

Experience Sharing by Liberal Studies Teachers
Seed Project - Curriculum Leadership and School-based Curriculum Planning
“New kid on the block”

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“Why did you employ me?” I was puzzled by this question for the whole morning. It was asked by teacher A who was a newly employed Liberal Studies teacher in this academic year. From our casual conversation, I learnt that this new graduate, who had no previous teaching experience, considered himself a student more than a teacher. He was passive and afraid to take the initiatives to do important tasks.

Currently, my school has quite a number of new LS teachers. Most of them think like teacher A. “Small Potato”, “New kids on the block” are often how they describe themselves. Yet I have a different impression of them. They are creative, self-motivated, hard working with a serious attitude in teaching and most important of all, willing to contribute. As a panel head, I see one of my important tasks is to develop this group of teachers who have massive potential to be competent Liberal Studies teachers. The only thing they are lacking in fact may be confidence. They are just like a group of chef trainees who are afraid to cook even with a cookbook in hand. Strategies that could help teachers build up their confidence in teaching by mastering the gist of the teaching materials prepared are therefore essential. From my own experiences, the following three strategies can help:

I. Assigning new teachers important tasks

A good strategy to help developing new LS teachers is to assign them important tasks, like setting examination questions, at the beginning of a term. Teacher A told me he was worried when he was asked to draft the mid-term examination questions: *“I don’t know whether I could manage”; “I would try my best with your help”.*

We started drafting the first term examination questions early in September, therefore, he could be given ample time to do the task. I led him through the steps in setting Liberal Studies question: setting assessment objectives, choosing the issue, searching for relevant data, drafting and refining the data and sub-questions. I found it

helpful to first give him some ideas on what social issues would be relevant, as this set the direction of what information have to look for and what questions to ask. In October, I held two short meetings, each for about 30 minutes, to give him feedback on the drafts. In the end, he could manage to do a fine job.

After finishing with the examination question, teacher A said, *"Throughout the process, we did not only learn to set an examination paper that could assess students comprehensively, but also gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum, including what knowledge and thinking skills have to be taught. Now, I have a better planning of my lessons with a better understanding of the essential elements and concepts."*

II. Asking new teachers to write reflective journals

From time to time, usually after accomplishing an assigned task, I would invite them to write reflective journals which serve as a good tool for teachers' personal development and could inspire other panel members too. After they finished drafting their mid-term question papers, they added some reflections in their teaching journal. I always find it better for new teachers to learn from their own teaching experiences than listening to what I said. Please refer to the appendix for the reflective journal written by teacher A.

III. Co-teaching with new teachers

My school has been practicing co-teaching for all LS classes. We have four classes in each form and we have the luxury of having two teachers teaching one class. I paired up one experienced teacher with one novice teacher in each class for S4 and S5. It works quite effectively and both teachers and students benefit a lot from this apprenticeship. For teachers, it shortens the time it takes to master the teaching curriculum; for students, it maximizes the time and resources they could have for learning this subject. The following are the comments by teacher A and an experienced Liberal Studies teacher respectively on co-teaching:

"I have more confidence in teaching as the other teacher who could keep the discipline very well. We worked out together the teaching plan so I knew I was on the right track. Wasn't it good to learn how to teach while you were teaching at the same time? This collaboration helped me to master teaching more effectively than teaching on my own" said teacher A recently.

“When I knew that I had to take care of you, I paid extra efforts in planning the lessons as I did not want to be a bad influence to you. I in fact realized that I had a lot to learn from you as well. You were full of new ideas, passions and could shed light on some perspectives that I’ve never considered before.” This was how an experienced teacher replied.

Moreover, I observe from these two years that most students welcome co-teaching as they could listen to more voices. There are exposed to more opinions and could think from more perspectives. There would always be a teacher nearby whenever they were having problems during group discussion.

The above three strategies are useful for the professional development of new teachers. They provide different platforms for us to exchange our teaching experience. Disregard of how long we have been teaching, we could benefit from our own or other sharing and reflections through communication on these platforms. As a whole, I am very happy to lead this group of LS teachers in this learning community and looking forward to an advancement of students’ learning and teaching efficacy.

Reflection Questions:

- ✧ Would the above strategies be useful in helping new Liberal Studies teachers in your school?
- ✧ What are the problems new Liberal Studies teachers in your school are facing in teaching this subject? Do they have any qualities or characteristics which are beneficial to the teaching of this subject?
- ✧ What role(s) Liberal Studies panel head should play in helping those teachers?

Reflective Journal by Teacher A

Oct 2011

As assigned by Mr. Li, our Liberal Studies panel head, I made up a first draft of an assessment question (shown below) for S5 first term examination. The parts highlighted in the double-lined boxes were amended after hearing feedback from Mr. Li and other experienced Liberal Studies teachers.

Question for S5 First Term Examination

Source A: Diary of a 16 year-old boy living in the rural area

12 August 2011	Rainy
<p>What a disastrous day today! The typhoon just arrived at my village and destroyed all the harvest in our farmland! Grandpa had fell down and hurt his backbone while he was busily collecting the remaining crops. My parents immediately sent him to the public hospital which is 100 miles away from our home. It took them nearly the whole day to walk there. The doctor said my grandpa’s backbone was seriously hurt and we had to pay a very high medical fee to save his life. My parents were so worried about him. Even if we could manage this year, we might have to spend all the savings on the medical treatment for my grandpa.</p>	
<p>And what made this even worse was that my parents asked me to move to a big city to find a job! Perhaps I can get a higher salary to support my family and to pay for their urgent expenses. But I really don’t want to separate from my parents! We are such a happy family, we eat, play and chat with one another all the time even though we are poor. I know many of my friends have moved to big cities to work and it has become so common in my village. So should I follow them.....?</p>	

*May
distract
students*

Source B: Diary of a 16 year-old girl living in the urban area

12 August 2011	Sunny
<p>Oh my God! I was found to be pregnant today! I fainted during my English tutorial class and an ambulance took me to the hospital at once. I was sent to the Accident & Emergency (A&E) department after paying a small sum of money. My teacher then contacted my parents about the situation, however, only my maid came to pick me up because they were too busy at work. Though my boyfriend has promised to take care of the baby, I still do not know how to handle the situation. Perhaps I should stop complaining about my parents as I know setting up such a big private enterprise after 1978 was not an easy task and my parents were, in fact, striving to maintain the company with 10000 workers. But who can tell me what to do next? Abortion...?</p>	

Source C:

In China, premarital sexual activity has increased drastically and more and more young people are involved. According to statistics, there were 1.493 million official cases of abortion in 2002 in China. About one fourth, 0.4 million cases were among teenagers. The increase in pregnancy outside of marriage is due to both consensual sexual activity as well as rape.

Sources: "Teenage Pregnancy on the Rise in China", The Epoch Times, Apr 08, 2004

May
mislead
students

Source D: An interview with two 16 year-old girls from rural and urban area

Reporter:	Many people said the teenagers in China are becoming more causal to premarital sex. What's your opinion?
Rural teenager:	I definitely oppose pre-marriage sex as this will greatly affect our Chinese moral value. My virginity should only leave to my future husband. Girls should protect themselves and stop all their curiosity towards sex.
Urban teenager:	I don't think there is any problem with premarital sex as it is fun for youngster to try out different things. This is in fact very common nowadays and people should be more open-minded to accept our new culture. Many of my friends have enjoyed very much the intimate time with their boyfriends. Some even engaged in compensated dating to exchange for the branded handbags. People are just choosing their own way of living and we should not interfere.

(a) Describe the differences between rural and urban areas with reference to Source A and B. (4 marks)

(b) What are the possible factors that lead to the problem mentioned in Source C and D by using your own knowledge? (6 marks)

(c) Do all people in China enjoy good living standards after the reform and opening up of China? Explain. (10 marks)

Not
controversial

I think I have learnt the following from drafting the question:

Focus of question

As new teachers, it is sometimes too idealistic to include a lot of background knowledge in a question and some information may distract students' thinking. In the question, I wanted to give students some hints so that they could compare the ways of living between the rural and urban areas by considering the situations faced by the migrant workers. Therefore, I had added one paragraph about migrant workers "... my parents asked me to move to a big city to find a job...". However, in order to have the students focus their attention on the differences between urban and rural areas, I decided to delete this paragraph. As this paragraph may direct the students to think of the problem of Sannong and the difficulties migrant workers have to face in the city. In Liberal Studies assessment, it is better to narrow down students' thinking, as students may not be able to consider too many aspects at the same time.

Appropriateness of data source

I have deleted the source C of the first draft Q1, "1.493 million official cases of abortion" might mislead the students that the abortion cases were simply because of the pre-marital sex. However, one-child policy might also be the root cause. To avoid complication, I had deleted Source C and students could still answer part (b) by solely using the information in Source D.

Controversy of a notion

When setting "do you agree" type of questions, teachers have to aware whether the notion quoted in the question is really arguable. In Q1 part (c) of the first draft, "Do all people in China enjoy good living standards after the reform and opening up of China? Explain." But on second thought, I think students may not be able to answer "no" to this question, as China is a big country, and therefore there must be some differences in the living standards of people living in different parts of the country. So, allowing students to choose yes or no would be meaningless. Thus, I changed the question to "To what extent do you agree that people in urban areas can enjoy better quality of life than people living in rural areas." This would be more arguable and help to assess students' ability to attempt higher-order thinking. Besides, I had changed the word "living standard" to "quality of life", as the later term include something more than the materialistic aspects of living. Students will then be inspired to do with the help of part (a) and "quality of life" can give an exact idea that they need to use also the knowledge learnt in the module of Hong Kong Today.