

The first institute for higher learning to adopt a Problem-Based Learning approach in its curriculum, Republic Polytechnic also aims to realise staff potential and promote innovative schemes for their well-being. Career Central speaks to two staff who made a career switch to work at the polytechnic. By Ruth Wong

petite and fresh-faced, Lee Siok Koon blends in effortlessly with the student crowd at Republic Polytechnic (RP), except that she isn't a student at all. Siok Koon, 31, is Head of National Education Programs with the polytechnic's Centre for Culture and Communications at its Woodlands campus. It is here that she has embarked on a new chapter in her career.

After graduating from NUS with an Honours degree in Philosophy, Siok Koon started her working life with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). In the six years that she was there, she held diverse

portfolios, overseeing policy issues ranging from philanthropy, volunteerism, and development of social services, to research analysis and strategic planning.

SEEKING A CHANGE

So why did she leave what seemed like a really great job? "The job was fulfilling and my bosses were great but I felt that it was time to go into teaching and work more closely with youths," she explains. Yet she wasn't initially sure what the next step would be.

While searching for answers on her next career move, she had a short stint in a private school, teaching thinking skills and

philosophy to children.

Then, she found out about Republic Polytechnic and felt that RP was the place to embark on her new teaching career. "I was intrigued by its Problem-Based Learning approach," she enthused. There are no lectures at RP, replaced instead by facilitation sessions where an academic staff otherwise known as a facilitator guides students' learning through a series of discussions and self-directed research on a problem or topic.

"I really enjoy the close interaction with students and helping them to connect the different pieces of information that they have through Socratic questioning,

Gary Su
Head of Sports Complex,
Republic Polytechnic

Developing Staff Potential and Promoting Work-life Balance

to watch them proactively gather new information to build their knowledge,” said Siok Koon.

The love for working with young people is also one of the reasons that made Gary Su, 28, take up a staff position in Republic Polytechnic.

Another alumnus of NUS, Gary holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Real Estate. He also has a Diploma in Building & Property Management from Singapore Polytechnic.

A sports enthusiast, Gary is currently the Head of Sports Complex with the Office of Student & Graduate Affairs, having recently been promoted to the position after working for about a year and a half with RP.

During his polytechnic and undergraduate days, he was very involved in various sports co-curricular activities (CCAs), with a penchant for adventure sports and endurance events. Over the years, he has taken part in biathlons, triathlons and even in a Half Ironman race. He also has much experience in organising sports events.

“I want to pass on my experience to the students and help them build character through sports. To do well in sports, especially for endurance sports, you need to have mental strength, focus and perseverance. I hope to help students develop these qualities,” said Gary.

“In addition, I also have qualifications in real estate. So my current job is ideal as it marries my two areas of interest,” he added.

SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES

Passion and interest aside, Gary said that the first six months on the job was a steep learning curve.

Besides managing Interest Groups (the equivalent of CCAs), I also organise events

and manage the facilities. Although this may seem a lot to handle, my colleagues shared with me how to prioritise and multi-task. This has allowed me to achieve a better work-life balance now.”

Indeed, having supportive colleagues is also what Siok Koon cited as a plus for working in Republic Polytechnic. “I just got married recently. During the marriage preparation period, my department was really supportive; they helped to cover my work so that I could take leave” she said, thankful for the care that her colleagues have shown her, even though she has only been working for less than a year at RP.

So what advice do they have for tertiary students entering the working world?

Gary said: “Know what you want to do and be passionate about doing it. If you’re not sure what you want, then go try out different things. While you are at it, remember that every job is an experience in itself, so make the full use of the opportunity to learn. Have lots of perseverance too!”

While agreeing that passion is important, Siok Koon also shared: “Think about what you have to do on a day-to-day basis in a job. Something may be your passion but on a day-to-day basis, you could be just doing things which don’t fulfil your expectations.” After all, as the founders of “Ben and Jerry’s” put it, “If it isn’t fun, why do it?”

She also quotes the creator of “Calvin and Hobbes”, Bill Watterson: “Creating a life that reflects your values and satisfies your soul is a rare achievement.”

“It’s one of my life’s philosophies. I believe it is important to have a job that is fulfilling and challenging, and which synchronises with one’s life values,” she explained, aptly summing up their experiences working at Republic Polytechnic.



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