

Mr Richard Koh Pee Chou

My Fulbright Experience

I recall receiving the email in September 2019 that I had been selected for the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers (Fulbright DAI). It felt surreal; to be away for four months in the United States of America (USA) was a professional development (PD) dream come true—I could hardly believe it was happening to me.

Yet as I sit down to compose this report, I realise that the Fulbright DAI was not just about PD. It turned out to be so much more than that. To me, it was also about the people I met, the sense of place, and adaptation. This report expresses the gratitude I felt being given the chance to go on this program, albeit a truncated one, as well as a critical review of my learning experiences.

The People

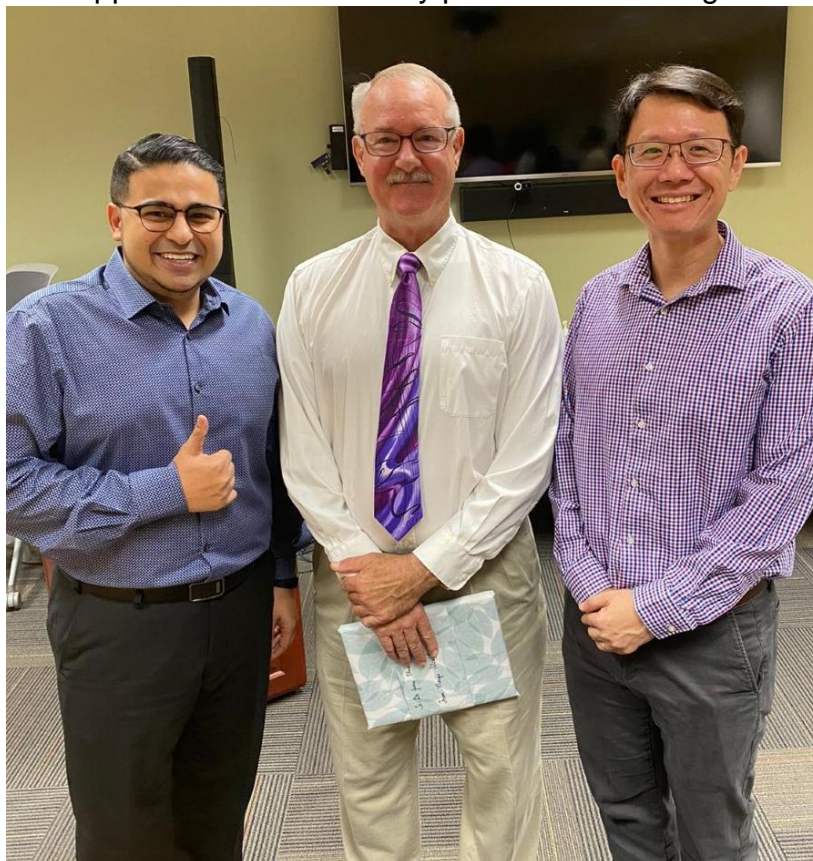
The other Singaporean teachers who went on this learning journey with me are fondly remembered: Syed Faisal, Humanities Head from Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School; and Wendy Pang, Year Head and Project Work Head from Tampines Meridian Junior College. At the very start, they became like family instantly. The morning walks we took to get to the campus at Arizona State University (ASU), the trips we made on our food hunts or to get our necessities at Target or Walmart, the few get-togethers when we whipped up meals because we missed our Singaporean cuisine like curry chicken or chicken rice, the meetings we set up to discuss the presentations we created to share with the other international Fulbright, all those times we spent together in a foreign land—I could not have been given better companions.



*Raining and snowing greeting our arrival in USA at Washington, DC.
(from left to right: Me, Wendy, and Faisal)*

The other major group of people I came to love were the international teachers and faculty members from ASU. Let me start with the program manager, Shari Solberg-Ayers, an unassuming soft-spoken lady from ASU, who, initially just a name in my email inbox, was giving me directions and counting down to our arrival in USA. I shall not forget her cheerful smile and her sincere 'How are you?' as she carried out our weekly status updates nor could I forget how she lugged along umbrellas and raincoats for our trip to Sedona, nor how she made the trip to check how I was when I came down with a fever just days after touching down in Arizona.

Next is Dr. James Blasingame, whose role was to guide me in my inquiry project. He was assigned to both Faisal and I as our faculty advisor and we were blown away when we read his biodata: he is a 'rock star', having received multiple teaching awards in USA and published many books on writing. His 'cool' factor soared to the stratosphere during our first meeting with him in person when I learned that he knew writers like Suzanne Collins. As I was interested to find out more about fostering students' personal voice through harnessing reading and writing connections, I remember his picking out all the books on his bookshelf that he thought would help me in my literature review. Even though I did not manage to read all of them (I would talk about the circumstances that led to my not being able to do so later in this report), I appreciated the support he rendered in my pursuit of knowledge.



*Faisal and I with Dr Blasingame at the first meeting
where we were introduced to our faculty advisors*

A notable mention must also go to Michelle Glerum. To say that I thoroughly enjoyed attending her lessons in ASU is a huge understatement. Her elective on the teaching

of writing pushed me to evaluate my own practices and the many articles she shared with me deepened my understanding of writing pedagogies. Though the elective module was demanding, I was enjoying the intellectual growth I was experiencing. Michelle drove us hard, but she never failed to encourage us, and extended deadlines when we felt overwhelmed. The effort required for me to complete my assignments reminded me of the continued need to be more compassionate with students who struggle with meeting deadlines.

Now, this report will seem incomplete if I do not include three other amazing teachers I met. One was the author of the textbook I was studying in Michelle's class: Penny Kittle. As I devoured *Write Beside Me* chapter by chapter as required readings, the admiration I held for this teacher grew. So imagine my euphoria when I learned that she was conducting a one-day professional development workshop in New York during the spring break with Kelly Gallagher, another renowned writer. Now, picture this: arriving at the workshop venue way early, because it is in every Singaporean teacher to want to get the best seat; conversing with the organisers and them realising that I flew halfway around the world to learn from Penny and Kelly; being introduced personally to Penny and Kelly because of the generosity of the organisers—It was basically a dream come true for a fan-boy. That aside, the ideas I learnt from these two presenters made me realise just how much more there is to learn.



Penny and Kelly (on my right and left respectively) were amazing presenters. The workshop provided me with so many new insights about teaching reading and writing.

So who was the third amazing teacher I met? This was Athena Kalia, my partner teacher from North High School. A generous, caring, and super fun character, she offered to all the Fulbrighters, 16 of us, items left over by the previous groups of Fulbrighters and kept for our use. This ball of sunshine warmed my heart even though it was quite chilly in Arizona in the months we were there. She invited us to her home for her birthday party, and I got to see the beautiful class library she had built over the years. Most importantly, I saw the passion and dedication she put into engaging her students. I was inspired, to say the least.



My partner teacher, Athena, in her classroom. Her classroom library was an inspiration to me.

Finally, the group of people that I would like to talk about now, is none other than the other 13 Fulbrighters from Bangladesh, Brazil, Finland, Greece, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Senegal, and Uganda. 16 of us from 10 countries—that comprises a lot of different cultures and educational systems to learn from. The Fulbright seminars that occurred every Wednesday saw us talking about our educational systems. Every fortnight on Tuesdays, we were enlightened about the culinary and cultural practices of the other countries. One thing I have learnt from the times I spent with these people is this: the love that we have for teaching and learning and the passion that we have for nurturing young minds transcend boundaries. I am grateful I had the chance to learn from such diverse great minds and for the fun times we had on the few outings we made.



The 16 of us with Shari Solberg-Ayers, the program manager (first row, far left) and Alejandra Enrique Gates, the program director. This photograph was taken before the spring break.

A Sense of Place

After the whirlwind of an orientation programme at Washington, DC that took four days, the 16 of us eventually arrived at Arizona, where we were assigned to our second round of orientation around the place we were staying at and around ASU campus. Other than knowing our schedules which were customised to some extent based on the different electives we took, we were brought to several grocery stores too. That was the first time I realised just how expansive Arizona is. Roads literally go on and on as far as the eye could see, and if one wanted to get to any shop or any place, it would seem as if driving was the best mode to travel. Yet, a few of us developed this penchant for walking and hiking, as we basked under the sunshine amidst a chilly climate and admired the gargantuan cacti that stood over us like giants.



This picture was taken on 31st January 2020 while walking to Target at Tempe Marketplace. The vastness of the evening sky and the fading light of the setting sun would be something I will miss.

Arizona is a beautiful desert city. When I was there, the air was clear, the temperature cold, and the view was mostly scenes one would see on postcards. Yet homesickness was real when I got back to the apartment. I was physically in an entirely different place, but my heart was somewhere back in Singapore.



*We would always pass by this cactus on our numerous walks around in Tempe, Arizona.
It was not the tallest though.*

Adaptation

So how long did it take for me to adjust to a new routine that was 15 hours behind Singapore time? I think it took my body a month to get over the jet lag and for my sleep to finally help me resemble something that did not look like I was functioning as a certain nocturnal mystical being.

However, unease was already brewing in the horizon as COVID-19, then termed as 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCov), blazed across continents. As the three of us from Singapore kept abreast of what was happening on the other side of the world through the news and social media, things were remotely peaceful in Arizona. While my colleagues and friends updated me about the panic-buying going on back home, I could still get hold of hand sanitisers in Target. The only thing that I could not get was masks. So to keep safe, we would sanitise our hands frequently and also the surfaces we came into contact with during lessons in the campus.

The week before spring break, no one expected things to change drastically in a span of simply days. All well-laid plans turned to nought within the spring break when cases escalated within USA, and we were strongly encouraged to return home in lieu of the COVID-19 situation.

For me, it was an extremely difficult decision to make. On the one hand, I was digging deeply into my inquiry and consuming course content that was enlightening. On the other hand, the risk I would have put myself through if I had continued with the program in USA was real. After much consideration, all three of us chose to go home.

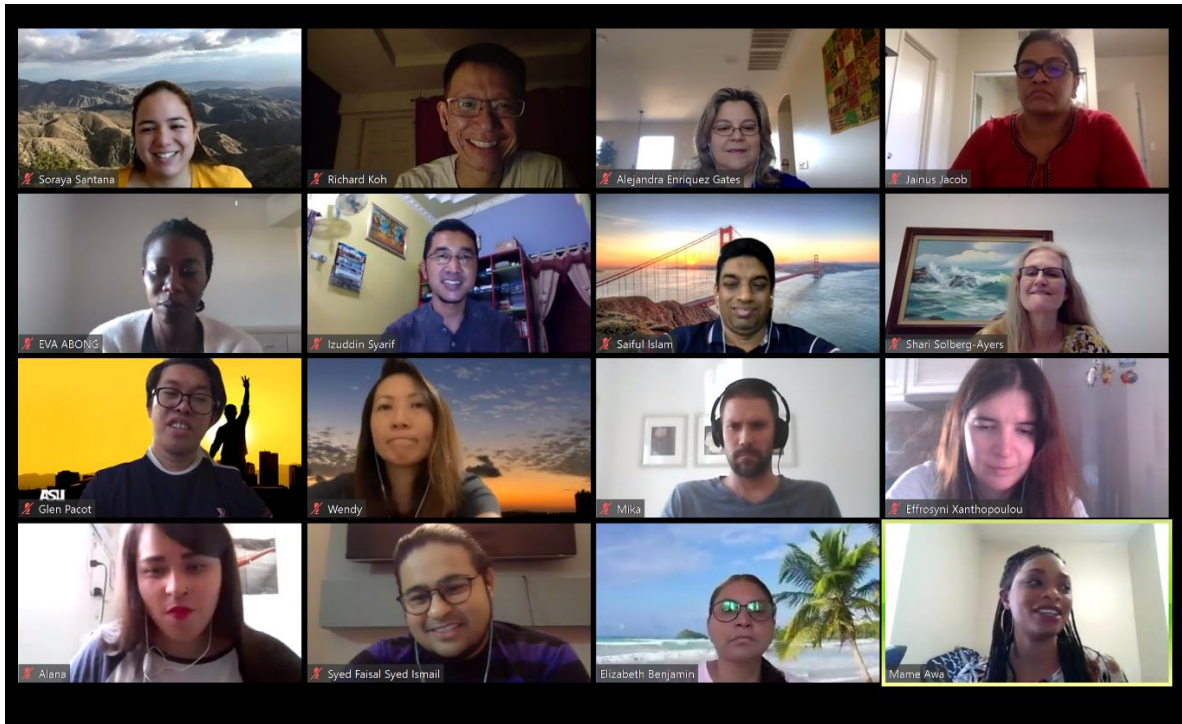
I was the last person in the apartment after everyone had left to return to their home country. I walked into each room and was sad to see them empty, but I remembered fondly the times we had spent cooking around the stove in the kitchen or cleaning the apartment.



Even though the room I spent more than two months in was empty, my heart was full of fond memories created during the program.

Upon touching down in Singapore, I had to serve my stay-at-home notice away from my family, and came down with a high fever. Thank goodness, the swab tests came back negative.

As I stayed in my room for those fourteen days, one thing I realised was just how adaptable humans are. It took me a while to adjust back to Singapore time but after recovering from my fever, I attended my first Zoom lesson to continue with the program, albeit in Singapore. The faculty members at ASU were relentless in their endeavour to still provide us with the learning that COVID-19 had stolen from us. I got used to a new routine and to distance learning. And after returning home to finally reunite with my family, I completed all my assignments and my inquiry project requirements.



Meeting the others via Zoom became something I looked forward to even though it meant staying up late.

All of us graduated in ASU's first virtual ceremony on 11 May 2020, 7:00 a.m., Arizonian time. It was great to 'see' the family I came to love while in Arizona but even more so, to know that despite the major upheavals made to the program and our lives because of the pandemic, we did not let the virus defeat us, physically and psychologically.



Shari and Alejandra flew the mortar board and sash to me via Federal Express from Arizona all the way to Singapore just in time for our virtual graduation ceremony.

Unprecedented Experience Indeed

Indubitably, my experience in this program has been affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The overseas experience was truncated and the learning experiences modified but that did not mean I have not gained from this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I have made friendships that I know will last for a long time, not just with my Singaporean compatriots but with my fellow international Fulbrighters. I also know for certain I have an international network of educators I can reach out to improve myself professionally.

My mind has expanded and more so my heart, and as a member of the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers 2019–2020, I am proud to say, I did it.

We all did it.