

More than Construction Work

International Service Learning (ISL) is a way of learning through community service overseas for a sufficient duration, and with a strong emphasis on learning in areas of

- personal development
- curriculum studies
- awareness of social, political, economic issues.



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He has been organising overseas YEPs since 1997 and has led 6 projects in Indonesia (Bintan), Cambodia, Thailand (Rayong Province), Malaysia (Sarawak) and China (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Province, Jiangxi Province).

Glossary of Acronyms

ISL International Service Learning

NP Ngee Ann Polytechnic

SIF Singapore International
Foundation

YEP Youth Expedition Project

Meeting Objectives of ISL: Why we need to go overseas

In my daily dealings with my students, I find that they have little knowledge nor interest in other countries, nearby or distant. They are too comfortable. We need to take them out of their comfort zone, and help them learn about other countries and the people who live there. When they go on an ISL trip to live with the local people, to play with them, to eat with them, to work with them, to dream with them, to cry with them, we have found that our students change. They return with

- a heightened sense of adventure (dealing with uncertainties etc.)
- improved social skills through group living and teamwork
- a broader view of the world due to their encounter with new and sometimes vastly different cultures and socio-economic environments
- a better understanding of their own value systems and beliefs through a comparison with the different perspectives they have experienced in another culture.

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They read about the happenings in that country. They care about what happens to that country. They care about what happens to our country. They appreciate what we have in Singapore – the government, the people, their parents, their friends.

How does a YEP (Youth Expedition Project) develop its participants?

1. Academic Outcome

We are from the Building & Environment Division in Ngee Ann Polytechnic, and the types of project we undertake are related to our curriculum, i.e. construction work, water treatment plant, water piping, electrical work, etc. Hence, the project reinforces the learning process because they apply what they have learnt, and also helps them to remember the technicalities and the alternatives/substitutes of materials used, etc.

There is also another aspect of academic outcome which we encountered. Engineering relies heavily upon linear, black and white thinking with little room for personal introspection and reflection. When those students are out there building with the local community where the people and their needs are real, it encourages them to learn in varied ways including spatial, visual, auditory and

tactile. We find that our brightest students became less nerdy, from a strictly theoretical person to one who sees application and alternatives which stimulates his/her critical thinking skills and creativity. On the other end, our weakest students find the learning process more exciting as they now understand what they have been studying, they learn to explore learning as a group, and they tend to form their own support groups.

2. Personal Outcome

The sense of confidence that you see in each and every student is very different before the YEP and after the YEP. The development is very obvious, the timid becomes confident, and the confident feel that they can now take on the world. I see them volunteer to lead activities, organize Freshmen Orientation to help the freshmen to develop themselves, they organize canoeing, night cycling, Dinner & Dance, and other enhancement activities. They are cohesive as a team – taking turns to lead depending on the strong points of each member, they learn to brief & debrief to learn from each experience. Outside of the school, they also initiate local community service projects.

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From the point of view of a staff in-charge of Student Development, a YEP is one activity that develops the whole person and they, in turn, help you to develop others. And this is done in the span of the expedition – 18 days.

3. Social Outcome

It is not only development of the self concept where the participants are much more aware of his/her ability, esteem, values, resilience, etc. but also understanding the social role and the importance of it in his/her life. Social competence is attained also through constructive conflict resolution and emotional intelligence.

When we were in Cambodia, someone donated a second-hand electric generator to Sunshine Home, a shelter for HIV-positive families. We sent four students there to do electrical wiring work. When they got back, they told about how the home for over 20 children had not electricity prior to that, and had to collect rainwater for drinking. They enquired and found that the home needed S\$3000 for a pump for extracting the ground water and a small treatment plant. When they returned to Singapore, these four students rallied their classmates onto this cause and raised S\$3000 in 3 months and presented the money to the home.

Here it is very clearly a case of youth leadership and empowerment where they see their civic responsibilities to the community, the need for collective effort for

a common purpose and in this case to enable a disadvantaged community to have access to proper drinking water. Very simply under those circumstances, they have developed into people who take upon themselves to be aware of the community issues, needs and problems and then look at available resources and work from there. The students in this case created awareness for the problem and then got support to solve the problem together. This creates a natural platform for them to initiate local community service projects when they go back to their home community and look at the needs and issues.

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Another incident occurred in one of our more recent trips. We worked and stayed in a village for a week when our host Youth Federation came and gave us a BBQ. The village children were around us out of curiosity and because they were used to being with us. We got canned drinks, and we offered it to the children. The Youth Federation told us not to give drinks or food to the children as they did not cater for them, and that we could do it only if there were leftovers. Our participants heard that, gave the children their drinks and food, and drank the well water instead and ate leftovers in our kitchen. Our participants saw how the village children treasured every sip of their canned drinks and the BBQ food, and felt that the sacrifice was worthwhile. Facilitation at the end of the night centered on the Youth Federation not providing for the villagers and related it to how we treat our cleaners, sweepers and even foreign workers in Singapore .

The issues of social conscience and justice come in. They are dealing with the sense of right and wrong relative to social inequalities and the potential need to advocate for fairness which then becomes the food for thought amongst the students.

4. Workplace-Related Outcome

Students can make use of their experience to explore their career and readiness. Most importantly, cultivating the right work attitudes about work ethics, responsibilities, and organizational functions can be addressed here.

On the same project mentioned above, half the participants had to lay a 150mm diameter heavy duty rubber pipe from a water source to the village we were working in. This was supposed to be done by the local authorities for over a year but had not been done. The participants had to carry the pipe, each 5 metres long, an electric generator and a welding machine to join the pipes. They had to bash through virgin forest, wade through swamps, bitten by all kinds of insects, and on the first day, everyone was stung by bees.

They came to me and explained the difficulties and wanted to stop this work. The few questions I posed to them were:

1. If you don't do it, how long more before they get their water supply?
2. How are they living currently without this water supply?
3. How many people in this village will benefit from the water supply?

4. How many other villages will benefit from this water supply?

They thought about it and finished the job in 10 days. Apart from the satisfaction of completing the job, they learnt the beauty of the forest from the locals, e.g. When they were hot, the locals plucked a big leaf for them to use as a fan. When having lunch, leaves were used as plates, and they ate with their hands. When bitten by insects, they used sap from certain plants as cure. When hungry, they cooked their food in bamboo.



This group of students benefited the most from many aspects, from a sense of helping others, to the learning of the Iban forest culture, and loving the people.

5. Citizenship Related Outcome

Having a project overseas and engaging with the people there helped our participants compare what they experienced there with what they have at home in Singapore.

Some of the issues include:

- water supply
- electricity supply
- sewerage
- public transport
- car ownership
- home ownership
- corruption
- safety on the streets
- past history & recent history of country
- things that could have happened to Singapore

Beyond construction projects

Many groups see the benefits of YEPs but based on the publicity given in the media, people's impression of YEPs is that of construction related projects, and that is not their area of expertise or interest.

There are a few ways around this. One way is to inform SIF/YEP your area of interest and let them source for projects accordingly. The other way is to source for your own projects in your area of interest. The latter is difficult if it is your first project.

The School of Life Sciences and Chemical Technology in Ngee Ann Polytechnic followed my Division on their first project to do construction work. After seeing the possibilities and potential available, and the support from SIF/YEP, they went on to do their second project dealing with horticulture, and will be

embarking on their third project dealing with aquaculture. They even got a related Singapore company to contribute towards the project cost.

Other projects undertaken or will be undertaken by various courses include

- a mini hydroelectric plant in Nepal and a solar power project in Cambodia by the Electrical Engineering Division,
- the design and construction of a water treatment plant and a rainwater harvesting project, both in Cambodia by the Civil and Environmental Engineering course,
- the reconditioning and installation of used computers and training of staff to use computers in Cambodia by the School of Info Comm Technology & the Maths, Science & Computing Division,
- the teaching of English and rice distribution in Cambodia by the School of Business & Accountancy,
- the construction of water collection ponds in India and the construction of playgrounds in Bintan & Cambodia by the Student Development & Alumni Relations Office

Conclusion

It is hoped that by sharing our experiences, we can encourage different groups with a diversity of knowledge and skills to go on YEPs to contribute and learn to be the future leaders/citizens of Singapore.