

A Different Way to Learn

■ By Nicholas Yong

At Republic Polytechnic, facilitators use a unique teaching methodology known as Problem Based Learning to teach their students. It is as much a learning process for the facilitators as it is for the students, and it is a job that is highly suitable for dynamic and open-minded individuals.

It's your first day of work at Republic Polytechnic. There are no lectures. Instead, you will be conducting "meetings". You are not a teacher, but a "facilitator". Students aren't allowed to passively sit through a meeting; they are required to stand up and speak. And you, as the facilitator, are the one who will make them talk.

Welcome to the unique learning environment that is championed by Republic Polytechnic (RP), Singapore's fifth and newest tertiary institution.

Established on 1 August 2002, RP commenced operations in July 2003. Student enrolment is expected to reach 13,000 eventually. It currently has about 500 staff, and they are looking for enthusiastic, tech-savvy and creative industry professionals to share their expertise with students using a pioneering educational concept. Terms like "a new learning pedagogy", "highly conducive learning

environment" and "diverse activities" are frequently used to describe the RP experience.

So what do they really mean, and what is it that makes RP so "different"?

The way it works

"There is no difference between learning in class, and learning in itself. In fact, learning is probably more effective outside the classroom than inside of it. Our aim is simply to leverage on how people naturally learn," says Mr Glen O'Grady, Director of the Centre for Educational Development. Glen, who has 10 years of experience in the higher learning educational sector, is firmly convinced that students who are traditionally thought of as "weak", and might otherwise struggle in another environment, can excel in RP. This, they say, is all down to RP's unique style of teaching, based on what is called Problem Based Learning (PBL).

Ms Magdeline Lew, Head/Academic

Policy (Chemical and Life Sciences), explained that this methodology has been used in educational institutes worldwide since the 1970s, such as McMaster in the US and the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands.

Basically, students are assigned a problem that has to be solved by the end of each day. They are assigned to teams of five, with a maximum of 25 students in each meeting or discussion. Each team will give a presentation on their solution, and the facilitator will give a final presentation that recaps the learning objectives for the day.

In terms of assessment, students are given a daily grade, based on their presentations as well as the effort put in to solve a problem. They are also given daily feedback. There are no exams, but there are Understanding Tests (UTs).

Furthermore, facilitators also act as mentors to students, and are expected

to contribute to Student-Life Activities (SLAs). This is RP's equivalent of Co-Curricular Activities in most other institutions, and each student is required to earn a certain number of SLA credits in order to graduate.

How are responses elicited?

RP aims to encourage a system based on proactive learning and a keen sense of personal initiative. Given that many RP students come from traditional, highly structured learning environments that are focused on rote-learning, how do facilitators wean students away from ingrained study habits, and make them contribute more actively during meetings?

According to Glen, a key to doing so lies in the creation of an interactive learning environment, as opposed to a structure designed for instruction. And facilitators play a major role in making this environment work.

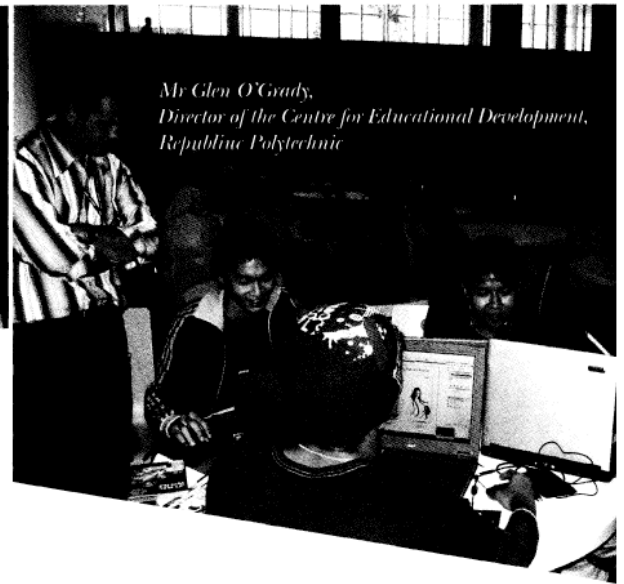
Mr Stanley Goh, an academic staff from the Centre for Educational Development, sums up RP's definition of the facilitator's role: "I am not a teacher: I am also learning. We are all learning together." He emphasises the hands-off approach in teaching, as he does not want to impose his opinions on his pupils. Students are allowed to explore in their own ways, and to utilise their own resources. The aim is to "build a mini-community within the classroom". As he puts it, students who find things out for themselves tend to remember better. Of course, if students are in danger of going off-track, the facilitators are there to gently pull them back on course.

This approach to learning has produced vocal students with excellent presentation skills. They are better at relating to things around them and at applying relevant knowledge. The pioneer batch of RP students have certainly turned out to be confident and articulate young adults with strong aspirations.

Tommy Lai, who holds a diploma in



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Head of Academic Policy,
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*Mr Glen O'Grady,
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Biomedical Science, says it was initially difficult to get used to the RP system. He found it "extraordinarily different", and he could not find any similarities with other polytechnics.

Yu Ka Yan adds that coming to RP involved a "change of mindset", since the old saying that "the textbook is always right" had become a misnomer. At RP, she found that students were rewarded for engaging in the thinking process, which she thoroughly enjoyed.

Even facilitators are learning

As you might guess, PBL is as much a unique experience for the facilitators as it is for the students.

The facilitators at RP are being constantly evaluated, just like their students. Upon starting the job, they attend a five-day PBL Foundation workshop on classroom management and assessment, to equip them with the necessary skills to facilitate classes and craft problems for the students to solve. They are then required to put in at least 20 hours per calendar year into PBL Development workshops to further their PBL knowledge.

There are many opportunities for training and development, and every staff member is given a budget for such purposes.

Republic Polytechnic has a unique One-Day, One-Problem™ PBL pedagogic

approach which is designed to encourage an inquiring mind, expand the imagination and engage the intellect of facilitators. The institution is looking for fresh graduates who are receptive to this approach, and are dynamic in nature.

They should not be daunted to take the road less travelled as this pedagogic approach is one-of-a-kind. Of course, a facilitator should have the ability to relate to youths, be flexible and open-minded, and he or she should definitely be willing to try out new ways of doing things.

Classroom management skills are also important qualities that RP is looking for in academic staff. Through its in-house RP-PBL Foundation programmes, graduates can look forward to displaying good facilitation skills. It will also help greatly that the age gap between them and their students will be very small, which makes it much easier for the students to relate socially to their facilitator.

All are welcome

As Republic Polytechnic is currently still expanding, there is a need to increase its staff strength rapidly. There are academic, corporate, associate and other part-time positions available, and fresh graduates are definitely encouraged to apply for a job that is unique, challenging and fun at the same time.