

Reflection for Vietnamese Experiential Learning Trip

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Our experiential learning trip in Vietnam was summed up about a month ago. My groupmates and I were tasked with teaching grades 4 and 5, as well as the third special educational needs (SEN) class. Our group decided to use arts and crafts to teach our lesson focus, which was intercultural education. We faced some struggles throughout the week because we chose to leave lesson preparations until we understood the English level of the students. This essay will detail the challenges we faced and what I have learned. It will also reflect on what I could have done better and how my beliefs have changed.

I would like to start by focusing on the struggles my groupmates and I faced. I believe my biggest growth came from these challenges, so they hold more importance.

Our group came to a quiet consensus on prioritising flexibility and adaptability over in-depth detailing of each individual lesson plan. I use the term “quiet” to express our consensus because we did not explicitly confirm whether we would improvise our lesson plans. Instead, we agreed that it would be difficult to create plans for students whose English abilities were unknown to us. Therefore, we settled on bringing all the necessary materials needed for our general lesson plans, such as play-dough and stationery, and improvising our lessons after understanding the students' abilities. This assumption led to our groupmate dreading our trip to Vietnam. Looking back, our group lacked proper communication as we did not discuss our intended way of preparing for the lessons. This was a problem stemming from me because I was the one who suggested improvising all the lesson plans. I failed to consider my teammates' preferred method of preparation, which created unnecessary negative emotions. I was too goal-oriented and lacked the foresight to comprehend my teammates' abilities, leading to our team struggling to settle on a lesson plan. I think what I could have done better was discuss with my group which classes would be taught by which person. This would have allowed us to create detailed lesson plans easily while ensuring everyone was on track.

Yet, despite what we could have done better during the preparation stage of the course, I found our improvisation to be a refreshing experience. My groupmate shared that this experience changed her view on how lessons should be taught. She expressed that it was a good idea to leave extra room for creating and fixing our lesson plans. We were able to cater to the exact needs of the students, which was shown when we shifted from class learning to individualized learning when teaching the SEN class. Most importantly, we quickly recovered from losing a groupmate to sickness, as we adjusted around the challenge and assigned lighter roles to her. In the end, I believe our choice to postpone detailing the general lesson plans trained us to improvise our lessons. I will still improvise, but rather than creating a lesson from scratch, I would adjust the difficulty of a detailed lesson plan to fit the class I am teaching. Therefore, I will create lesson plans for my lessons and modify them as we progress.

Now I will discuss the difficulties we faced in our planning stage every night after class. We were always tired after a long day of teaching. By the time we finished our sharing activity after dinner, we would take a long break. Afterward, we would immediately jump into planning for the three lessons the next day. At that point, it would be around 9:00 PM, and we all knew we would be occupied for at least two hours. I remember one night when we had to stay up until 1:30 AM to plan a special lesson because we could not agree on which activities to carry out. There was a specific moment that I look back on with shame, and it was when I changed my tone out of frustration and tiredness during a discussion with one of my groupmates. We were planning for grade 5's last lesson, and she believed it would be fine to reuse play-dough, even though they had already made crafts using it earlier. I raised the concern that it might be repetitive, suggesting we look into other activities. However, my groupmates said it was fine to use play-dough to create a diorama. I was stubborn and continued to insist we should consider other activities. The discussion ended when I sighed and relented to their idea. When I sighed, I noticed my groupmate's face and realized I had hurt her feelings. My stubbornness made me dead set on following my own idea, but that hurt her because I did not appreciate her input. I was wrong in how I handled the situation. I let my superiority complex overshadow my ability to listen and tried to shut down her opinion. I apologized to her the next day, but I have been reflecting on how I treat my teammates when I let my emotions get the better of me. I need to work on my listening skills and reduce my presence in group work because I tend to want to take the lead in each setting. This is not right and may harm my relationships with my groupmates in the future.

I experienced many challenges when creating lesson plans with my teammates, but the biggest challenges came when we were teaching. One example that is still fresh in my mind is the interactions I had with a student named Dang, who has severe ADHD and autism. My first lesson with Dang can be summed up with the visual of me chasing my own tail around and around in a circle. Dang was, without a doubt, the most difficult student I have ever taught.

I constantly needed to guide him back to the task we were working on, otherwise, he would run out of the classroom or look at something unrelated. This difficulty was further increased by a language barrier. Unlike mainstream students and other students in our SEN class, Dang does not understand English at all. We were only able to communicate through actions or by copying each other.

On the first day, I had Dang with an older student, Joun, in my group. Joun helped me keep Dang in line as they communicated in Vietnamese. However, Joun was very talkative, so it was hard for me to focus fully on Dang. Therefore, Sai and I switched up our grouping on the second day. I taught Dang one-on-one, and Sai taught his students in a group of four. It was

lucky that Sai's students understood a bit of English, as they completed their tasks without much difficulty.

The turning point for teaching Dang came after our lesson ended on the second day. Dang's teacher pulled me aside and told me about his biggest struggles. She taught me the correct way to communicate with Dang, which is to repeat the same verb while I perform an action. In addition, she taught me to draw traceable dots instead of asking him to copy my drawing directly.

I applied these tips immediately during our next lesson, and the change was instant. I was shocked at how big of a difference setting a start and end point for tracing made when I worked with Dang on drawing balls. He was able to focus better because he saw a tangible end point, which gave him a reason to continue drawing. Furthermore, repeating the word 'colour' helped remind Dang on what he was supposed to focus on when we were colouring the soccer ball we drew. Teaching Dang became easier ever since I learned these tips.

Our SEN classes were always carried out in small groups or one-on-one learning. This style of education fits into Hong Kong's three-tiered intervention model for SEN students in mainstream schools. For my lessons with Dang, our model of learning falls into the third tier, which is intensive individual support. Working one-on-one with Dang gave me first hand experience on how useful and effective individual learning can be for SEN students. After teaching Dang, I understand why it is important to have the three-tier intervention model in mainstream schools. We as teachers will be able to cater to the specific needs of students who need intensive support and give help in ways we cannot in a large classroom.

Originally, I wrote in my pre-departure essay that I was worried that I would not be able to create a lasting influence, or be able to leave anything memorable for the students. However, this fear of mine was abolished at the end of our week long teaching at Maison Chance. Not only did we leave memorable experiences with the students, we also taught them about cultures from around the world. They gave us presents made from the arts and crafts we shared. For example, we taught students how to fold Japanese origami hearts, and they gifted us plenty of origami hearts with letters written within (Appendix 1). Students would greet us using Mandarin, Cantonese, and Japanese. And through their actions, I realised that my groupmates and I were able to bring joy to their lives and leave a memorable experience with them.

But arriving at this outcome and reflecting on my experience, I realized I could have done other things to improve the experiences for the children. One of the biggest awakenings for me during this trip was that I learned from our sharing sessions that I have conflicting teaching beliefs. On one hand, I believe that improvising our lesson plans can be beneficial to students, as it allows us to cater to their level of ability. On the other hand, I feel very tense and uptight when carrying out these improvised plans because I want the lessons to be successful. Being tense as a teacher is not good as students can perceive your feelings easily through the way you teach. I

realized that these two beliefs are contradictory, and my tendency to improvise only heightens my worries about the success of my plans.

My groupmate brought this awareness to me, and I think she has been very influential during this period of teaching. As of now, I am still uncertain whether these beliefs can coexist. However, I feel I am closer to transforming one of them into a healthier mindset than I am to completely removing one. After careful thought, I believe my tendency to improvise can be more detrimental to my lessons than my desire for them to succeed. Planning things last minute can be risky because it takes time to create worksheets and gather materials. If I cannot gather all the materials I need, then my lesson plan may not be executed successfully, which will affect my belief that my lessons should be successful.

Therefore, a goal I have set for myself is to rely on improvising my lessons only when I have taught that lesson before. This way, I can adjust the level of difficulty to cater to the students' learning abilities.

Overall, this Vietnamese experiential learning course has been the most important teaching milestone I have passed as a pre-service teacher. Coming into the trip, I felt terrified at the unknowns we may face. Looking back, I may have been dreading improvising our lesson plans as well. However, the lessons I have learned and the experiences I have gained have opened up a path for me to explore. I will rely on improvising only when I am very familiar with the students and class content, and I will work towards guiding my mindset into a better, more productive mindset. Finally, the in-person experience I have gained teaching SEN students has made me more confident in practicing the theories we learned in Ms Janna's class (BBED3002 Learning Support 1 - Catering for Diverse Learning Needs) as I have seen the importance of support models in learning. If I can, I will without a doubt join one more experiential learning course before I graduate.

Appendix

Appendix 1 - Picture of some of the letters I received from the students at Maison Chance. Notable letters include the heart shaped letter, and also the Chinese New Year Red Packet envelope.

