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LEARNING IS ABOUT ENGAGING AND BEING OPEN TO SURROUNDINGS

The death of comfortable education

ANGELA MEI FERGUSON



There may be an outfit for every occasion, but one in particular has served me in my most daunting moments: A grey V-neck, magenta Nike pullover and black yoga pants, which have never once been used for yoga.

This was my battle armour when I took the SAT, then again when I took and re-took the ACT. At other times, this was my I-am-sleep-deprived-so-I-might-as-well-be-comfortable outfit for nights of working on the high school magazine until 5am. These were my comfort clothes. So of course, that was what I was wearing one July morning as I hugged my parents outside airport security and sobbed.

I was leaving for college, the caveat being that it was located in Singapore — three flights and 24 hours away from home in aggressively suburban south-west Ohio.

And yet, just six months ago, I had not been confident that I could find Singapore on a map. Even after I had decided to enrol, my mum's friends had berated her for sending me abroad when teenagers in other countries would give up so much to study in the United States.

Ultimately, though, I wanted to learn more outside the classroom than I did in it. That idea tugged enough at my mind to make me leave behind everything that I knew, but not enough at my heart to make it easy.

After crying through the morning car ride, the walk through the airport parking lot and the check-in process at the airline counter, any words I tried to find strangled themselves in my throat before I could choke them out. My mum found only two: "Just go." And so I did, crying as I went through security and walked to my gate alone.

The next 10 months ended up being the best of my life. I threw myself into exploring Singapore's nooks and crannies, and it amazed me that I got along so well with friends who had grown up worlds away from me.

And yet those months, which opened my eyes in more ways than I can say, did not come without growing pains. I sometimes found myself deeply unsettled.

The more I learned about the world around me, the more unsure I felt about my place in it.

Ironically enough, it was being away from home that, for the first time, pushed me to reflect on what it means to be an American citizen.

As opposed to reading about US foreign relations online, I was living it. I finally learned what young people from other countries thought about my own and, rather naively, was shocked at the polarised views I heard.

That was when I began to sense my behaviour being unconsciously shaped by the stereotypes I perceived. If people generalised Americans to be culturally insensitive and lacking global awareness, it felt like my personal responsibility to prove them wrong.

So I caught myself inadvertently trying to go the extra mile, overcompensating as if through my actions, I could say it is all right, we are not really like that.

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SEEK YOUR OWN GLOBAL EDUCATION

When I was not attempting to defend my country from negative stereotypes, I criticised it for seemingly misunderstanding my new home. I had grown to love the diverse, bustling city-state that I once knew nothing about.

Singapore's education system had taken me in and its people were warm, from the construction worker who al-

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Global education today is a mindset — a willingness to learn from people whose backgrounds differ from your own, and about places that exist outside your own bubble. TODAY FILE PHOTO

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ways chatted with me to the teacher who had treated me to supper when I was lost at midnight.

I had developed a secondhand appreciation for the country's 50-year transformation from a small port to a global hub. So when American news outlets peppered Mr Lee Kuan Yew's obituary with comments about the country's ban on chewing gum and lack of civil liberties, I felt defensive.

Previously I, perhaps, would have also scoffed at governments which did not mirror my own. But from living abroad, I had seen that there was no absolute formula for structuring a society.

Norms that work in some societies simply do not exist to the same extent in others, and that is the nature of diversity.

After a year of mulling over these ideas, I finally went back to Ohio, only to feel like a total outsider.

Here I had made best friends and undergone the horrors of puberty and learned to drive a car and yet, it was as if the last one year had written over the past 17.

Now, I was straddling two different worlds: The former one, revolving around my 28-square-mile suburban stronghold, and the one in which I now cared about Rohingya refugees and South China Sea disputes — people and events far removed from the place where I grew up.

My perspective had permanently shifted and I was uncomfortable in both of these worlds.

But, perhaps, that is the point. Global education should make me feel uncomfortable. It should open my eyes to other cultures while allowing me a new pair through which to see my own.

Undoubtedly, it is a position of privilege that allowed me to fly 15,427km away from home in the pursuit of higher education.

But at its core, I have to think that global education today does not require moving halfway around the world. It is a mindset — a willingness to learn from people whose backgrounds differ from your own, and about places that exist outside your own bubble.

To engage with ideas which go against everything that you have always believed to be true. The simple act of being open to learning opens many doors that would have otherwise remained closed.

So whether it is down the hall, down the street, across the country or across the planet, seek out your own global education and just go — even if you need your comfort clothes to get there.

Angela Mei Ferguson is a second-year student at Yale-NUS College. This piece clinched first place (University Category) at the International New York Times Writing Competition 2015.