



Learning with a difference

You don't have to pursue a career related to what you've studied. Two engineering graduates share their experience of taking the path less travelled, and how they have made a difference in the lives of others in their own ways.

■ By Sharon Lin

Woo Kwai Fong could have become an engineer after graduating from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with a degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering.

But after several "intimidating" job interviews for engineering positions, she realised she was not cut out for that career.

"Engineering jobs involve a lot of technical work. I'm more of a 'people'-person. I probably wouldn't be able to stand it if I've to do technical things for a living," says the 26-year-old with a laugh.

Different approach to learning

That is why she became a "facilitator" at Republic Polytechnic

(RP) instead. It is not hard to see what led her to this career. As a former member of NTU's Welfare Services Club, Kwai Fong volunteered to teach at boys' homes and hostels, and she enjoyed the experience very much. "I like seeing people improve," she says.

Furthermore, RP's learning by engagement (commonly referred to as PBL) approach intrigued her after she read about it on the polytechnic's website. It inspired her to take up teaching as a career. Becoming a facilitator wasn't an easy task, however, especially during the first semester, when she had to learn how to apply some Problem Based Learning (PBL) ideas in class.

Kwai Fong learnt quickly with help from fellow colleagues as

well as students. She has since facilitated Mathematics and Computational Methods for two-and-a-half years, and feels a lot more confident.

"There is no spoon-feeding in class. Often, students who do not do well blame the system, especially during their first year. It is my job to help them see how they should truly learn," she explains.

"At the end of every lesson, students provide feedback using the 'reflection journal'. It gives me great satisfaction whenever I read about their growing confidence in themselves as learners," she says with a smile.

Kwai Fong has other responsibilities besides facilitating students. She acts as a mentor for students during their time at RP, and also serves as the advisor of the Social Dance Club, one of many student interest groups at RP. Like all academic staff at RP, Kwai Fong is also responsible for planning many different school events.

Fun at work

For example, Kwai Fong recently conceptualised, organised and executed RP's Engineering Week together with her colleagues. She fondly remembers the fun they had while experimenting with their ideas in the laboratories. "We didn't even mind staying late in school, as we were doing stuff that we liked," she smiles.

"I don't think I would have had the chance of doing so many different things if I had become an engineer. RP has provided me with a more fulfilling working experience," she says.

Her colleague, Alexander Sarsito Sia, has a similar experience to share. After graduating with a degree in Computer Engineering from NTU, he tried working as a computer programmer but discovered that "sitting down and doing work in front of a computer all day" was not his thing.

He heard about RP's dynamic culture from a friend who was already working at the polytechnic, and was excited to learn that there were people there who shared his belief of "work hard, play hard". Alexander soon quit his job as a programmer and became an administrative officer in RP's Graduate Services department.

Doing what you love

Like Kwai Fong, Alexander enjoys meeting and working with new people. After a year in Graduate Services, he switched to the Sports Department due to his interest in sports. "I play many types of sports such as soccer, softball and hockey, and was Sportsman of the Year for my hall in NTU," says Alexander. "I feel that it is important for my career to be related to something I love."

As Head of Sports Development, Alexander is in charge of the sports club in RP, which oversees 25 sports teams such as netball and basketball. His typical day revolves around meetings, email correspondences and interaction with students to gather their feedback on various school policies. Of course, like any other staff member, he also guides students in their work.

His main challenge comes from balancing the institution's needs against his students' needs. "Sometimes the two needs are different, but I try my best to align them," he says.

For example, Alexander led the committee that was responsible for organising the graduation night for RP's pioneer batch of graduates. As this was the first time they were organising the event, the committee did not know where to start. Alexander took the initiative to discuss possible ideas with the graduating students, while listening to the polytechnic's plans at the same time. He found a way to balance the two needs, and needless to say, the event was a success.

With such positive experiences, it is no wonder that Alexander recommends a few of his friends to join him at RP. Two of them have already become his colleagues. When asked to share his "recruitment pitch", Alexander says, "If you're someone who likes working with students, loves a dynamic environment, and accepts new ideas readily, you'll love working at RP!"



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