

Character counts as much as smarts here

A couple builds a centre to offer well-rounded tuition education, reports **LEE MEIXIAN**

WHEN 27-year-old Jed Ong was an entrepreneurship major in Singapore Management University's (SMU) business school, he refused to join other students studying in the library until closing time.

While his classmates, including his then-girlfriend Michelle Loh, were hitting the books, Mr Ong was building contacts and acquiring the tools he knew he would need to build his own business later.

Friends thought he was just taking life easy, but Mr Ong says: "I always knew that eventually it wasn't going to be about the grades; it was going to be about who you know, what you know, and how you carry yourself."

Today, he and his now-fiancee, Ms Loh, 24, are jointly the founders of SOZO Education, a tuition and enrichment centre that seeks to provide a more well-rounded tuition education for students – focusing just as much on academics as character building, creative thinking, and fuelling a hunger for learning.

SOZO teaches English and Mathematics to students from preschool through secondary school. Its name is a word from the Greek New Testament that means "to save, to make whole, to rescue from danger or destruction". Both Mr Ong and Ms Loh are Christians.

It's not accident that Mr Ong chose to start a tuition centre, given his family's teaching background. His mother has been giving tuition for the past 16 years. Many of his relatives are also teachers. His grandmother used to run a kindergarten from home.

"I guess education has always been in the blood for me," he says.

But to make a business out of teaching is somewhat different; it takes more than patience and a nurturing disposition, requiring also prudence with finances and careful business considerations.

The first important decision Mr Ong and his fiancee had to make was choosing a location for the centre, which he says was a long and difficult process.

Worried that they might not make enough to cover rent because "we are always warned that not all businesses succeed", they considered safer options in Serangoon Gardens and the east, including HDB void decks, before landing up in a 1,300 square foot space in a prime residential district on Hillcrest Road. Rent is not cheap, Mr Ong concedes, but the location has helped them gain traction among parents of students from the premier schools in the Bukit Timah area.



Family affair: Jed Ong and his fiancee Michelle Loh (left and second from left) started tuition and enrichment centre SOZO Education, and run it with the help of Mr Ong's parents, Daniel Ong and Susan Wei (both pictured).

PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

They then got lucky with their choice of an opening date in late October 2011, which fell on a sweet spot when students were receiving their year-end results and parents went "shopping" for, or looking to switch, tutors and tuition centres. This makes it the crucial period for tuition centres to solicit new business, says Mr Ong.

The couple started the centre with a \$100,000 loan from Mr Ong's parents. In just over a year, SOZO's enrolment has climbed to more than 200, with classes conducted seven days a week, and up to eight sessions a day. The centre didn't even do much marketing, says Ms Loh; word simply spread.

Mr Ong and Ms Loh believe they have found a gap to fill in the local tuition market – often said to be overcrowded with too many players – by moving away from a wholly academic-oriented approach to providing a more multi-faceted learning experience for students.

They take pains to discipline students who misbehave, encourage children to play with traditional toys rather than technological gadgets such as iPads (which they believe discourage socialising), and intentionally create an intimate and family-oriented learning environment within the centre.

Ms Loh says an environment that provides acceptance and love is important because "when you really love the kids, they can feel it and will actually do even better at school and focus even harder. It's a really wonderful reciprocation."

Part of how they teach the kids is also inspired by how they were taught in SMU. For instance, they incorporate presentations and

discussion-based learning practised in SMU into their classes. Every so often when Primary Six students have to go for Direct School Admissions (DSA) interviews, they also teach them interview skills outside lesson time. This is akin to SMU's *The Finishing Touch* programme, where Mr Ong and Ms Loh were taught skills like social etiquette, personal branding and networking to prepare them for their careers.

The centre has no criteria for enrolment and has even taken in children with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Challenge

Ms Loh is adamant on this, after what she went through during a short stint as a tutor at a popular local tuition centre prior to SOZO. There, she was discouraged to learn that the centre sifted out academically poorer students and enrolled only the bright ones in order to boast of 100 per cent examination scores later on.

For her, "educators should be helping the ones that get sifted out, rather than elite students who are already so driven... The challenge lies in teaching those who are naughty and don't do their homework, or are weaker in their studies."

SOZO is now mostly family-run, with Ms Loh, Mr Ong and his mother teaching. But they are not enough to run the centre, which caps class size at six students. SOZO is looking to hire not just more teachers, but also curriculum architects.

While they want to keep things small for now – "when it's very big, you lose that family

element, that homeliness and warmth" – they say that expansion is likely in the near future. Perhaps moving into an additional subject (Science), or another outlet, or a side business (say, kids' stationery, like Smiggle).

Given their restlessness and aversion to being "desk-bound", Mr Ong and Ms Loh are certain that SOZO won't be their only business venture. They are keen to go into food as well, given Ms Loh's penchant for "those cutesy cafes overseas".

Both recall the allegory of a sampan an SMU professor once used to explain why entrepreneur-wannabes should start their own businesses young.

"He (the professor) said most people dream of starting their own business eventually, but find it difficult to convince themselves to do so when they are already in the corporate world, with a family to care for and bills and loans to pay," Mr Ong relates. "For them, it's like jumping from a cruise ship onto a sampan, because they have to give up stability to risk starting a business that might fail and they usually have to settle for smaller pay."

Conversely, someone who starts a business from young is like someone who is drowning in the sea and climbs into a sampan. Instability would not concern him as much, as long as he stays above water. Without any safety nets, the young entrepreneur is more undaunted by risks and has enough youthful vigour to pour himself into his start-up.

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