

TEACHING FROM EXPERIENCE
Mr Toh Jin Tian, Tampines Junior College

"I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework."
~Lily Tomlin

What is Education to You?

"Why did you choose to study in a junior college?"

That was the question I asked my students when I met them on the first day of school. I proceeded to ask them what kind of education they think a junior college could provide students with. The students' answers revealed their concerns with achieving academic excellence. Character and values excellence were somewhat not apparent in their interpretation of education. Why did my students not mention anything about how a junior college education could guide them in making important life decisions, equip them with practical skills to manage their life in society, or inspire them to contribute back to society?

The Student who Triggered the Educator in Me

It was only after a conversation with Stephanie* that I realised that something had to be done to help students find their own directions in life. At the end of Term 2, Stephanie indicated that she had the intention to withdraw from college and enrol at a polytechnic. She explained that she had trouble coping with her studies despite repeating her studies for a year and revising her work diligently. Her parents also felt that she was not suited for an education in a junior college and should therefore not waste another year. After a long conversation with her, I concluded that she was just afraid of failing and not being promoted to JC2.

That night, the conversation with Stephanie kept replaying in my mind. I was able to relate to Stephanie's feelings since I had been a repeat student too. I reflected on my life and asked myself why I had chosen to become an educator. I kept asking myself if there was something I could do to help Stephanie and the many other students in my classes who were facing family issues, struggling with their academic work or questioning their sense of direction in life. An idea struck me and I knew there was something I could do for them.

A Holistic Education – A Positive Impact in My Class

A few days later, I went into Stephanie's class and announced, to the students' surprise, that there will be no Economics lessons for the day. Instead, I was going to share my life story with them. They were shocked as they probably had not heard any teachers share their life journey before. I began my sharing with a question.

"What do you think are the criteria to be a JC teacher?"

A student exclaimed, *"Good results, of course!"*

There was dead silence in the class when I mentioned that I was once a repeat student. Stephanie looked at me in disbelief. Smiling at her, I looked at the class and told them the story which I was going to share would benefit and motivate many of them. I shared with them how my Junior College and University days turned out to be the turning points in my life and expounded the value of self-management, making important decisions in life and resilience. Due to a lack of motivation in my studies and other personal problems, I did not do well academically and had to repeat JC2. I also shared how, through sheer

determination, I managed to graduate from the University and entered the career of my choice despite the difficulties faced.

Was academic excellence the sole reason why I managed to overcome my life obstacles? The life skills I have acquired over time through the 'failures' in my life and the education I received coupled with my *never give up* attitude were what made it possible for me to overcome those challenges.

My students had never been so attentive and as I approached the end of my sharing, I knew that real learning had taken place.

A few days later, Stephanie told me that she had decided to continue her studies in the Junior College. She promised to make the best out of it and to cling on tightly to her goals. I am glad that Stephanie has now graduated with good results and is currently studying in the course and University of her choice.

Students learn best from experience and from those whom they can relate to. I believe that the sharing of my life experiences not only benefited Stephanie but others as well. This inspires me to develop school programmes and influence others with my life experiences.

Striving to Inculcate Character & Values in Students

As the Subject Head of Student Development, I constantly reflect and ask my team what are the skills they want to equip the students with to prepare them for the society. Observing the various dimensions of CCE, I aim to put students through various platforms to gain experience and develop themselves. Students are strongly encouraged to work in teams to initiate projects for the College and the community to achieve meaningful outcomes. In the midst of the students' planning of projects, obstacles and failures were important checkpoints to attain greater heights and develop resilience. More importantly, our students can learn from these experiences and continuously grow as an individual. I hope to develop Student Leaders who not only lead themselves but also have the heart to empathize and help the less fortunate. This is an area where our future generation can work on to drive our nation towards an inclusive and caring society.

The Impact of an Educator Knows No Limit

As the saying goes, *"Teaching creates all other professions"*. In my four years in the education service, I have guided and provided students with the skills to make their own decisions. I may have encountered numerous 'failures' in life but these experiences allowed me to relate to the challenges my students face. I am elated whenever my ex-students share with me their excitement of embarking on the journey of their choice. Through my conversations with them, I know I have succeeded in educating them whenever the topic revolves around how the skills they have learnt in JC helped to enrich their lives instead of the number of distinctions they had obtained.

As Jacques Barzun once said, *"In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years."* I am sure that my teachers who have taught me will be proud and happy to know that they have developed me into a real educator.

**Name has been changed to protect the identity of the student.*