Making Connections: Fieldwork and visual arts at the Studio@CresPion Halls of Residence at Nanyang Technological University

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Abstract

Institutions of higher learning are continuously challenged to deliver high-quality and enriching learning experiences with paradigm shifts in learning styles, technology-enabled learning, global changes in media consumption, and the need to equip graduates with future skills. But to do so requires strategic thinking and planning at a higher level, making connections between otherwise disconnected scholarly programmes and institutional systems. Using the case of residential education at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), we share in this paper NTU's experiences in developing its new residential education programme, outcomes and challenges.

Introduction

Learning in institutes of higher learning has often emphasized the importance of life skills and exposure beyond curriculum, but are often limited in scope and reach due to dependence on individual faculty members to provide opportunities to achieve these outcomes within structured academic programmes. Residential education can potentially meet an important gap in offering learning opportunities for students to pursue courses beyond their formal academic settings. However, such pursuits are also confronted with many challenges especially in large universities where residential structures often operate independently from academic programmes. For instance, designing meaningful learning experiences of interdisciplinary nature within the residential education umbrella that effectively complement academic competencies acquired in more formal and traditional settings often require dialogues and collaboration with multiple stakeholders within the university.

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Because the scope of residential education differs from those of academic faculties, stakeholders from both sides need to gain a good understanding of the outcomes they are trying to achieve and come up with feasible ways to work with one another. Such understanding takes time to acquire, and universities need to come up with mechanisms to effectively engage various stakeholders.

In this paper we discuss concepts, experiences and outcomes from a course that has been introduced to first year undergraduate students in the format of residential education as a case study at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. This course is significant as it is one of the first courses that mark a collaboration between a residential hall cluster and an academic programme. We present the concept of "The Studio" as an interdisciplinary learning space in the Crescent-Pioneer (CresPion) Hall cluster of NTU for students to dabble in visual arts (in both digital and tactile forms), the integration of learning activities at The Studio@CresPion as part of a course for students in the University Scholars Programme (USP), and reflections from 54 students on the outcomes of their learning experiences. We discuss the challenges and problems encountered and addressed, pedagogical implications and the future ahead for both the USP and residential education at NTU.

Background

In this section we discuss two gaps that have motivated the conceptualization and introduction of "The Studio" in the cluster of Crescent and Pioneer (hereafter referred to as CresPion) Halls of Residence in Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

In 2011, NTU articulated in its Education framework the aim to develop graduates who are: a) smart leaders with good communication skills and have respect for others; b) upright characters practicing ethical reasoning and integrity; c) citizens keenly aware of social issues in the local and global communities; d) individuals with enquiring and creative minds; e) competent scholars characterised by self-discipline, disciplinary depth and lifelong learning. These outcomes are embodied in graduate

attributes referred to as the "5Cs" of NTU education: Communication, Character, Civic-mindedness, Creativity, and Competence (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Five Cs of NTU education

Whilst academic degrees are very good at equipping students with competence in their respective specialisations, there may not be as many opportunities for students to develop other attributes such as civic-mindedness and creativity. Additionally, there are disconnections in terms of learning within their academic programmes and residential living. The attributes of NTU's education, together with technical competence, character, and communication skills are important qualities for graduates professionally, socially, and societally. They are qualities that should contribute to building them as resilient individuals and good citizens to their families, neighbours and communities. It is recognized that this gap may be addressed through the development of Residential Education, integrating experience in residential halls with academic learning at colleges/schools to create synergies for a more holistic university education.

NTU enjoys a dynamic and enriching student residential scene spanning 18 Halls of Residence. As of April 2016, 10,400 undergraduate students and 1,300 graduate students were living on campus, accounting for approximately 45% of the total student population. Structured activities in residential

halls have traditionally weighed heavily towards recreational, sports, social and cultural aspects. Whilst they have been instrumental in building vibrant hall communities, residential living has often been regarded as a different part of student life from academic learning. Hence despite being a natural environment for developing attributes such as character and civic-mindedness, it is disconnected from the learning experience in more formal settings in the colleges and schools that students are enrolled in. The potential learning moments may also be missed due to the lack of pedagogical structures to leverage on such opportunities. If this gap can be addressed, many types of learning and integration issues can be mitigated. For instance, at-risk youths who may otherwise struggle with learning in their formal degrees can draw support and gain other skills from a vibrant residential learning environment. Such an outcome is plausible and has already been demonstrated, as Lee & Barth (2009) found in their survey of 67 residential education programmes.

The need to provide opportunities to develop attributes other than competence, as well as the need to remove the disconnect between residential experience and classroom learning has thus led to the initiation of Residential Education in NTU to bring about a more holistic learning experience, piloted through the CresPion Halls of Residence cluster. In Sep 2014, CresPion Halls conceptualized five interdisciplinary residential learning programmes, with the roadmap to establish and expand them in phases over a 5-year window. These programmes (branded as "@CresPion") are: The Garage, The Studio, The Kitchen, The GiveBack and The Manga/Anime Enterprise. For the scope of this paper, we will discuss The Studio@CresPion and a course developed to bring about its synergy with the University Scholars Programme (USP).

The Studio@CresPion

The Studio provides an experimental and mixed arts space to inspire the learning and production of visual and literary arts in the new halls. Computers with imaging, audio and video editing suites are provided, with a flexible arts space which can be used for small-scale arts projects and exhibitions. The arts reflect a way of thinking, and the manner in which we go about our daily lives so this is a space

where learning in such areas can happen. The focus on visual and literary arts is also purposed to complement projects at other residential learning programmes such as the Garage, Kitchen, and GiveBack. For instance, students can draw inspiration, and in turn, inspire innovations in mechanical inventions at the Garage and creativity in culinary presentation at the Kitchen. Users of the Studio can also give back to the community through engaging with the arts, or use various forms of art and media to document social issues in the local and global community. Through film screenings, talks, workshops and the support of resident-initiated projects, the Studio@CresPion promotes the 5Cs in NTU education by:

- Encouraging exploration and creativity in visual and/or literary arts (i.e., Creativity)

- Development of philosophical thinking and self-expressions through the arts (i.e., Communication)

- Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration with the science and engineering fields (i.e., Communication & Character)

- Blending concrete experiences and abstract conceptualizations/reflective thinking (i.e., Communication & Competence)

The University Scholars Programme

The University Scholars Programme (USP) is one of the four Premier Scholars Programmes (PSPs) at NTU, which are for academically-strong students interested in developing themselves further as future leaders with creativity and critical thinking skills and as global citizens. It complements NTU's core disciplines, so all USP students are enrolled in a core programme of study – mostly in business, humanities, arts or social sciences. One of USP's missions is to develop graduates who are not only competent and critical leaders, but also individuals who have a deep understanding of social and pragmatic issues globally – or at least understand how to interact with others in order to gain such understandings. Hence from its inception in 2011, the USP has always taken students in their first year for an overseas study trip in a regional destination. The first of these trips was in Jan 2013 to Taipei,

followed by Perth in Jan 2014, and Hong Kong in Jan 2015. Different topics and themes are developed depending on the context of each destination.

By the third overseas study trip in Hong Kong, it was apparent that the extent and depth of the overseas study trip had grown and evolved much. Together with accompanying faculty, students would come up with well-defined questions of interest they would like to investigate themselves even before departing for the trip. This meant that the trip would need to involve conducting interviews and observations, other than the usual lectures and consultation with faculty members in the overseas universities. This suggests that informed consent is required, and students should also be trained in social science research approaches and methods. But a typical research methods course would not be enough to tailor to the learning objectives of these overseas study trips. Each trip also produced many footages using various media devices – photographs, sketches, video, just to name a few. There was so much produced and collected that to distill and produce a coherent story about each project was a major challenge.

In recognition of these issues, the overseas study trip evolved into a new course in collaboration with the Studio@CresPion after the Hong Kong overseas study trip in early 2015. The course 'Fieldwork and Documentation' was launched in the second half of 2015 with two related learning objectives: a) to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to design, plan and execute a research project in the social sciences, and b) to develop competence, creativity, and communication skills in the development of a media story using mixed media. The first batch of students enrolled in this new course started classes in October 2015 and all 54 of them went to Chiang Mai under the supervision of the teaching faculty and other accompanying faculty members in the USP.

Fieldwork and Documentation: Key teaching and learning features

In the following discussion we highlight three key features of the course, designed to support the learning objectives.

Small-group, residential-based collaboration

Most students enrolled in the course are also residents at either Crescent or Pioneer Hall. This made it possible to for classes and related activities to be held in the Hall. Students were organized in small teams tasked with completing their research project as well as to produce a media output using photographs, film, tactile art, or a mix, using materials and resources available in the Studio. As the Studio was also organizing various media-related workshops around the same time, students were able to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to complete the deliverables. Importantly, being in close proximity of each other since they are in the same halls, students were able to work effectively in teams and with greater flexibility to exploit their non-classroom hours, e.g. even late into nights.

Making connections between concrete experiences and abstract conceptualisations

Concrete experiences and opportunities to apply and practise what was learned are important, but if left on its own, it is left up to chance for students to internalise these experiences. It is therefore a guiding principle of the course to actively make connections between concrete experiences and abstract conceptualisations and/or reflective reasoning. Using a blog developed specifically for the course (see Figure 2), students were required to develop three types of blog posts individually: reflections at the end of the pre-trip classes, before the fieldtrip which should detail their projections and expectations; posts for each day of the trip to articulate what they learned; and finally, a reflective post after the fieldtrip. Through the practice of writing blog posts with specific guidelines, students go through the process of discursive reflection, turning their experiences into explicit and internalised learning that cannot be otherwise taught in a traditional learning environment. The blogs also provided a platform to encourage interactions between the teaching faculty and the students.
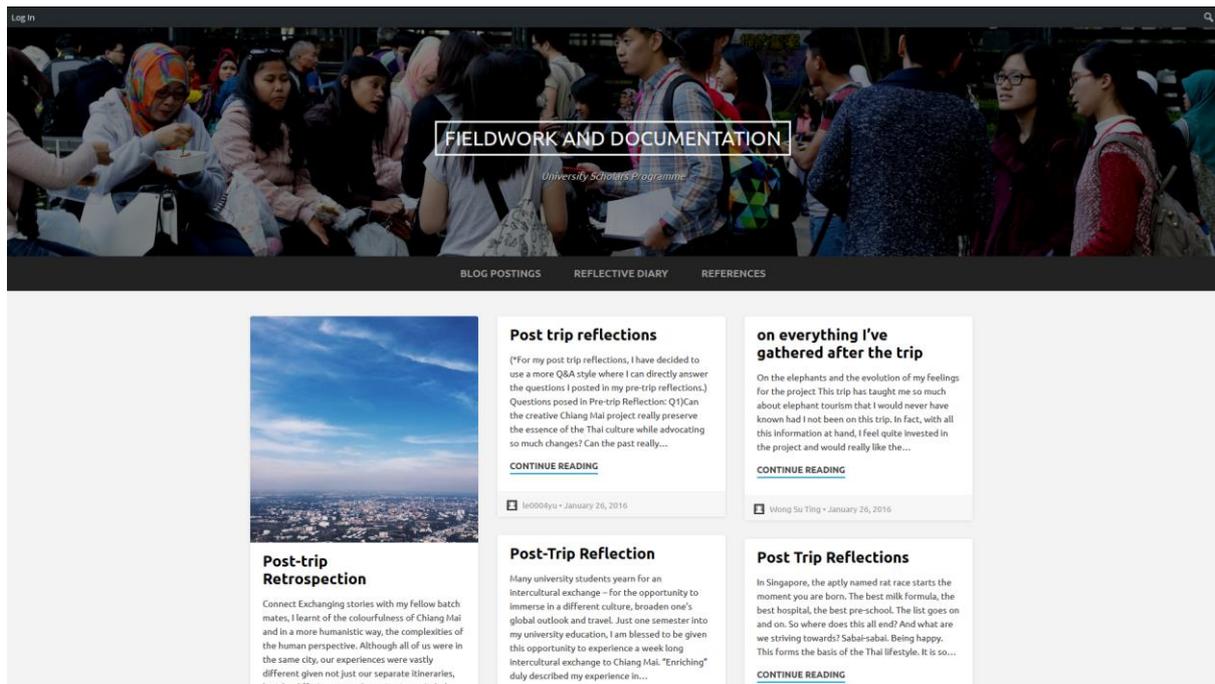
Figure 2. Blog used in Fieldwork and Documentation

Communication and materiality

Using photographs, clay, paint, and film, students developed a media deliverable in their respective teams. Each project team was given three exhibition panel and/or a projector depending on the nature of their media deliverable. These were coordinated and organized into an exhibition event spanning several evenings in CresPion Halls, providing opportunities for the teams to share with other residents their perspectives touching on various issues emerging from the fieldwork in Chiang Mai. From the use of social media among youths to tourism and public health issues, various aspects and issues of Chiang Mai as a society were deliberated and discussed. With the exhibition, students had to put their storytelling skills to practice. Being able to complete a research project is different from having to communicate a clear and coherent story about it. During this process, many students lamented that this task of coming up with a clear message was the most difficult, as there was so much to tell. But they learn that communication is about being mindful of who the target audience is, what are their interests and backgrounds, and paying attention to not just the content of what they were delivering,

but also the form of this content. They learn to deliberate as a team, and make conscious decisions at every critical juncture in their work. By working with materials, students are also intimately connected 'to the experiences of seeing, feeling and forming materials through technologies to express ideas' (Grushka, 2010). This is part of the model of visual education, which advocates that this ability is key to survival in the contemporary media environment.

Learning Outcomes

The following provides a discussion of some of the main learning outcomes emerging from the blog. They are based on the post-trip reflections written by students.

Global literacy

Being a relatively new programme, the USP has sought for ways to define its identity for students. One of its missions is to nurture and develop graduates who are also good citizens equipped with skills as future leaders and lifelong learners. It is important that students realise this, and internalize their learning journey on this trajectory. Understanding Singapore's place in the region and the world, or having the skills to gain this understanding – are therefore crucial. Several post-trip postings discussed this reflection, alluding to the learning about global literacy. For instance, one student shared:

> "Our actions can have either good or bad impacts, and it is with awareness that we
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> have control over what we bring to this global community. I realise that learning will
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> be a continuous process, and just as I feel as guests in a foreign land we ought to be
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> humble, open-minded and respectful, we ought to have that eagerness to learn and
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> understand other cultures and communities." (Choo Jue Ying, 2016)

The reflection was preceded by the same student talking about being more than tourists, experiencing, even if not fully, the lives of the people she met and interviewed. This learning outcome is aligned with one of the missions of USP, and also the graduate attributes of NTU in developing graduates that are civic-conscious and competent.

Cultural awareness and context

Global literacy brings with it the development of cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural literacy. This was a dominant theme emerging from not only the post-trip reflections, but also the daily postings where students reflected on the challenges encountered in trying to interact and communicate with people from a different culture, spoke a different language, and had different understandings of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviours. As students elaborated their encounters, many of them concluded that there is much they still need to learn, and they need to be sensitive and seek to understand.

But culture cannot be simply reduced to a number of factors like language, religion, values, or even daily routines. It is about understanding who is saying what and why – the local and global influences that are shaping each response. Such an understanding is not easy to achieve, but it was hoped that the course would give students a taste of the complexities involved. And a few did see this, as a student who studied the topic of female empowerment reflected:

> "…female empowerment carries different meanings for different individuals. We saw it as a state where women can do what men already can, in areas ranging from academia to politics. There were many parallels between our definition of female empowerment and those of the Thai youth which we surveyed and interviewed. As previously mentioned, this was attributed to the fact that our respondents were urbanised, privileged and relatively well-educated. After all, they were sought mostly from universities and high-end shopping malls. Had we gone to a rural village to collect responses, the results could very well differ….and I wondered how much of Ms H's views were coloured by her circumstances, upbringing and values…" (Pang Jin Hu)

Although the reflection is given in the context of the particular topic that the student was working on, the exposure and acquisition of cultural literacy here is something that will hopefully be ingrained and internalized, since it is experienced rather than acquired in a classroom. In this way, students develop themselves as individuals that has character and are civic-conscious.

Dealing with contingencies

Competence as researchers implies the ability to deal with contingencies, adapt and develop strategies to deal with them. Application of strategic thinking, and the ability to anticipate challenges are important skills that are difficult to be taught and mastered simply in traditional classroom environments. Through the fieldwork experience and residential-based collaboration, students experience first-hand both general challenges with regards to executing any research project, and also issues arising from specific contexts of their research topics.

> Due to unforeseen changes in our plans, we had to exercise flexibility, adapt and respond to the changes. On a personal level, I have learnt through these last-minute changes in plans, to be more flexible and accommodating. I have also learnt the importance of contingency plans in any situations. Standby plans are necessary as unforeseen circumstances can occur any time. This learning will be very useful for my future personal travel plans as well as in my job due to the fact that I would be dealing with students. (Daryn Tan, 2016)

> There were also some hiccups during our research process, such as when we realised that the survey questions that we'd crafted before the trip were sorely inadequate, and we had to resort to coming up with verbal survey questions on the spot. This led to quite a bit of fumbling on our part while surveying the tourists, and some of the tourists couldn't understand us very well. On looking back, we could probably have done better by putting in the effort to review our survey questions before setting off

for Chiang Mai. This would have ensured a smoother and more efficient research process, and I will definitely take note of this when conducting future research. (Teo Rui Ling)

"Even the best-laid plans can backfire. What we faced were merely some objections and concerns from one or two individuals. However, it did not mean that we were destined to fail. It only made the journey more challenging, and at the same time, more interesting. We decided to go with our original plan regardless and believed that as we got to interact with more Thai people, we would understand our research better. Even if our assumptions were wrong, it would not stop us from learning things. At the end of the day, our ultimate goal for this research is to become more informed and knowledgeable about our chosen topic. A researcher should aim for depth instead of certainty." (Fay Fuyang Shen)

There are more examples discussed which showed how students reflected on the importance of understanding the target audience and subject matter before the fieldwork, but also the need to know when to adapt and think quickly when in the field. These qualities build competence for the students as future researchers and leaders.

Empowerment

As social scientists, the end destination of research should not and cannot be research in and of itself. Students are continuously encouraged during the course to think about the implications and impacts of their research and findings. There are two motivations for this. One, it helps students think about how to frame and ask questions, and exercise respect when interacting with their research participants. Two, it should help them understand and appreciate the role of social science research, and its impacts.

The trip has also honed my interview skills and increased my self-awareness. I realised that when giving interviews to people whose first language is not English, it is very important to simplify the question. However, at the same time, there comes the dilemma of simplifying it without sounding crude or leading. This was certainly a situation that I came across several times, but still have difficulty dealing with. (Lim Sue Qin)

Here's hoping that our research may stir the waves of change that will save these elephants from the plight of exploitation! (Teo Rui Ling)

In the second reflection, the student belonged to a team that was examining the awareness and perceptions of elephant tourism, and issues relating to its sustainability. Such sentiments reflect the empowerment that students received in being trained as researchers in the course. Through such empowerment, we hope to develop future leaders that are not only competent, but also has a heart for the society and environment in both the local and global neighbourhoods.

Personal growth

Another theme that emerged from the blog posts was that of personal growth. Many students shared about how they grew as individuals, and the skills they learned. For instance, one student shared about how she grew more confident as an individual through the course and the trip:

"I think one of my most important takeaways from the trip was learning to become a more confident person as well as a better communicator. In my group, I helped to film most of the videos, and I often had to take the first step to approach complete strangers for interviews and surveys. Having to approach people in a completely foreign land was really unnerving, and I was very worried about being rejected or brushed off.

However, as we carried out more interviews, my confidence gradually grew as I began to realise that my worries were completely unfounded in the first place – most people that we encountered were so warm and approachable! I found myself stepping up to approach more people, and even having personal conversations with some of them! That being said, there were definitely intimidating situations, such as an instance when a Taiwanese family that we approached was suspicious of our intentions, and demanded for proof that we were from NTU. Despite their coldness, we remained polite and friendly, and they eventually warmed up to us and even offered us pineapple tarts! Through this, I have learnt that there is truly no better means of communication than a genuine smile, a friendly disposition, and a sincere personal interest in the conversation." (Teo Rui Ling)

Confidence and communication seemed to work together like hand in glove here. Her confidence grew as she learned how to communicate and interact with her team members and interviewees; yet it is also the same confidence that encourages her to communicate. In another post where a student reflected on her USP education, she discussed the importance of learning from failures.

"…the main focus isn't about the multi-disciplinary education that I receive. Sure, those were perks that would greatly broaden my horizons and provide a holistic education for me. But to me, what's special about USP is the nurturing environment it creates to encourage learning.

On our first day, the dismal results we've received left us feeling heavy-hearted and disheartened. Prof Geraldine, Prof Patrick and Prof Nat made it a point to lift our spirits and encouraged us not to give up. It was then I realised USP is about the journey of learning. Here, failures aren't frowned upon. The end result isn't as important as the growth we receive as USP scholars." (Natalia Chioang)

Degree of Leverage on The Studio@CresPion

Post-trip usage of The Studio was high, with almost nightly occupancy of the space by one team or other, over several weeks leading up to the exhibition. Resource utilization level was healthy, indicating that students were indeed perceiving The Studio as a viable project workspace outside of their College/School settings. Project activities often run very into the nights at The Studio, which would not have been a safe option had the space not been located in the halls and within proximity to their sleeping quarters.

Issues arising

Despite the course being in its inaugural run, the objectives and learning outcomes were met successfully. Some challenges were observed nevertheless which relate to the nature and design of the course, as well as management of stakeholders (teaching staff, college/school management, hall management, students etc) involved in this case.

Being residents in the same Halls and also peers in the same USP community, there was a high level of visibility for the students as individuals. This meant that there is a high level of student performativity – where students are expected and evaluated on the basis of how they perform in various tasks and activities such as attendance in classes, role in performing group projects, and presentations. In the education literature, performativity is usually positively associated with greater learning outcomes and engagement in classes (Macfarlane, 2014). However, as Macfarlane (2014) argued, it can result in some negative effects. For instance, having students write reflections can evoke performative rituals amongst students which may or may not be authentic. As Macfarlane (2014) argued:

> "…reflective writing is intended to provide an authentic insight into the links between professional theory and practice and the inner thought processes of students, assessing them in this way brings to fore performative rituals of confession and

compliance (Ross, 2011). Students must display a range of emotional responses in their reflective writing: penitence for past mistakes or lifestyle choices, excitement at discovering some gratitude for the way the process has 'transformed' their lives. Many students are strategic in knowing what the teacher's preferences are and are 'audience-aware' in the manner in which they produce reflective writing for a number of different readers (Ross, 2012). This is an example of the performing self in a similar mould to the reality television contestant (Macfarlane & Gourlay, 2009) and represents the 'surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression' (Ross, 2011, p. 113)" (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 8-9)

At the end of the semester, students have privately shared with the teaching coordinator about the level of stress they experienced working on deliverables, yet nothing of that nature was written in the blog postings. So whilst they were unafraid to share these thoughts with the teaching faculty, they did not want to admit them to their peers. Such behaviours give us clues that Macfarlane's (2014) ardent warning is an important reminder about the need to think about and define the boundaries of such performativity, and protect the rights of students to also learn freely as individuals. In the subsequent run of the course, we aim to reduce the level of visibility of the reflective postings by making each post private – the students can view their own posts only, although the teaching faculty can continue to view and comment on the posts.

In the context of residential education, the issue of student performativity needs to be examined and addressed carefully. As residents, students study, work and play together in the same spaces and performativity heightens especially when they are also in the same academic programmes. Ethical principles associated with teaching such students need to be deliberated and articulated.

A well-oiled mechanism integrating the contribution of stakeholders from various departments and schools and with differing agenda takes years to develop and evolve. Understandably, with the first run of such a course marrying residential education with academic learning, channels of

communication and standard operating procedures often had to be worked out from scratch. The stakeholders are more numerous in Residential Education than in cases of traditional academic courses offered in College/Schools. Firstly, the course coordinator by necessity has to be a Faculty-in-Residence of the halls offering the residential learning programme, who has, in addition, primary responsibilities within his/her College/School. The level of support and alignment of various College/School management (another stakeholder) to the Residential Education initiative which is in its early days are varied, precisely because the ramification and consequences in terms of teaching effectiveness, manpower deployment and resource utilization are unknown and uncertain. In terms of facility, unlike the well-supported traditional academic spaces (lecture theatres and tutorial rooms) on campus, facilities within halls come under a different management (Housing and Auxillary Services) whose staff often perceive teaching activities to be "non-residential" in nature and outside of their area of support and maintenance. Even for the student body within CresPion Halls, residential learning programmes (while no doubt serving much benefit in the broader sense) are sometimes causes of operation strains because they compete for limited activity spaces and calendar slots with the conventional structured hall activities run by the halls' student leaders. These hurdles were overcome through multiple rounds of communication and negotiation, impressing upon the various parties the importance of Residential Education in the coming phase of NTU's education.

Conclusion

In this paper we shared the evolution of NTU's residential education along with the development of the Studio at Crescent and Pioneer Halls. The use of the Studio was made more meaningful with the introduction of a new course developed to meet the needs of the USP. The USP, being a relatively new programme was experiencing gaps in its growth which were addressed with the support and expertise of the Studio in Crescent and Pioneer Halls, where USP students were also residents of. We discussed the design and key outcomes of the course, and also identified important challenges for both the context of our course, and residential education.

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