

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FORUM (ELF) DIGEST (ISSUE 1)



Initiated by the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE), ELF serves as a platform where faculty members share their expertise with the SMU academic community in experiential learning and/or its related topics.

Experiential Learning Through Role-Play Using Films 28 March 2016

In this inaugural issue of ELF-Digest, we feature Lee Kong Chian Visiting Professor Paul Evans, who shared his experience of teaching a class using the experiential learning approach through role-play using films.



A summary of the key points is as follows:

- Professor Paul shared about the use of the film “Salvador” to engage students in a debate about realism and liberalism, and to introduce complex themes about the Cold War in an International Relations course. Selected scenes from the films were shown, and students had to internalise what they saw and connect with their assigned characters.
- Students in the section were divided into teams of 5-6, and assigned different roles. In addition to the key characters in the film, Professor Paul also created two additional characters (i.e. the “ghosts”, and the “Singaporean diplomat assigned to El Salvador”). The “ghosts” represented the human conscience, which was intended to surface issues pertaining to the morality of various acts in specific circumstances as depicted in film excerpts. The Singaporean diplomat character (i.e. that of a practical idealist) was created to invoke a local perspective from the foreign setting set out in the film.
- Four students who took the course were invited to share their takeaways and experiences:
 - A student from School of Social Sciences (SOSS) shared that the approach helped her revise the concepts of realism and liberalism, and the relationship between the two; the latter was something that she had previously not given much thought, prior to watching the film.
 - A law student shared that she was more mindful of the considerations that go into decision-making through the film.
 - Another SOSS student shared that the discussions that took place during class illuminated the different understandings that her peers had of the various characters, which were different from what she had perceived to be. This subsequently led to her being able to synthesize the different perspectives and gain new insights.
 - Another SOSS student went on to elaborate on how the film helped him to better understand the readings and the morality behind the decision making process of the character he was assigned to. Other than applying general knowledge, he also made use of what he had learnt from an ethics course he had separately taken before framing the advice, and thinking more deeply about how to put across what he had to say in a manner that was deemed appropriate for his character.

- Professor Paul also provided some recommendations to other faculty members who were keen to adopt this approach for their courses:
 - The use of role-play using film generates high emotional and intellectual intensity amongst students, who are very quick to get into their characters. He recommends that the “ghosts” characters be included (in addition to those that were a part of the film) and get students to judge the morality of acts in specific circumstances.
 - Facing a generation of learners whose learning is largely driven by visuals, faculty members may consider including more non-print materials (e.g. video clips, simulations, animations etc.) as part of their courses. Professor Paul includes between 30-40% of such visual contents for a typical course that he teaches.
 - The film chosen for role-play should allow for opportunities to stimulate decision points, where decisions made will have real-life impact on people’s lives. Some suggestions of films include: “Too Big to Fail”, “The Big Short” and “Spotlight”.
 - To test if students can synthesise their understanding of the concepts learnt through the readings to the takeaways from the role-play experience, it is suggested that students can design their own assignments (e.g. writing a paper) to evaluate their understanding.
 - Faculty members to be more mindful of the use of films for role-playing that depict religious and multicultural contexts, as these have immediate political impact on society.

This ELF-Digest is produced by the Centre for Teaching Excellence.

Please contact us at cte@smu.edu.sg to feature your stories and insights on best practices in designing and teaching experiential learning courses. We welcome your feedback!