

Mdm. W.K. June Rohini Brampy

2022 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program: *The Joy of Learning*

Personal Goals for the Fulbright Programme

I am deeply honoured to have received the Fulbright Distinguished Award for International Teachers (FDAI) 2022. It was an immensely enriching and fulfilling experience for me. Two primary goals that I had established for myself at the start of my Fulbright journey were

1. to connect and build meaningful and lasting relationships with the FDAI fraternity of international teachers as well as with the Indiana community; and
2. to gain deeper perspectives on the United States (US) education system as I engage in critical conversations with my US counterparts about the educational standards, beliefs and values that are formed and enacted in classroom lessons.

At the end of this exceedingly worthwhile venture, I wanted to be able to reflect on the learning I had discovered, to transform my classroom practice and to share the relevant skills, workable ideas and strategies with my teaching fraternity back home. These aspirations were achieved through lived experiences through the different roles I assumed during the FDAI Programme.

As a Teacher, during Field Experiences and Academic Excursions

At Maris Stella High School, I had introduced the idea of open classrooms in my school and found it to be a very effective tool for teachers' ongoing professional development. I was also presented with opportunities to engage in open classrooms during my experiences in the two US schools I was attached to. My partner teachers in Indiana Senior High School as well as Pittsburgh Brashear High School scheduled lesson observations for me, to enable me to observe different lessons every Wednesday. I was not only able to conduct a cultural presentation in both schools but also introduce the literary concept of symbolism through a Singaporean Lee Tzu Pheng's poem titled 'Singapore River'. I adapted this lesson to suit the profile of the students in Brashear High School, adopting a more quiz-like approach instead. One of the stimulus activities I incorporated to help establish the context for the poem was a visualization exercise, where I invited students to draw a symbol that combined aspects of a fish and a lion, after which we compared their drawings to what our Merlion looked like. Here are some examples they came up with:



Samples taken from the visualization activity based on a Singapore symbol, 'The Merlion', from the lesson I conducted on Sept 28, 2022

During the weekly **Fulbright Seminars**, we engaged in many honest discussions about the American education system, the cultivation of conducive school cultures and learning environments, learning through multiple pathways, challenges faced by the teachers and students, and many other insightful topics. Coupled with what I was observing in US classrooms, the entire process has been purposeful in helping me reflect on how I would like to make my own classroom more inclusive, for example, by offering more opportunities for students to take ownership of which learning pathways they would prefer to engage in. Overall, my school and classroom experiences had increased my understanding of the key tenets of the US education system, namely diversity, inclusion and equity, and how these principles are actualised in American classrooms.

We also participated in several academic excursions to state educational institutions. Indiana County Technology Centre (ICTC), for example, is a public vocational school, much alike to the Institutes of Technical Education (ITE) in Singapore. We also visited private schools like Kiski Area School as well as schools that focus on meeting customised career pathways like the River Valley School District Steam Academy. There was also a site visit to the Duolingo headquarters, where we learnt about the company's vision, philosophy and its outreach programme.



The Fulbrighters' visit to the Indiana County Technology Centre (ICTC) during fall of 2022.

As a Student in Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)

IUP offered me the space, time and support I required to engage fruitfully in my learning and research work. Each time I encountered some difficulty and surfaced it to my lecturers, I would receive some form of support almost immediately. The culture of care was very obvious, and I enjoyed interacting with all the teaching and support staff there. IUP was a very welcoming university that embraced diversity, considering the varied backgrounds of the Fulbright teachers!

I had also requested to observe the Literature lessons taught by my University Faculty Advisor, Dr. Kenneth Sherwood, and learnt greatly from the way he approached the teaching of Literature with his undergraduate students at IUP. I found his lessons on challenging students to work collaboratively to evaluate different sources of e-Literature and what they perceived to be good literature, against the discussed success criteria, to be very impactful as it opened up possibilities and helped me reframe my understanding of what comprises literary works.

The weekly **Fulbright Seminars** were very useful in providing a deep understanding of differing educational contexts, needs and issues across the global landscape, with meaningful sharing from each country's Fulbright teacher. The weekly **Technology Workshops** introduced us to so many tools, and it was obvious that the lecturers, Dr. McGinty and Mr. Roger Briscoe, were so passionate about technology! They were

extremely skilful in guiding us as we experimented with the different applications and tools, while providing us with timely feedback.

I had also chosen to attend the audit course '**Strategic Assessment and Instruction in Expository Texts**' conducted by Mr. Andrew Weaver. I found this course to be highly relevant for Singapore as we try to increase support for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Mr. Weaver was very forthcoming in sharing all the resources that he had created to support students with SEN to the class of beginning teachers. As we engaged in critical conversations, we realised that we shared common strategies to support student learning, such as creating scaffolded templates. I shared with him what I had been working on, namely the 4-Quadrant Routine (4QR) and the Writing Skills Checklist. This audit course led me to reflect on the areas I could improve on to engage and support students who are challenged in their learning by forging meaningful partnerships with relevant organisations.

As a Researcher on a Mission

I also found the process of preparing for my Inquiry Project, entitled 'Scaffolding Thinking to Promote Creative and Critical Responses in the English Literature Classroom' to be deeply satisfying as there was the breadth and depth of research recommended by my mentor and Faculty Advisor, Dr Sherwood. The readings we did for the Fulbright Seminars helped me to reframe my mindset in preparation for the school experiences. The weekly critical conversations with my Faculty Advisor, as well as the advice and feedback given by him and the Fulbright Seminar lecturers, had helped me immensely, to scope what was a potentially ambitious research project, and undergird it with sound and relevant theoretical underpinnings.

Overall, I received good feedback from my advisors and host lecturers as well as other participants when I presented my Inquiry Project at IUP and also the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) End-of-Programme held at Washington, DC. At both presentations, I received offers for further collaboration to explore the use of my thinking routine in other countries' educational contexts and classrooms. With the feedback I have received, I hope to deepen the scope of my project and extend it to explore another area that is of particular interest to me, namely using dialogic talk to strengthen the reading-writing connection in producing creative and critical literary responses in the literature classroom.



The Fulbrighters at the IREX End-of-Program held at Washington, DC., where we received our Certificates of Completion for the Fulbright DAI Programme for Fall 2022.

As a Member of the Indiana Community

Together with the other Fulbright participants, we engaged in cultural visits to iconic places, landmarks and museums outside of the university grounds. We had also shared a meal and engaged with former American Fulbright participants of the Fulbright Association (Greater Pittsburgh Chapter). I participated in various cultural experiences, visiting several churches (though I was more involved with one), visiting church families in their homes and spending time with elderly couples, as well as participating in church events. In our time there, a few Fulbrighters including myself, were interviewed for the *Indiana Gazette* newspaper, where we were asked to comment on the differences in the education systems in the US compared to our home countries. Do read the published article [here](#).

As an on-campus community, the Fulbright teachers undoubtedly spent much time with each other, interacting, cooking and sharing meals, studying, as well as participating in many campus activities together. To help foster a sense of belonging to the Indiana community, we were encouraged to visit events like the Indiana County Fair, the Christmas Light-Up and 'It's a Wonderful Life' parade, as well as the local baseball and

football games to support the Indiana teams. I felt a strong sense of community spirit while I was at IUP and Indiana and paid it forward by volunteering at the Indiana Community Garden, where I was also allowed to enjoy the fruits of my labour when I brought fresh produce back to cook for my meals.



Volunteering at the Indiana Community Garden.

I had also forged meaningful relationships and interactions with my hosts too; a couple named Larry Feldman and Margaret Stempien, and thoroughly enjoyed their company. We met very regularly, going on walks or attending cultural performances, doing grocery shopping together (especially when Margaret was recovering from her surgery) as well as visiting them for tea and desert. We used these opportunities to share about our personal lives, food and culture, exchange ideas and perspectives about our own educational systems and world events as well as visit beautiful parks to witness the change of seasons.



Two Fulbright teachers, Mr. Aziz (most left) from Morocco and myself (second from left), meeting our friendship host/ couple, Larry Feldman (most right) and Margaret Stempien (second from right), for the first time.



The four of us having our farewell dinner, together with their son, Keith.

Fulfilled and Inspired

I have returned from the Fulbright experience with a better understanding of how teachers face almost similar problems in the different educational contexts that we exist in, and that what essentially differs is how we perceive these issues and attempt to frame and resolve them. I now have greater respect for all the various countries' educational systems and understand that they have been shaped by needs and goals specific to each country. While each has their own challenges and constraints, all are built towards the common goal of helping students learn in the best way possible. The pandemic showed how teachers will always find a way to help students learn. Hearing how teachers from the other countries coped with teaching during such a tough time has been inspiring for me. I had embarked on a journey that opened my eyes to the reality that there is no perfect education system. There might be more well-equipped ones; with stronger funding, infrastructure, manpower, direction and support. However, it need not mean that countries with better funding in education, like the US, Finland and even, Singapore, are doing it better. Each country is handling their education system *differently* because of their own specific contexts and clarion calls. All in all, I appreciate what Singapore does to support the teachers and students so much more now!

My Fulbright experience has been a very humbling one. I will strive to be a better version of myself, as an educator and a human being. I aspire to model the talk and the walk of someone discerning, empathetic, and sensitive to cross-cultural perspectives and differences, while simultaneously adopting a critical lens to all that I read, see and hear. I hope to be an inspiring role model and Teacher Leader, for students and teachers respectively; one who can connect, relate, and make a difference in the lives of others, as much as the other Fulbright teachers and host university staff have made a difference in my life. Some examples of how I intend to pay it forward: I am actively engaging the aspiring-STs in my school to share with them my journey as a Teacher Leader, and to personally coach experienced teachers and mentor younger teachers to be skilful and competent teachers. I have also volunteered for the US Embassy Singapore–ITE Alumni Mentoring Program (USEAMP) 2023, so that I can influence and empower young lives. Apart from being involved in partnerships with the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) and the Ministry of Education (MOE), I also aim to contribute towards building a strong Literature fraternity by sharing my key learning with my peers, within and beyond Maris Stella High School, so that we can all work towards shared goals to improve teaching and learning.

I feel that we should all celebrate the joy of learning through any opportunity provided or moment presented, to learn with and from like-minded individuals, with our passion burning bright! I hope to keep this passion for learning alive in me, for as long as I can,

and to relish every opportunity of learning I receive and am a part of, just as I was able to enrich myself from the FDAI Programme 2022.