

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION**

**SECTION 2: THE PRACTICUM IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

**The view from a teacher training college**

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## The view from a teacher training college

**JNUSTA:** *In your experience teaching undergraduate or postgraduate students, could you share your views about how we can better achieve the learning outcomes through experiential/service learning, especially given the concern Professor Amy Tsui raises about the risk of “educational tourism”?*

**Benny:** My experience with experiential learning is limited mostly to supervising student teachers doing their Practicum at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. NIE is the sole tertiary training institution of pre-service primary and secondary/Junior College school teachers in Singapore. The Practicum component of our undergraduate (BA/BEd) and graduate programmes (i.e., Postgraduate Diploma in Education, PGDE), is the “internship” aspect of our programmes. (I should add that the views expressed below are my own, and do not necessarily represent those of the Practicum Office.)

The supervision of student teachers for the Practicum during their school attachment is the joint responsibility of the NIE Supervisor, other senior NIE faculty, and our partners in the school community [e.g., the Cooperating Teacher (CT) who is an experienced school teacher in the student teacher’s teaching subject; the school’s Vice-Principal or Head of Department who provides other aspects of mentorship, etc.].

The Practicum component is highly structured. It comes with explicit goals and learning outcomes, a prescribed minimum number of hours of teaching in specified subject areas, a minimum number of structured class observations of the student teachers by both the CT and the NIE supervisor, often accompanied by immediate structured feedback using prescribed lesson observation/feedback forms that are aligned with the goals and learning objectives of the Practicum.

I see the CT’s main role as socialising student teachers into the school culture and actual classroom teaching practice/procedures/expectations. The NIE supervisor’s role includes some of the above, but also includes the additional role of helping student teachers to appreciate the connections between theory and actual classroom teaching. Admittedly, the kinds of links made by student teachers may depend on the specific expertise of the NIE supervisor. For example, an NIE supervisor specialising in pedagogy may provide better guidance for the pedagogy-classroom practice link, whereas the supervisor specialising in academic subject content (e.g., English syntax theory) may

be better able to guide student teachers to relate academic content to actual classroom practice, and so forth.

There are also prescribed forms that student teachers use for reflecting on the links between their school teaching experience and larger institutional goals (e.g., NIE's larger master plan or philosophy of teacher education). Such reflections are typically discussed formally at a prescribed meeting between NIE supervisors and student teachers towards the end of the Practicum.

The “internship” of student teachers is therefore a very well structured process. The risk of “educational tourism” is thus minimised. Obviously, we can't rule out the possibility of occasional lapses in proper Practicum supervision by one person in the process, but there are several people involved in the supervision process of each student teacher such that any lapse by one party is quickly addressed by another party in the partnership.