www.ijses.net

Student-Led Research and Outreach in the Humanities: A Case of Experiential Learning

Mia Lee
Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore

To cite this article:

Lee, M. (2022). Student-led research and outreach in the humanities: A case of experiential learning. *International Journal of Studies in Education and Science (IJSES), 3*(1), 75-84.

International Journal of Studies in Education and Science (IJSES) is affiliated with the
International Society for Technology, Education, and Science (ISTES): www.istes.org

IJSES International Journal of Studies in Education and Science
2022, Vol. 3, No. 1, 75-84 ISSN: 2767-9799

Student-Led Research and Outreach in the Humanities: A Case of Experiential Learning

Mia Lee

Article Info

Article History

Received:
20 February 2021
Accepted:
13 August 2021

Keywords

Active learning
Experiential learning
Collaboration
History curriculum
Nation building

Abstract

Although historians often address a small target audience largely composed of other academics, history, like so many other humanities disciplines, has the potential to reach a much wider public and reconnect to a meaningful past by both providing new content as well as new perspectives. With this in mind, my collaborators and I designed a teaching platform based on non-professional history writing, which incorporated student-initiated research, student leadership, peer mentorship, and extra-university collaboration. Coinciding with preparations in Singapore to commemorate the 1819 British landing on the island, we asked, "Why 1819?" We wanted to consider the various stakeholders that made 1819 a significant date in Singapore's history, which meant looking at British policy and strategic planning but also the role of local inhabitants and diaspora and migrant communities in building the island's infrastructure. We hoped to foster a collaborative, bottom-up approach that included voices and issues beyond the ones typically found in the public school curriculum. Ultimately, what started as a modest ambition to foster student-led projects became a comprehensive research mentorship program that has realized two primary objectives: supporting student leadership and research work, and building public engagement and collaboration.

Introduction

Slogans promising to revolutionize teaching and learning abound such as learning beyond the classroom, thinking outside the box, approaching learning as a journey, and my personal favorite, be future-ready. Although we educators may despair of new pedagogical catchphrases, there can be a happy coincidence between a trend and a sincere investment in a new project. This sort of coincidence occurred in the spring of 2017 when Singapore as a nation took a look back in time to the 1819 British landing on the island. Various institutions and sectors took part in the preparations for the bicentennial commemoration of the event. At the same time, at the tertiary level there was renewed interest in public outreach that included the commemorative events. By drawing on the momentum for this occasion, we — a small group of historians — took the opportunity to create a platform for a collaborative, amateur, public history telling of the past.

In sympathy with Raphael Samuel's Oxford History Workshop Movement (History Workshop, 2012) as well as

the German Barefoot Historians' Movement (*Barfußhistorikerbewegung*, "Ein kräftiger Schub für die Vergangenheit, 1983), my colleagues and I aimed to create opportunities for historical research from the ground up that could link our campuses with the wider community. Historians often write for a small target audience composed of other academics, but history has the potential to reach a much wider audience as testified by the popularity of broadcast and online history channels, documentary series, and bestselling print publications. Nonetheless, many academics have an uneasy attitude toward popular history. Thus, we undertook this project to demonstrate the productive collaboration of amateurs and non-experts when it comes to expanding historical knowledge and understanding. In addition, it was our explicit aim to empower students—we wanted them to flex their creative and analytical skills. With these objectives in mind, we designed a teaching platform that incorporated student-initiated research, student leadership, peer mentorship, and extra-university collaboration. What started as a modest ambition to foster student-led projects has become a comprehensive research mentorship workshop that has realized two primary objectives: (1) supporting student leadership and research work and (2) building public engagement and collaboration.

Fortuitous Beginnings

This project arose out of a mix of our initial interests as well as some fortuitous circumstances (Lee, 2021). Starting in 2017-2018, an array of governmental, non-profit, and educational institutions, which ranged from the Prime Minister's Office to heritage centers to the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, began preparations to commemorate the British landing in Singapore in 1819 (Yuen, 2017). One of the key questions at the time was what exactly was being commemorated. We shared the sentiment and asked: "Why 1819?" Clearly 1819 was a significant date in Singapore's narrative of nation-building and thinking about how it should be remembered was an important as well as sensitive exploration of national identity, migration and displacement, community formation, and the British colonial legacy. We wanted to consider the various stakeholders that made 1819 a significant date in Singapore's history, which meant looking at British policy and strategic planning but also the role of local inhabitants and diaspora and migrant communities from Southeast Asia, India, and China in creating a permanent settlement on the island.

Beyond content-driven concerns, we hoped to foster a collaborative, bottom-up approach that included voices and issues beyond the ones typically found in the public school curriculum. We wanted to prioritize history from below and work with external as well as non-professional partners. We, thus, proposed a research mentorship program that paired university students with secondary school students. To do so, we coordinated with the History Unit of the Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Singapore Ministry of Education, local secondary school teachers, and secondary school students. We were also fortunate that the history teachers who made up the unit were also interested in diversifying opportunities for secondary school students. The Ministry of Education officers selected advanced secondary students, who were eager to develop their research skills and apply their training. On our side, we identified university students who wanted to apply their research skills and training in narrative analysis to something more hands-on and not the typical capstone honors thesis. We ran the first session in 2017-18 and the second session in 2018-19.

Project Format

Working with non-university partners provided new opportunities but also came with a new set of challenges. It required fulfilling at least two sets of health and safety guidelines as well as working with several institutional and personal timetables. Working with school age students entailed additional guidelines on confidentiality and health and safety. For example, secondary school students needed to be chaperoned during all events and meetings for this project including those outside of school hours, which meant partnering with teachers to avoid burdening their timetables since they remained responsible for all chaperoning duties.

We instructors organized and prepared the project over the course of two semesters and met regularly with representatives of the Ministry of Education and local secondary schools to confirm rules, guidelines, and dates as well as confer on topics and organization. For each year that we ran the workshop, we began recruitment of our university student mentors the semester before the workshop. We specifically looked for students who enjoyed teamwork, were keen to try something different from the usual classroom format, and were possibly interested in teaching careers. In the process of running the project, we found that the optimal size for the groups was 12-13 university student mentors paired with six secondary school students (16 and 17-year-olds). The Ministry of Education secondary recruited secondary school students through their extracurricular history program. The secondary school students shared an eagerness to expand their experience in researching and writing history. Together these university and secondary school students organized and ran a half-day workshop for approximately 60 first-year secondary school students (13-year-olds). Research and workshop preparation took place from mid-December to early-March to coincide with the secondary school term break in mid-March.

The focus on the British arrival in Singapore in 1819 allowed us to address topic that was already part of the secondary school curriculum: British colonialism and nation building in Singapore. 1819 marks an important watershed for the history of modern Singapore and touches on several key themes including migration and diaspora, British imperialism, and modernization. Working with our student groups, we divided the large topic of the British arrival into three main fields and six sub-fields: (1) Settlement (sub-fields: migration and urban planning), (2) Resources (sub-fields: land management and disease control), and (3) Defense & Revenue (sub-fields: port Infrastructure and tax farms). Groups of 2-3 students were responsible for researching and distilling key themes for each sub-field.

Managing Expectations

Once the research agenda was set, the university student mentors had several duties to undertake. First, in small teams, they had to conduct research on their sub-fields and produce two synthetic and analytical papers on their findings. Both papers were due in the first month of the semester. Second, they needed to compare their working hypotheses and data with the other teams and to distill the major themes of the larger research fields and overall research topic. They began this work in the second week of February. Third, they had to translate these main themes and arguments for the secondary school workshop, which entailed drafting a 40-minute introductory presentation and creating a half dozen hands-on activity stations for thirteen-year-olds. This workshop script had

to be finalized by the beginning of March. During these phases of research and workshop planning, the university student mentors were tasked with coaching their secondary school partners in the following skills: identify research areas, locating archives, using catalogs, and reading sources. Their collaboration with the secondary school students was the mentorship component of their role and required that they draft working schedules in order to comply with safety regulations, pace assignments, and guide their mentees through the research and workshop organization.

Although many of the students were attracted to the project by the promise that they wouldn't have to write term papers or sit for exams, they quickly realized that the project entailed new skills and a much higher level of commitment than a typical course. Unsurprisingly, during our first run, we faced some exasperation. Our student mentors had signed on knowing what the project entailed but because they were not prepared for the demands of a collaborative project – managing their workload, personalities, and expectations that had a real-life deliverable – they lost patience with the project itself. Before even reaching the workshop preparation phase, a group of our students came to us asking how they were supposed to manage all the various layers of work. Part of their concern was a worry about how they were going to be assessed and our expectations as instructors. It was critical at this point to emphasize that we were all part of this experiment and journey together. Just as they were unsure about how the project would turn out, so were we. The uncertainty did cause us anxiety as well but it was also part of the fun.

Higher-Order Learning in Action

Although we had not started with a pedagogical goal in mind, we found ourselves aligned with the tenets of active learning as set out by the researchers Charles C. Bonwell and James E. Eison in their 1991 collaborative study (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). As students progressed from independent research to collaboration to workshop presentation, they used a wider variety of skills than are usually exercised in a typical classroom. Proponents of active learning posit that it requires higher-order thinking tasks, namely analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Assessments were designed to highlight skills and autonomy: (1) formative assignments in the form of research essays, feedback, and group feedback; (2) summative assignments in the form of the workshop script, workshop activities, and the workshop itself; and (3) a reflection essay in which students evaluated their research trajectory, mentorship experience, and workshop delivery. In sum, they gathered information, apprehended the multiple perspectives at stake in the commemoration of 1819, synthesized their findings, and digested and framed narratives and key concepts for 13-year old students. Our students were responsible for finding material and preparing it and in doing so became the agents of their own learning.

The workshop, in particular, demanded that students scaffold ideas and develop activities that complemented each other. This required close cooperation, team work, and problem solving. For example, the first draft of their presentation script was 45 pages whereas the presentation was scheduled for 40 minutes. Students faced the difficult task of pruning those 45 pages down to ten while keeping key content and the coherence of their arguments and main themes. As one student mentor described the process: "After several meetings…we finally concluded that we were to give the students enough background information to pique their interest while

allowing them to recognize the multi-layered issues that occurred within Singapore's society then." They made the choice to sacrifice content because they realized that the students could think through the issues on their own. When it came to the activity stations, they remarked that "brainstorming…was tough due to the different views within the group." Although there were several stations, they chose to coordinate the different activities to expose students to a variety of skills and ideas. In the end, the students agreed that "it was a great chance to translate what we had researched into something tangible." A student from the 2019 cohort pointed out how the project allowed her "to experience what it is like to craft a workshop."

The main skills students focused on were:

1. Building a compelling narrative that is conscious of gaps in historical knowledge and historical assumptions
2. Providing an assessment of "common knowledge" alongside alternative approaches and perspectives
3. Assessing audience and tailoring information
4. Reflecting on lessons and skills and learning to recognize and evaluate problems and missteps
5. Promoting teamwork, accountability, effective and respectful communication, peer support, conflict resolution, and self- reflection

Through the various stages of the project, students recognized how the project had an internal dynamic that pushed them to expand their skills and responsibilities. One student mentor explained that in contrast to more typical classroom assignments, he had to "take responsibility for my work and provide justifications, if necessary, for the decisions I made." Moreover, because the assessments were more varied than traditional classroom assessments, it gave students more opportunities to explore their strengths and resources as well as grow and shine. As Bonwell and Eison put it, this type of project allowed students to be "involved in all stages from start to finish" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. iii). The sense of responsibility cannot be stressed enough. Students took their contributions very seriously. Not only did they depend on each other, they also undertook their duties as peer mentors and educators conscientiously. That said, they did not present themselves as experts but rather as guides or even fellow travelers. They were committed to sharing their experiences and knowledge as well as gaining new perspectives.

Reflections

For all the serious pedagogical intent and well-intentioned reasons for collaboration, the workshop project was also a lot of fun. We arrived at school venues during their spring break to greet dozens of sleepy 13-year olds many of whom didn't quite know what their parents had signed them up for. Putting on a workshop involved a lot of nerves and when students saw how it all came together, they were both relieved and elated. One of the student mentors from the 2018 cohort emphasized that "[o]f the entire programme, I enjoyed planning for the workshop most. It was a great chance to translate what we had researched into something tangible." And, though many of the thirteen-year olds arrived bleary-eyed, their overwhelming response by the end of the half-day was that they wished that the workshop was a full rather than half day.

As an instructor, I also appreciated my changing role as the students took charge of the project. What began as an instructor-guided collaboration shifted to cooperative team and action-oriented large group work. At this point, my collaborators and I relinquished control of the "classroom" so that the student mentors could develop their own research agendas and ideas. Although we provided feedback on their arguments, concepts, and approaches, I quickly saw how peer feedback was far more powerful and efficient in helping students see when they were on the right track. Students immediately sensed the importance of audience when they presented to their classmates. For example, when they presented their draft lecture, they appreciated within the first few minutes how their script was far too long, how their presentation themes needed better integration, and how content was overwhelming their main arguments.

Thus, as the workshop took shape, the role of the instructor receded because the students took ownership of the project. The process – almost a natural one – recalled Jacques Rancière's discussion of how teachers can actually impede learning when they dictate content and approach (Rancière, 1991). A veteran of the French Revolutionary Wars, Rancière's approach to learning was based on the notion of equality. Not only did he criticize rote learning but also the Socratic method for instilling in students a reflex to look to figures authority for confirmation. He saw this reflex as undermining learners' confidence in their ability to seek understanding with the result that they discounted their own intellectual capacities. By contrast, Rancière approached learning as an endless endeavor. Learning, in his eyes, was a way of being in the world, the never-ending search for understanding. As both a participant and a product of the French Revolution, he put it succinctly and significantly, "And education is like liberty: it isn't given; it's taken" (Ibid., p. 107). In that spirit of empowerment and equality, students took ownership of this project as they uncovered their research themes, creatively problem solved, and shared their findings with their audience.

And, quite fitting for our project, communication itself was a form of learning and poetry. Students knew their script was incomplete but the attempt to communicate their ideas —the effort to bridge the gap between themselves and their audience — was an intellectual adventure. Rancière's elaboration on the act of communication – "Improvisation is the exercise by which the human being knows himself and is confirmed in his nature as a reasonable man…..In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same" (Ibid., pp. 64-65) – truly fit the essence of our project. His statement reflects one of the most important components of this project: our students extended themselves to invite others to join their intellectual journey. They were not there to impart specific content or a certain interpretation, but rather to ask their younger counterparts to join them in considering the significance of 1819, its meaning for modern Singapore history, and its place in local identity and culture. Our student mentors agreed there was no single answer to these questions and their presentation and activities were a chance to build interpretations and more importantly share the excitement of discovering the past and its relevance for the present.

So, standing aside was the best thing we could do to facilitate the learning process. It was anxiety-inducing to go "live" without being in control; but it was also exhilarating. As I am sure many of us have witnessed, our one-sided lectures – mainstays of university teaching, particularly in our large lecture halls – can drop energy levels

to most uninspiring levels. This project kept us on our toes while also giving our students the starring roles. Our spirits rose as we saw them deliver their material, think on their feet, adapt to changing conditions, and engage with others as peers and role models. As the "instructors", our roles were simply to remain present as facilitators and support staff – organizing meetings, corresponding with our collaborators, and managing venue details as well as being responsible for the overall structure and continuity of the project (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Workshop Presentation

The Next Phase

Due to the pandemic, we had to change gears, scrap face-to-face meetings, and rethink how to channel our spirit of exploration and experimentation. So, for the third season of our collaboration with secondary schools, we inaugurated the pilot episode of a podcast, which we hope will have several episodes. Although the shift has been tricky, we are excited about the potential to reach a far larger audience and the opportunity to reach out to more external partners and experts.

For the podcast project, we have temporarily removed the mentorship component to reduce the amount of virtual liaising we had to manage. We also arranged meetings with a diverse array of experts and practitioners from professional historians to policy makers to leaders in the nonprofit sector. In addition, we continue to collaborate with secondary schools and secondary school students. Thus far, we have conducted one roundtable discussion with historians, and it was exciting to witness students put their learning center stage, pose questions, and push for clarification.

Based on our experience with this pilot episode, I would argue that it is slightly more complicated establishing

rapport over emails and Zoom meetings. It is more difficult to convey the purpose, motivation, and enthusiasm, and, I believe, it is more challenging to build trust and connection. We have, however, persisted and here network plays an important role. Fortunately we built our ties to some of our external partners before the pandemic, and friend of a friend can always help place a helpful word. We remain, however, undaunted and believe that we can fine tune procedure once we have survived the pilot episode. A new project on a new platform is certain to have some hiccups.

Another project we are starting is creating history subject resource packs. Secondary school students have been working directly with primary sources for years but in our current project, we want students to conduct the selection and sorting of primary sources to deepen their understanding of how the preservation of the past and the architecture of the archive shape history writing. In other words, taking part in the process of selection and collection to see first-hand how these actions form a critical part of the interpretative and analytical process. With this project, we will discuss the politics of the archive and how historians have to contend with an incomplete picture of the past.

Concluding Remarks

Our student-led research mentorship project stemmed from an intuitive understanding of problem-based learning combined with a commitment to history from below (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Eisner, 1991; Adams, 1974). Active, problem-based learning prioritizes student initiative and self-reflection. Such an approach works on complex, real world issues without right answers. It is self-directed and necessitates taking risks, moving away from a focus on "outcomes", and focusing on developing skills and problem solving. The collaborative platform we created captured this spirit by supporting students in their application of skills, their critical assessment of approaches and methods, and their sustained engagement with non-academic audiences. Students opted in for an experience that challenged them to take on risk and try something different. Together, we gained useful skills and insight into our own resourcefulness and ability to face new challenges.

Although the overall experience was a positive one, we certainly had to learn to embrace disappointment as part of the learning process. Because the starting point for this project was to empower students, the process of developing ideas was just as important as the final product. The ability to bring together diverse perspectives to create a compelling narrative and a coherent set of arguments required perseverance but also vision and creativity. Our commitment to engagement and exchange as well as improvisation and ultimately creativity and self-expression meant that the process of developing ideas was just as important as the final product. We discovered that some activities were unwieldy for a half-day workshop or some arguments too obscure for teenagers. The mix of "success" and "failure" was a valuable part of the learning process and it provided students with critical moments to reflect on what "worked" and what did not. Much of what we as educators do each time we enter the classroom.

Through the workshop, students witnessed how their research and analysis had the capacity to overturn long-held views on national identity. Furthermore, they saw the appeal of collaborative history in its ability to engage

diverse audiences, spur participation, and inspire a lasting engagement with the past. This process of exchange, negotiation, and sharing has engaged participants and encouraged us all to put together a narrative of the past that matters to us.

Figure 2. Activity Stations

Figure 3. Activity Stations

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the support of my collaborators Dr. Sharon Low (NUS), Dr. Ho Chi Tim (SUSS), the History Unit of the Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Singapore Ministry of Education, the many fine history educators in Singapore's local secondary schools, the Singapore University of Social Sciences Centre for University Core, the National University of Singapore Centre for Development of Teaching & Learning, and last but certainly not least the two cohorts of university and secondary school students who realized this project. This article is dedicated to our students who were also our inspiration.

References

Adams, James L. (1974). *Conceptual blockbusting: A guide to better ideas*. W.W. Norton.

Altowairiki, N. (2021). Online collaborative learning: Analyzing the process through living the experience. *International Journal of Technology in Education*, 413–427. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijte.95

Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University.

Der Spiegel (1983, June 6). *Ein kräftiger Schub für die Vergangenheit* [Spiegel Report on the New History Movement in the Federal Republic]. https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14021414.html

Eisner, E. (1991). What the arts taught me about education. In D. Willis & W. Schubert (Eds.), *Reflections from the heart of educational learning* (pp. 34- 48). New York, NY: SYNY.

History Workshop (2012, November 22). *History of History Workshop*. History Workshop Online. https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-history-of-history-workshop/.

Lee, M. (2021). *History from below in Singapore's secondary schools: Student-led research and outreach – teaching connections*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://blog.nus.edu.sg/teachingconnections/2021/03/17/history-from-below-in-singapores-secondary-schools-student-led-research-and-outreach/

Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford University Press.

Author Information

Mia Lee

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3383-301X

Singapore University of Social Sciences

Singapore

Contact e-mail: *mclee@suss.edu.sg*