

## **Turning Learning Experiences into Learning**

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The New Senior Secondary (NSS) Curriculum has started in September this year. As part of the new academic structure, the NSS Curriculum aims at nurturing our secondary school students to attain whole person development and achieve lifelong learning.

To that end, the NSS Curriculum contains three main components: four core subjects (of which Liberal Studies is one), 2 or 3 elective subjects, and Other Learning Experiences (OLE). Components of OLE include Moral and Civic Education, Community Service, Aesthetic Development, Physical Development and Career-related Experiences. It is hoped that, with no less than 15% of the total lesson time (around 405 hours) devoted to OLE, students will develop important skills and attitudes through participating in a wide variety of activities.

Student Learning Profile (SLP) is a tool introduced to support the implementation of OLE. Despite that SLP can be built through different approaches (including learning portfolios), it basically serves as a summary of the activities that students participate in (both OLE and other activities outside school) and their achievements. However, SLP should not be merely a list of entries. A learning experience initiates the learning process, but actual learning occurs only through a deep or critical reflection of the learner. As John Dewey put it, "Experience plus reflection equals learning." In a secondary school, teachers encouraged their students to share the OLE most cherished by them during the school term. This gradually helped to build up a reflective school culture. Miss Cheng, teacher of the school, said, "I am very pleased that we could share student learning and celebrate their developments through the programme, namely '*One OLE that I cherish most*'. Amongst students' sharing, I found that students are reminiscent of the experiences and learning therein, and through reflection they confirmed the implications and significance that these experiences have brought to them. This programme has also become a driving force for students to participate in different OLE more enthusiastically."

This is where students, teachers, and parents will need to be careful about. The essential purpose of OLE is to broaden students' overall educational experiences, and that of SLP is to help students develop the habit of reflection, which is a requisite step in learning. Even though universities will consider using SLP as a reference document in the admission process, it should not be a driving force for students to participate in OLE and to compile their SLPs. Take another school as an example. A training workshop for students was conducted in September this year to enable them to understand their dreams. Learning activities were designed for this, through which students also made reflections on areas that needed improvement. The school aimed at promoting students' intrinsic values of learning towards participation in OLE and compilation of SLP because this intrinsic motivation would help to enhance student engagement in the learning process.

The most effective SLPs are thus *formative* in nature, that is, students should have positive developments when building their SLPs, in that they contain a body of evidence showing what students have *become* instead of what they have *done*. Students will need to be encouraged to take ownership of developing their SLPs as a vehicle to tell their own 'stories of learning'. One good way to tell such a story is through deep or critical reflection.

What is deep or critical reflection? It goes beyond simply recording the experience. Rather, it involves making meaning of the experience and connecting to what a learner already knows. Only then will a learner be able to internalize what has been learned and transfer that learning to new situations. This overall process underscores self-directed or self-regulating learning.

Deep or critical reflection does not come naturally. It must be developed through learning. This is why students, be they at secondary schools or universities, often cannot articulate what they have learned from an experience, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by employers during interviews. In an effort to develop students' ability to reflect properly so as to learn from their participation in developmental programmes, we have offered training workshops to our students at my own institution.

Proper training is also important for teachers. In its continuing commitment to helping schools to develop OLE and SLP, the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Bureau will organise professional development courses and networks under the notion of 'Turning Learning Experiences into Learning'. It will also continue to communicate the purposes and values of OLE and SLP to all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and employers.

So will universities ever take SLPs into consideration in admitting students? I hope so, but it must not be done in a rigid and quantitative way. If the idea of whole-person education is to identify and develop attributes that go beyond academic accomplishments, then information that are non-quantitative like personal interviews are necessary in the selection process. SLPs that are properly put together could be useful reference materials in both the selection process and during the interviews.

Regardless of what the universities might do, it is critically important that secondary school students develop the proper mindset with respect to OLE and SLP. The first cohort of students under the NSS Curriculum will enter university in 2012, at which point they will face a university environment which supports whole-person education and provides many activity-based learning opportunities. By then they should have the maturity to make informed decisions, pursue activities out of intrinsic motivation, and monitor their own learning and development along the way. That, after all, is the spirit behind the education reform.