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2024 Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching for International Teachers

Fulbright: An Odyssey of Ruminaton, Calibration, Elevation & Renewed Motivation

Chapter 1: Ruminaton

“What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action.”

— Meister Eckhart

Taking my first step into my four-month experience was exciting yet filled with some trepidation. I was at a crossroads in my life where, in leaving behind the comfort of my family as well as my supportive community of colleagues and students in school, I was nudged into taking stock of my philosophy as an educator of more than twenty years and onto my new role as an ambassador of Singapore. Fortunately, my path was made easier in the form of two other like-minded Singaporean teachers, who had a similar passion for what we do, even though we came from diverse disciplines such as Economics and Physical Education.



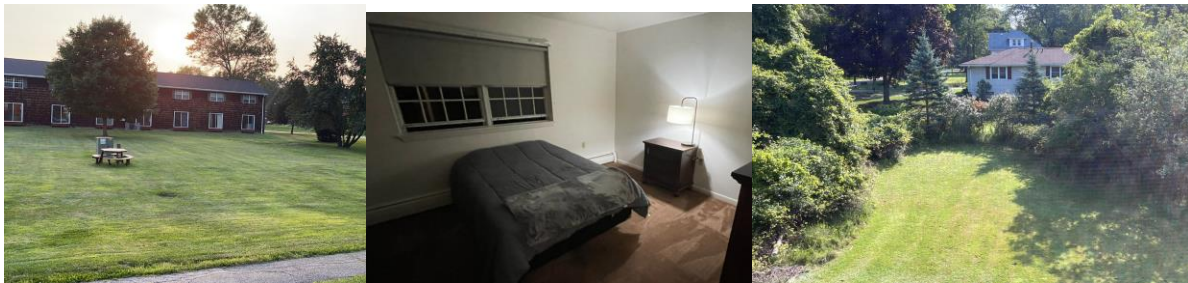
Navigating Rochester, New York, the United States, with my fellow Singaporean peers

After a long travel route of almost thirty hours, crossing continents, the three of us arrived in Rochester in the dead of night. This gave us a glimpse into the serene compound that we would call home for the next four months, which was made even more breathtaking by the unexpected yet ethereal appearance of a strolling deer, just like being in a Disney film.

Being immersed in the heart of nature was instrumental in many moments of rumination to come, when I mingled with 21 other Fulbright scholars from 14 different countries, in a neutral

space in the form of the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester (UoR), at our housing compound as well as on many jaunts into surrounding areas that we explored together.

My first challenge was to set up home as a student, which I deeply appreciated, having not had the experience of living on campus as an undergraduate. Getting used to simple things which I have previously taken for granted, such as preparing every meal made from ingredients which I could only source once a week from a major, weekly trip to the grocery store (and not my nearby twenty-four-hour NTUC) and doing my laundry only once a week at the centralised laundry facility, have made me all that much more appreciative of the ease of living I have back at home in Singapore.



Graduate student housing at Whipple Park, my home of four months

The process of settling in was made easier when my fellow participants and I built our emotional banks with each other through shared activities such as taking turns to cook for each other, discussing everything under the sun (and moon) while we drew on older wisdom to process newer experiences, and took walks of 3 kilometres to our university campus or the nearest grocery store, admiring the beauty of fall and eventually winter along the way.



Walking everywhere quickly became the new norm

Time to reflect is a priceless gift. During our weekly Fulbright Seminars and at sessions to share Singapore culture, we were called on, either individually or in groups, to navigate topics such as the purpose and goals of our education systems back home, and revisiting educational theories alongside varying contexts of the American education system, to prepare us for our weekly attachment to local schools to carry out our field experience and educational research.



Our Fulbright DAI 2024 Community

In these sessions, it was clear that while everyone shared a common mission to teach, our triumphs and challenges differed based on the various situations we came from. Learning to listen as a student after a long time of taking the stage as a teacher, or guiding by side of my teacher peers in Singapore, provided a fresh canvas for me to learn from the lived stories of my Fulbright colleagues. I was privy to the concept of pedagogical humility, to view myself as a tool of teaching among many others all over the world. At the same time, a newfound gratitude for all we have in Singapore in the form of the systems and structures, supported by ample resources and respect as educators became evident over the course of regular sharing. This is indeed something to be highly valued.

Chapter 2: Calibration

“That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you’ve understood all your life, but in a new way.”

— Doris Lessing

In my second week into the programme, a swerve ball came my way in the form of an accident at home in Whipple Park, resulting in an arm fracture. This is when my bond with my two Singaporean friends was cemented, as they helped call an ambulance in a foreign land to get me to safety and onto the road of recovery. I thought I had previously understood what support was, but the level of care both of them gave me was tremendous for people who had been strangers mere weeks before this, from staying by my side in the hospital as I waited for medical attention, to giving regular check ins through the night to my worried husband and son back in Singapore from their unwavering position next to me, while plans were made for me to undergo surgery to ensuring I would be able to function well while recuperating at home and at school, post-surgery.



From left: Pre- and post-surgery x-rays; my housemate from the Philippines, Angel; learning to function with a cast; the day I was fully discharged

Coming home from the hospital taught me to draw on reserves of strength and endurance I did not know I possessed, while teaching me humility and acceptance as I relied on my housemate, Angel, a fellow Fulbrighter from the Philippines, in the initial days for simple tasks such as combing my hair. I learnt how I could speed up my own self-reliance as I kept testing my own boundaries to the things I could do independently, while giving my body the space it needed to heal. Through it all, I learnt patience and a new-found appreciation for the different readiness

levels of the people around me, as I became ready for different things at different times in my own journey of bouncing back from the fracture.



From left: TCMS Fulbright teachers; Partner Teacher, Ms Kristen Hallagan; Faculty Advisor, Dr Teresa Valdez

I was blessed to be placed in Twelve Corners Middle School (TCMS) in the Brighton District, and found my US counterpart in the form of my partner teacher, Ms Kristen Hallagan, a teacher of English as a New Language (ENL) to support new students to the US whose dominant language is not English.

Kristen and I share similar beliefs: we are both educators who believe that every child wants to and can learn, supported by our facilitation of each child's innate quest for eventual self-direction. We soon found common ground in teaching approaches, our ability to engage different stakeholders such as teachers, parents, administrators and the larger community to best help our students as well as openness to immersing ourselves in the diversity around us. Kristen's generosity and our mutual identification as kindred spirits has turned into a friendship which I know will be for life. Indeed, in our last meeting, we did not say "goodbye", but rather, "till we meet again"!

I had to quickly adapt to the new context of a co-educational middle school, interacting with 12- to 14-year-olds, as opposed to my daily interactions with only teenage girls in my secondary school back in Singapore. I also had to find my place as a Literature teacher in an environment which was only familiar with English Language Arts (ELA), and had to map what I

knew onto what existed in this new setting. My persuasion skills were put to the test as I sounded out other ELA teachers to see if they would support me in carrying out my research on implementing an adapted thinking approach in their ELA classrooms.

Mrs Lisa Golubjatnikov not only opened the doors to her various classrooms, but worked alongside me in trialing the approach, stepping in to teach so that I could observe a teacher in action and collate feedback on what worked and could work better. Her students were equally welcoming and made me miss my own students slightly less, through their thoughtful words and eagerness to learn together with me. Lisa's collaboration has brought my research to its next level, ready for further implementation and sharpening in Singapore, as I endeavour now to bring teachers in the larger Literature fraternity on board with this approach for all students.

This would not have been possible without the background guidance of my faculty advisor, Dr. Teresa Valdez, who patiently sat through numerous sessions as I proposed and changed my research questions. Her timely questions helped me to clarify my intentions and her expertise in the field of language education provided me with essential handles and resources. We laboured over my paper together, and her parting words of encouragement and acknowledgement of the success of the approach echoed the satisfaction I found in this shared process, which I am now paying forward in similar interactions with professional learning teams both in my school and at AST.



Left: One of my four teaching classes at TCMS Right: Audit Course Lecturer, Mr Dardan Shabani, and coursemates



Seizing opportunities to share about our Singapore at various platforms

As I went back to the drawing board and made sense of these experiences, along with learning from insightful discussions in my audit course and with my Singaporean friends to share about Singapore at various platforms, indeed I could now “suddenly understand something [I’ve] understood all [my] life, but in a new way”.

Chapter 3: Elevation

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."

- Dr. Seuss

In the spirit of the UoR’s motto of *Meliora*, becoming ever better, I immersed myself in the elevation of my mind and spirit through passion projects of visiting and learning from libraries in growing the love of reading, watching plays and musicals, especially on Broadway, engaging in community work as well as travelling.



Exploring library spaces and learning from professional school librarian at TCMS, Ms Katie Lambert

In the words of author, Mary McNear, “public libraries are the heart and soul of any community; they are a place to read and think and browse and dream”. My forays into the school library at TCMS, other high schools, the UoR series of libraries as well as the New York Public Library have provided me with a heightened appreciation for the role of professional librarians and how they bring learning and communities together through research and reading for the sheer

joy of it to every child and adult. Especially intriguing was how Makerspaces could be further unpacked to meet the needs of a community, and this, paved with the refreshed articulation of school libraries by MOE, fuels my passion to explore this further with my colleagues and students.

It had been a personal dream of mine to wander into Broadway theaters and catch the action in a theatre designed for it. I was fortunate to do this several times, feeding my artistic soul as I watched words jump from page to stage, awed by the director's vision and scrutinising how each actor made the character his or hers, and just being enthralled by the majesty of every set customised for each rendition.



Exploring the dramatic arts while grateful for the opportunity to give back to the local Sikh community in Rochester

At the heart of my purpose as a human being is the call to service to others. I consider myself fortunate to have found fodder for my spirit in the form of weekly service as one of a few Punjabi language tutors to about 40 Punjabi children at the Sikh Society of Rochester. I was humbled by how the community came together to meet spiritual, linguistic and social needs of their children every Saturday by offering customised group classes in the domains of Punjabi language, Sikh history, identity formation and self-esteem as well as communal hymn singing and playing of musical instruments. Those who did not lead sessions worked hand in hand to cook warm meals in the communal kitchen, to which all contributed.



Experiencing the differing flavours of diverse US states

How can one visit the US and not explore what different states have to offer? Travelling with my fellow Singaporeans and other Fulbright friends to uncharted territory was a wholesome experience. Whether it was Niagara, state parks, NYC, Washington, Boston or Cleveland, every foray out beyond Rochester allowed us to soak in local flavours, rich history as well as interact with locals to get dibs on the best coffee and what they loved about the US. Memories of songs sung on road trips and striking up conversations with random strangers have added more threads to my travel tapestry, which are entwined with those of my friends.

The Next Chapter: Renewed Motivation

“We must become what we wish to teach.” — Nathaniel Branden

The overall experience has indeed elevated my sense of being, and when I walked back into my classroom in 2025, the open faces of my students as they asked eagerly for stories of my adventures and how I got there to begin with filled me with satisfaction at having completed this unexpected phase of my life which came in the form of not just a Fulbright odyssey to the US, but also an inward journey into my heart, mind and soul.

I am indeed fortunate to have been given this rare opportunity as part of the Fulbright programme. I have walked away with a firm friendship with my two fellow Singaporeans, who I know in my heart are just a message away. I now have friends across the world, who share a similar vision as me. My colleagues in turn feel rejuvenated by my candid sharing of anecdotes of all things Fulbright.

Especially poignant is sharing this part of my life with my students this year which has embodied my ability to step into their shoes for four months as a student, giving me renewed empathy for their everyday triumphs and struggles and in turn providing them with a hope of what they can venture out to do in the future.

Together, with both colleagues and students, I believe that we can help each student to realise their belief that they want to and can learn, by building on ways to support the facilitation of each child's innate unique quest for eventual self-direction, bringing to life the idea of Meliora, being ever better.



Wrapping up my Fulbright 2024 @ UoR Chapter: Meliora, Ever Better