

# The case for learning journeys

Habits of questing, wandering remain essential for education today

Ong Siow Heng

For The Straits Times

Blaise Pascal's famous mid-17th century statement, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone", from the *Pensees* collection of writings, is a convenient quotation to avoid inconvenient interactions.

It may resonate with devout netizens who find that the widely webbed virtual world fully gratifies their wishes for distraction, social contact and learning.

There even seems to be august precedence for minimal contact with the world: Bygone intellectual giants upon whose shoulders every age has stood to see further traversed a predominantly mental terrain.

However, sound counter-arguments to any ivory-towered

armchair approach to life abound. Most of us are not as smart as the historic cerebral titans we admire, regardless of how little or much they travelled. Pascal himself interacted passionately with all the issues of his mid-17th century community.

Although he wrote further in the same document that we can only find happiness outside ourselves, in God, Pascal's interests in philosophy, science and mathematics clearly favoured intense thinking across disciplines; the calculator he invented was a utilitarian tool to help his tax supervisor father compute taxes for work.

In the 19th century, Lewis Carroll's Red Queen sniffs that if Alice could make progress by running fast, it must be a "slow sort of country" (*Through The Looking Glass*). The queen's warning is that running till breathless would merely keep Alice in step with her surroundings; getting ahead would require doubling one's speed – an obvious

impossibility. The implication is a need for astuteness beyond just exponentially increasing speed.

Pascal, Carroll and many past great minds have 21st century relevance for their astute engagement with their world. Today, we would be naive to assume that modern education equips us for our world, with limitless Internet-mediated information to plug any gaps. Negotiating today's labyrinthine world of economics and geopolitics requires distinct skills in proficiently adapting to thrive in a world that will evolve perpetually and irrepressibly.

The stranger navigating strange lands is a trope in every quest-themed film, book and comic, in stories for children and adults. The wandering learner is celebrated in secular and religious narratives, ancient and modern. The wandering process inevitably involves a physical, intellectual and psychological journey, culminating



in vitalising insight.

Even when enlightenment is attained in the stillness of meditation, the meditation itself takes place on a trek away from the familiar.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of The Ring*, Aragorn was also called Strider, underscoring that he is no aimless drifter but a questing wanderer preparing for his calling. The poem for Aragorn begins: "All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither." Even "non-glittering" experiences have value in strengthening the purposeful wanderer for the future.

This is why teachers everywhere, whatever the age of their students, go to great trouble to organise learning journeys.

Pupils in my generation were excited by an excursion to the southern islands. Those unsophisticated provincial experiences stimulated us "city kids" to new conversations and thoughts about people who earned their living from fishing and making jewellery from seashells. These basic facts could have been more efficiently delivered in the classroom, but the invisible curriculum for the day was cognitive and affective empathy.

Today's schoolchildren benefit from overseas language and cultural exposure, and Community Involvement Programmes.

Helping to build a classroom in an isolated village emphasises responsibility to the larger community. Basic nutrition can be economically taught in the classroom, but witnessing how vitamin deficiency causes pale, thin

hair in the village children stresses urgency to address nutritional deficiencies. Alongside the transparent learning, the invisible curriculum is palpable.

However, much as we applaud the transient journeys for experiential learning for schoolchildren, and admire historical and fictional wanderers, we balk at recommending overseas exchange programmes and work attachments for tertiary students. It seems elitist when costs may be unaffordable to some.

Yet, for these young adult students, there are still more perspectives to discern from a spell of study or work alongside those who experienced a different upbringing and school system. Formulating social connections beyond the default chat about which secondary school one attended is another benefit.

Most importantly, as they learn how to steer from floundering like an outsider to functioning like an insider, the brain becomes hardwired with the mental and emotional dexterity to adapt to the unfamiliar. Under conditions where stakes are not as high for the tertiary student as they would be later in the real working world, the mind prepares itself to transform when necessary – an essential survival skill for a future of inescapable change.

This is akin to a fish from a still pond learning to adapt to life in a large lake or moving river. In nature, there are even species of fish that can live in both sea and fresh water.

Immersion in a different values system can sometimes create benchmarks for vital decisions.

Humanitarian Gabriel Teo Kian Chong, featured in a recent edition of *The Straits Times*, founded the Tana River Life Foundation in Kenya to improve the next generation of young lives there, having first engaged with the community there as a young graduate.

According to a recent *Today Online* article about Carousell, the young men behind this local start-up spent time in Silicon Valley as part of a university programme, which inspired some of their later business decisions.

City Development recently supported young professionals Jessica Cheam and Inch Chua on a 14-day Antarctica expedition led by renowned environmentalist Robert Swan.

But such sponsorships are rare for tertiary students. Possibly, tertiary institutions could locate sponsors, and encourage and facilitate overseas work or study for tertiary students, so that opportunity cost does not impede opportunity.

Students are at a unique time of life, on a quest to build their strengths and intercultural competencies, and ascertain how best to perform and contribute in society. Help them be purposeful, learning wanderers, strengthened to stride into an intricate, multifaceted future.

[stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg)

• Ong Siow Heng is professor of corporate communication in education and dean of international affairs at the Singapore Management University.



**As they learn how to steer from floundering like an outsider to functioning like an insider, the brain becomes hardwired with the mental and emotional dexterity to adapt to the unfamiliar. Under conditions where stakes are not as high for the tertiary student as they would be later in the real working world, the mind prepares itself to transform when necessary – an essential survival skill for a future of inescapable change.**

Humanitarian Gabriel Teo Kian Chong founded the Tana River Life Foundation in Kenya to improve the next generation of young lives there, having first engaged with the community there as a young graduate. ST FILE PHOTO