethical design (structuring access without colonising agency).

- I have shifted from relying on personal instinct for fairness toward building fairness into routines—because equity cannot depend on mood, charisma, or emotional stamina.

What brought about these changes was not a single lecture or theory. It was the friction between my intentions and the lived reality of students: their limited English, their need for safe entry points, their early practice of goodbye, and their capacity to care for me even when I believed I was the one there to care for them.

9) Future Plans: How I Will Behave Differently

Based on these findings, I plan to behave differently in three concrete ways:

1. Cross-language teaching

   - Design step-by-step visual instruction sequences

   - Use time cues through visual progress bars and closing rituals

   - Co-teach with local partners as pedagogical equals, not as "translators"

2. Creativity and scaffolding

   - Use tiered entry points and micro-prompts

   - Reframe exemplars explicitly as "styles/ideas" rather than standards

   - Publicly legitimise difference ("no standard answer") and celebrate student-generated variations

3.Ethical care and separation

   - Systematise fairness in affection/attention distribution

   - Practise "no false promise" language that is honest yet affirming

   - Leave students with internalised recognition and tools for expression, not dependence on my continued presence

   - Personally, practise staying present even when separation triggers avoidance

10) What I Still Want to Explore

I still want to explore:

- How teacher education can prepare students for "exit ethics" in short-term service learning: entering and leaving without harm, without saviour narratives, and without emotional withdrawal.

- Low-cost, high-impact routines for "equity under scarcity", especially for quiet learners in SEN and mainstream contexts.

- How metaphors and shared symbols (like the moon) can be used ethically to support emotional literacy—without romanticising hardship or turning resilience into an expectation.

Conclusion

Maison Chance taught me that in a globalised society, education work is not only instructional—it is relational and ethical. Communication is not merely language; it is design. Care is not merely closeness; it is warmth with boundaries. And service learning is not a stage for the volunteer's goodness; it is a space where power must be examined and where learning should be reciprocal.

The students' letters and gestures did not remove the sadness of leaving. But they changed what I believe remains after separation: not a promise of return, but the reality that something true happened—and that truth can be carried forward as practice, not just memory.

⬆ Big Apple Tree & Blue Lake mural photo