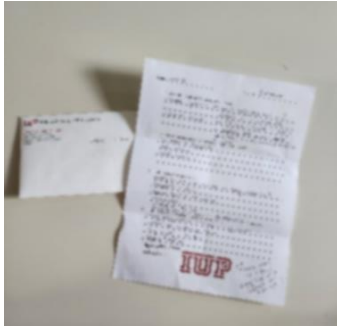


Cheng Edwina

2025 Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching for International Teachers

Between the Lines of a Letter to Myself



The letter that I wrote to myself at the start of the programme.

“Write a letter to your future self, and I will give it back to you at the end of the programme,” our FDAI IUP Team Leader, Dr. Michele Petrucci, told us. She is the Associate Vice President for International Education and Global Engagement.

At Compassvale Secondary School, where I teach, we do this letter-writing activity with our graduating students every year. As the Year Head leading this, I never expected to write a letter to my own future self. I wrote my letter on the second day of the FDAI programme and read it again four months later. I realized how powerful these words could be. Writing to your future self is more than just a message. It helps you reflect, become more self-aware, set goals, find motivation, face challenges, track progress, process emotions, reduce stress, and preserve memories.

In my letter to myself, I wrote about the part of the programme I found easy. I also listed some fears and worries, and thought about what I could contribute. Here, I want to share three of these thoughts with you.

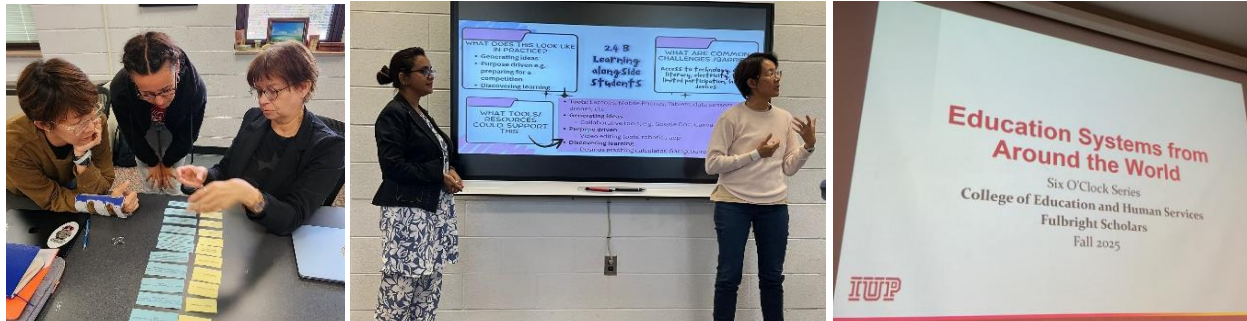
1. Overcoming Doubts About Myself

In 2025, FDAI brought together 20 teachers from 13 countries at IUP, a borough in west-central Pennsylvania.



The 20 Fulbright Teachers during a welcome lunch reception.

All 20 teachers are passionate about teaching and stand out in different ways. Hearing them introduce themselves with such confidence in the first few days made me doubt my own abilities even more. Yet as we attended Fulbright Seminars, Tech Workshops, and lunch meetings, and shared about our countries' education systems, it was often the informal chats on long bus rides or walks back to our dorms that brought us closer. These moments opened doors for deep discussions, lively debates, and heartfelt sharing about both education and our own lives.



Group discussions and presentations on topics related to education.



Our visit to Indiana County Technology Center to learn about the U.S. education system.

Through these conversations, many of us spoke openly about the difficulties, challenges, and fears we face as educators and FDAI participants. This openness helped me see that everyone in FDAI has their own struggles. We have many differences, like culture, school environment, and teaching resources. Still, we all share a desire to improve our teaching and make a positive impact on our students. This collective optimism and drive to grow helped me accept my insecurities and try to overcome them.



Reminder to be kind to others and yourself!

During the programme, I learned a lot from the academic classes and field experiences. For example, in the audit class Teaching Mathematics in Special Education, I picked up new and useful ways to teach math to different students. I also gained a better understanding of what universal design for learning looks like in a math class.

I tried to stay curious and asked questions during academic sessions and field experiences, such as weekly meetings with my IUP faculty advisor and talks with teachers from Indiana Area Senior High School and Pittsburgh Brashear High School. I also made sure to learn more about educational support by reading articles and books from the many resources at IUP.



Growing my confidence through multiple sharing, such the left image: Sharing with Student Teachers about the Singapore education system Education System. Middle image: conducting a workshop on Teaching in Enjoyable Ways to with fellow Teachers on the Fulbright DAI Programme. Right image: At radio station WCCS 101.1FM and AM1160 to share about our experiences on the Fulbright DAI Programme.

I also took the chance to share and speak up. I talked about the Singapore education system with student teachers in my audit class, gave a cultural presentation about Singapore to students from Indiana Area

Senior High and Pittsburgh Brashear High School, went on live radio to introduce myself to the Indiana community, and led a workshop on Teaching in Enjoyable Ways to Motivate and Engage Students using the RAP Pedagogical Guidelines with other FDAI participants.



Conducting cultural lessons with students from Indiana Area Senior High and Pittsburgh Brashear High School.

Being part of FDAI has been a privilege that encouraged me to welcome new experiences and challenge myself to grow. I feel proud to be Singaporean, knowing that the dedication of those before us has built Singapore's reputation for good governance and a strong education system. Yet, this is not something to take for granted. We must continue to uphold our values and prepare ourselves for whatever lies ahead.

2. Challenging Myself to Appreciate Others and Deepen Friendships

Relator is one of my top five strengths in the Clifton Strengths assessment. As a relator, I enjoy building close and genuine relationships. I hoped that the 20 FDAI participants would become close, stay in touch after the programme, and even visit each other in our home countries.

At our online pre-departure meeting, I mentioned my excitement about visiting the IUP gym and invited anyone who was interested to join me. While I may have sounded like a gym enthusiast, my true intention was to connect with others by sharing experiences together.

I suggested potluck dinners where each of us brought a dish from our home country to share. My love for nature led me to invite fellow FDAIs on hikes at Whites Woods Nature Centre, the Thousand Steps trail, and even on an adventure exploring a local Pennsylvania cave.



Our first potluck dinner.



Our first hike at Whites Woods Nature Centre.

Over these four months, the 20 of us built a safe space and supported each other. We shared our cultures not only through potluck dinners, but also by sharing meals, going on shopping trips, joining exercise classes and gym sessions, hiking, and exploring new states together during fall break and Thanksgiving. We even welcomed each other into our circles of family and friends.

Beyond the FDAI participants, I am deeply grateful for the friends I found in Indiana's warm and welcoming community. Their kindness and readiness to help turned a foreign place into a home and made my experience all the more rewarding.

My friendship with the Adkins family, Stacie, Dr Rick, and Carissa, gave me not only their warmth but also



My friendship with the Adkins family, from right to left: Stacie, Dr Rick, and Carissa

a better understanding of American culture, filled with new experiences. They took me to my first American football game, where I learned the rules by peppering Rick and nearby fans with questions. At the Indiana County Fair, I marveled at the farm animals and vegetables proudly displayed by farmers, each a testament to years of dedication.

When Halloween drew near, Rick, Stacie, and Carissa brought me to a pumpkin festival. I wandered through a sprawling corn maze and picked my own pumpkin straight from the field. While choosing my pumpkin, I watched

children running around happily, trying to find the biggest one. This was a Halloween and fall tradition I had never known before.

I completed my educator project under the close guidance and mentorship of Dr Janet Walker. Her wealth of experience as a Mathematics Education Professor opened my eyes to new ways of engaging students, using strategies I had never encountered before. Her encouragement lifted my confidence in academics, an area I once doubted myself in. Each week, she would ask if I had enjoyed my weekend, much like my mother checking if I had eaten. I still remember the tote bag she sewed for me at our first meeting, and the thoughtful gifts that followed, each one warming my heart and sometimes even filling my stomach. Dr Walker supported us in every FDAI activity, from cultural presentations to project showcases and celebrations. She was more than a mentor; she was a giver, a steadfast supporter, and a mother figure to me.



*My IUP Faculty Advisor,
Dr Janet Walker*



Dr Soo (in the middle) with Dr Phil on her left, together with their close friends and other Fulbright participants, gathering for a Thanksgiving dinner.

Who could have guessed I would meet another Singaporean in a small town like Indiana? Dr Soo introduced herself at our first meeting with the IUP faculty advisor, and the moment she mentioned she was from Singapore, I was overjoyed to find a familiar connection 15,000 kilometers from home. Though we were strangers, her presence brought instant comfort. Dr Soo and her husband, Dr Phil, welcomed us with home-cooked meals and conversations sprinkled with Singaporean

references that soothed my homesickness. She even checked in on us regularly and brought Prima Taste laksa instant noodles to satisfy our cravings for a taste of home.



Mr Waryck (left) with fellow Fulbright teachers at the top of Thousand Steps hike.

We were fortunate to have Mr William Waryck as our FDAI field experiences coordinator. His generosity knew no bounds as he introduced us to Indiana’s natural wonders. Some of us watched shooting stars streak across the sky, fed birds in Blue Spruce Park, searched for Bald Eagles at the dam, and witnessed Buttermilk Falls in three different seasons. He even took us geocaching in the snow. From him and the Indiana community, I learned that true hospitality requires little more than a sincere heart and a passion for sharing.



Mr Waryck brought some of the Fulbright Teachers to Blue Spruce Park to feed birds.



Some of us were fortunate to see Buttermilk Falls in fall and winter with Mr Waryck.

Stacie, Dr Rick, Carissa, Dr Walker, Dr Soo, and Dr Phil are just some of the kind people I met in Indiana. Many others helped me along the way, and I am grateful for each friendship. This includes Dr Michele Petrucci, Dr Edel Reilly, Dr Stephen Schaffrath, Dr Holly Rougeaux, Mr Gerald Smith, Mr Timothy McGogney, Ms Atia Rasul, Dr Jacqueline McGinty, Ms Jess Oest, Mr William Waryck, Ms Farzaneh Jahangiri, Mr Jobson Barbosa, Ms Koga Chilume, Tina Smay, Eric Smay and Jordan Smay, and other IUP graduate assistants who supported the FDAI Programme.



Grateful to all of them, from left to right, pictures taken with Dr. Holly Rougeaux, Ms Koga Chilume, Mr Jobson Barbosa and Ms Farzaneh Jahangir.



Grateful to all of them!

Picture on the left: Dinner with Dr Janet, Eric Smay, Jordan Smay and Tina Smay.

Picture on the right: End of Tech Workshop picture taken with Dr Jacqueline McGinty (in orange shawl), Ms Jess Oest (in a pink shawl), teaching assistants Anna (in grey sweater) and Dana (in maroon top), and fellow Fulbright teachers.



Grateful to all of them!

From left to right: Pictures taken with Dr. Holly Rougeaux, Ms Koga Chilume, Mr Jobson Barbosa and Ms Farzaneh Jahangir, Mr Gerald Smith, Ms Atia Rasul, Dr Stephen Schaffrath, Dr Edel Reilly and Dr Michele Petrucci.

The people I met through FDAI opened my eyes to a world of cultures. I became more tolerant, less judgmental, and more understanding of our differences. It was heartening to discover that values like humility, kindness, care, empathy, and respect are values shared everywhere and help create inclusivity and diversity. Through these interactions, I learned more about myself, my strengths, and my areas for growth. I am deeply grateful to everyone I met, for they made me stronger and better than before.

3. Striking a balance between academics and play

I have a habit of pushing myself to complete tasks, often at the expense of long hours and my own well-being. Before the Fulbright DAI programme, I started making healthier choices, eating better and staying

active. In my letter, I reminded myself to find balance between work and play, and to keep a routine that included time for study, relaxation, and fun.

To maintain a healthy work-life balance, I treated myself after study sessions by joining campus activities with fellow teachers. The campus buzzed with energy, from sports to student-led cultural and interest groups like tie-dye T-shirt making, cookie decorating, karaoke nights, and more. I realized that the vibrant campus spirit is shaped not just by staff, but by students for students.



Left to right: Creating our own Dia de los Muertos headpiece activity organized by the IUP Spanish Society; Taking a photo with IUP's mascot while participating in IUP Unity Day.



Left to right: Participating in IUP activity, Chalk the walk; Watching our first ice hockey match with fellow Fulbright participant



Left to right: Visiting Washington D.C.; Helping out at the Smiling Goat Soap Company; Visiting Fallingwater, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

On weekends, I rewarded myself by meeting my friendship hosts and diving into activities I love, as well as adventures I could never have in Singapore. I soaked in the outdoors, attended concerts and musicals, explored museums and memorials, and traveled to iconic places like Niagara Falls, Fallingwater, Washington, D.C., and New York City. I tried so many firsts: watching American football and ice hockey, making apple cider, carving pumpkins, dressing up for Halloween, helping out with soap making, snow sledding and even driving in America. I visited friends in Portland, Oregon, and celebrated my first Thanksgiving with them. Experiencing summer, fall, and winter all within four months was nothing short of magical.

In my quest for balance, I discovered that making a plan is simple, but following through is the real challenge. Speaking my intentions aloud and inviting others to join keeps me accountable. Clear goals help me stay focused, and breaking big tasks into small, steady steps makes them manageable. As I return to the bustle of family and work, I hope to continue carving out time for activities that nurture my mental and physical well-being.

The Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching has been a truly enriching journey, giving me the time and space to reflect on my teaching philosophy, build confidence in my academic abilities, and strengthen my social, emotional, and 21st century skills. I picked up valuable teaching practices and global perspectives as well as friendships. These four months helped me understand myself more deeply and gave me the chance to recharge and return stronger. I am deeply thankful for this opportunity and to everyone who made it possible. In the future, I hope to inspire and support others as I have been inspired and supported.

