

**NIE's Arts, Humanities and Literature Conference Closing symposium, 4 June 2015**

**“Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford”?  
What's next for Arts, Humanities and Literature education**

**Discussant response by Suzanne Choo**

**Introduction**

I'd like to thank Suchen Christine Lim, Tan Tarn How and Rebecca Chew for offering their thoughts in this closing symposium. We only gave them ten minutes because we hope to engage them together with all of you in a conversation around the future of Arts, Humanities and Literature education. This is an important topic – we all have a stake in it. Do these subjects have a future? What public role do they play in our country? Now I know we should end this conference on a happy note, we shouldn't talk about negative things. But before we can envision the future, we need to confront the problem that is before us and I want to remind everyone once again, about the current state of Arts, Humanities and Literature education.

- Enrolment in the GCE 'O' level Geography was relatively stable from 1992 to 2001 but declined from 64% of the cohort in 2001 to 12% in 2012.
- Enrolment in the GCE 'O' level History was relatively stable from 1992 to 2001 but declined from 38% of the cohort in 2001 to 3% in 2012.
- Enrolment in the GCE 'O' level Literature in English has fallen from 48% of the cohort in 1992 to 22% in 2001 and 9% or 3000 students in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Point: 24% or less than ¼ of our students are taking a full humanities paper.

- Enrolment in the GCE 'O' level Combined Humanities (Social Studies and Elective Geography) is 52%
- Enrolment in the GCE 'O' level Combined Humanities (Social Studies and Elective History) is 38%
- The enrolment in the GCE 'O' level Combined Humanities (Social Studies and Elective Literature) is 9%.<sup>1</sup>

Point: Of the three humanities subjects, literature is now the most endangered overall.

The point of this closing symposium is really to take an honest, realistic look at the current state of AHL education in Singapore and to think of how we can move on from here. If we remain apathetic or silent, then in the next 50 years, subjects such as literature may cease to exist or be offered to an even smaller minority. The greatest worry I have is that people are not worried about this. To echo Tarn How's point, we cannot afford NOT to begin somewhere. And showing concern is a first step!

I want to offer three thoughts building on what the three speakers have shared.

**1. Returning to our essential philosophy of education: From education for human capital to education for human well-being**

We need to return to our fundamental ethos and philosophy of education and move away from a human capital model of education to a human well-being model of education.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: Heng, S. K. (2013). Parliamentary Replies: Schools Offering and Annual Cohorts Taking Full Literature at 'O' and 'N(A)' Levels. Singapore: Ministry of Education

The human capital model of education emphasizes preparing students with the right skills, competencies to power the economy and so focuses on applied subjects. Now when government leaders give excuses like the falling enrolment is due to a wide range of new subjects like computing, economics, drama in the curriculum, they are essentially subscribing to a human capital model of education. They are saying that this is the free market – there is the buffet of subjects, let students decide. This problematic. Firstly, school leaders and the government have a responsibility to counter any imbalance in our curriculum to ensure holistic education; they cannot leave it to market forces to determine the direction of education. Secondly, do students really have a choice? Yes they can choose from the range of subjects available but what I suspect is this – most students are deciding not based on interest but based on practicality, which subject is easier to score, which subject can appear to provide better future prospects. This is not real choice to me since they are not necessarily choosing subjects they value or knowledge they may be curious about.

Education for human well-being goes beyond the instrumental value of education. This is based on the work of scholars such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and focuses on education's intrinsic value in empowering students to pursue the good life which is the ethical life, the aesthetic life, the meaningful life. Are schools meaningful places where students find deep value in what they are learning?

Now when we look at the statistics, Singapore has done very well in some areas. We are the second most globally competitive country in the world according to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index 2013-2014. Our students also perform well on global competitions and assessments like PISA and TIMSS. However, we don't do so well on other measures. Take for example, the article by CNN<sup>2</sup> (as well as other foreign articles) in 2012 about how Singapore was the most emotionless society. There are others such as the World Happiness Report 2015<sup>3</sup> in which Singapore was ranked 24<sup>th</sup>. The report lists areas such as empathy, socialization, mindfulness among others as measures of happiness. Then there is the Global Well-being Index 2010<sup>4</sup> by Gallup in which Singapore was ranked 83. The well-being index measures feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment of learning among others. Just yesterday, there was also an article by CNA<sup>5</sup> about how, in a survey of travellers, Singapore was second in the list of nationalities most likely to steal from hotels.

All these paint a certain picture of the Singaporean – the Singaporean as competitive but emotionally disengaged, self-centred, unable to see from the perspective of others. At the same time, I think about how one of the most common questions we ask in literature is this “What are your feelings towards a particular character in the story?”, “How do you feel about a particular event that occurred in the story?” Questions that tap on the affect, the sense of connectedness to another – these are questions we ask in literature classes and it is very sad that less students are now being exposed to these ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world. Are students given sufficient exposure to what Suchen has described as the cognitive, aesthetic and affective aspects of education and encouraged to pursue what they truly value, not what they find pragmatic?

Tarn How's talk highlighted the fact that we are now facing a whole range of challenges from principals who continue to emphasize results, heads of department and teachers who are afraid to question. The point is this, if we are committed to an education that seeks to develop the well-being of our students and cultivate well-rounded human beings, then school leaders and teachers must be accountable in ensuring a holistic education. This means supporting subjects like arts and literature.

---

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/23/world/asia/singapore-emotions-gallup/>

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/04/WHR15-Apr29-update.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Source: [http://geographic.org/country\\_ranks/global\\_wellbeing\\_index\\_2010\\_country\\_ranks.html](http://geographic.org/country_ranks/global_wellbeing_index_2010_country_ranks.html)

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-travellers-have/1891754.html>

## **2. Providing more explicit articulation of AHL's fundamental contribution to holistic education: Developing the imagination, dispositions of empathy and hospitality, and dialogic capabilities**

We need to more explicitly articulate the reasons why Arts, Humanities and Literature education are fundamental to human well-being. They offer something that subjects like math and science do not. And I would like to sum this up in three areas.

First, no other group of subjects in the curriculum can train and develop our students' imaginative capacities. If Singapore wants to be a global city of not just workers who can follow orders but thinkers, visionaries, leaders, then our education needs to be committed to the training of the imagination. And the imagination must be trained, must be cultivated, must be expanded. As Columbia University's professor Gayatri Spivak has said, the fundamental role of aesthetic education is to test the limits of the imagination's capacity to perceive otherness.<sup>6</sup>

Second, these subjects foster dispositions of empathy, hospitality, appreciation of ambiguity and differences. They enable us to perceive other realities, to understand differences, to empathize with other cultures through storytelling in their multiple modes.

Third, they encourage dialogic capabilities because of the open-ended nature of aesthetic language and consequently, they facilitate ways of engaging with aesthetic language through practices of play, speculation, inquiry, debate, and dialogue.

## **3. Building our collective voice: Working towards a coalition of Arts, Humanities and Literature educators**

My final point is this. We need to strengthen our community of Arts, Humanities and Literature educators. We need to build a stronger voice in articulating our vision for AHL education.

We also need exemplary school leaders to share best practices with other school leaders. Rebecca's examples of the way arts pedagogy can be relevant for all disciplines of learning not just for training students who want a career in the arts, her description of the iterative processes of designing effective Arts education curricula that would give students a sense of agency are examples that perhaps can be shared with other principals to provide glimpses of the transformative power of aesthetic education.

More importantly, we need to work towards a coalition of Arts, Humanities and Literature educators. I use the term coalition to mean a coming together of individuals with a shared purpose and with a desire for joint action. Very often, teachers may feel they are alone when they constantly have to defend and fight for Arts, History or Literature in school. We need to find ways to support each other, to collectively voice a stronger sense of mission and philosophy about our discipline. This could take the form of an association or society or it could also involve the development of a position paper that clearly articulates to the public the philosophical basis of our discipline and the principles it stands for.

These are some of the thoughts I have and now, it's time to hear from you. How to envision Arts, Humanities and Literature education in the next 50 years? What are some ways that we can address the falling enrolment and how can we support teachers in schools?

---

<sup>6</sup> Source: Spivak, G. C. (2012). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.