A New Core Texts Course in Singapore

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In early 2012 I arrived in Singapore to help create a core texts course with global content that would be part of the first-year curriculum at the soon-to-open Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). The task of designing and implementing a course based on a set of "world classics and other texts of major cultural significance" (as core texts are defined by the Association for Core Texts and Courses [ACTC]) drew upon nearly all of my previous knowledge and experience (ACTC, n.d.). My doctoral studies had embraced European intellectual history; my teaching experience had included three years in a great books program with a syllabus of core texts drawn from European culture. Prior to that, I had studied and worked in different parts of Asia for more than a decade, in the course of which I acquired considerable understanding of major cultures and languages of East Asia and the Southeast Asian archipelago. I was thrilled to join SUTD in a capacity that would allow me to combine my interests in both Asia and the West. Indeed, Singapore—an island populated

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largely by ethnic Chinese, located in the middle of vast region dominated by Islam, and marked with a history of European colonialism—seemed like the perfect place to bring it all together in a core texts course titled "World Civilizations and Texts."

A Tip

When colleagues at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) asked me to write about the experience of designing and implementing the core texts course at SUTD, I gladly accepted this chance to reflect upon my work of the past three years. Carefully reading the letter from CUHK, I took special note where it stated: "*In this globalized 21st century, university education has become more and more specialized and career-oriented.*" This is worth highlighting. These two trends, specialization and globalization, impact the acquisition of language skills, which are prerequisite for the critical thinking needed in core texts courses. In this regard, the content and structure of the core texts course at SUTD have been determined in no small part by exogenous trends that inhibit greater acquisition of language skills by Singaporean students prior to university matriculation.

Undergraduates at SUTD, like undergraduates everywhere, have been motivated to seek specialization within the academy. Career-oriented, indeed, technology-oriented, incentives contour their education long before they find their first jobs. This utilitarian focus reduces the margins for tech-bound students to develop the language skills needed to think critically about anything as complex and indeterminate as human experience. The

irony is that the pursuit of academic degrees has in many, if not most, cases become detached from any firm grounding in language skills that for centuries formed the very basis of education in all literate cultures. SUTD undergraduates, like those everywhere, are affected by the stepped-up pace of globalization, perhaps most pervasively through the digital world of instant entertainment, information, social networks, and you-name-it. The effect of this sort of globalization trend is, however, more ambiguous. It may be the case that the digital world provokes and proliferates new ideas by connecting users to faraway people, places, and things, yet simultaneously diminishes language skills needed to articulate any new ideas derived from participation in that world. The instantaneousness of the medium often compels its users to seek shortcuts for everything, so that their range of verbal expression shrinks more and more toward texts and tweets.

What does this sort of globalization mean for a core texts course aiming at global content? Does a medium that puts the whole world within easier reach simultaneously diminish the linguistic ability to develop and express ideas about the world? Does this medium strengthen or weaken understanding about humanity? Does an increasingly interconnected world motivate young people to wonder more or less about the universality and particularity of human experience? The swelling technical content of university education tends to squeeze humanistic questions like these into a shrinking forum. In this regard, the vision and leadership of institutions such as SUTD and CUHK to establish core texts courses as part of their undergraduate curriculum is highly commendable. Such courses contribute to undergraduate education by engaging students to think critically about

human experience as expressed in texts of great cultural significance. The value of this contribution to their education is unquestionable, as I hope this essay about the SUTD case in Singapore will reveal.

Let me preface my reflections on the SUTD core texts course with a tip. Anyone interested in setting up a comparable course should bear in mind how globalization and specialization combine with local factors to shape the education and attitudes of their students, especially in terms of language skills that are prerequisite for critical thinking. This will vary from country to country, from university to university, even from student to student. Instructors must assess each situation for what it is. In every case, however, factors that inhibit language skills also diminish the ability to think well about anything human. The story of the design and implementation of SUTD's core texts course cannot be told without reflecting on language issues that have constrained its possibilities.

An Idea

The idea of a humanities-based core texts course with global content as part of the first-year curriculum at SUTD was conceived by the university's collaborative partner, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which in its long experience of educating young people in technical and scientific disciplines has come to understand the importance of adding humanities, arts, and social sciences to its undergraduate curriculum. As stated on the MIT website, "*these fields empower young scientists, engineers, thinkers, and citizens—with historical and cultural perspectives, and with skills in the arts, communication, and critical thinking—to help them serve the*

world well, with innovations and lives that are rich in meaning and wisdom." (MIT, n.d.) MIT thus advised SUTD to develop a curriculum that would enrich the technology-focused education of its students, helping them to become not just engineers and entrepreneurs, but also contributors to the mind and spirit of their community. SUTD undergraduates are required to accumulate about one-quarter of their total credits toward graduation by taking courses in "Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences," a multidisciplinary cluster within SUTD that everyone here, in a typically Singaporean way, calls by an acronym, "HASS." This includes credits earned for "World Civilizations and Texts." Beyond this course title, however, the content and structure had yet to be worked out.

I was not a complete stranger to Singapore when I arrived in 2012 to take up this work. In the 1990s I worked for a major Singaporean state-linked corporation in its Jakarta office and frequently visited the headquarters. Singapore, outside of its bustling financial district, was a low-rise conurbation through which was scattered a racial and ethnic mix of Malays, Tamils, and dialect-speaking Chinese—Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Cantonese, and Hakka. Despite state-sponsored language policies intended to dilute this mixture, Singapore was still a vernacular soup with many ingredients. It was not unusual to meet middle-aged Singaporeans who had assimilated two or three Chinese dialects, as well as Malay, while growing up, and then learned Mandarin or English at school. Many had gained enough proficiency in these languages to mix within different ethno-linguistic contexts. By 2012, however, a surprising degree of change had occurred in Singapore. The landscape had become saturated with middle-class growth in the form of high-rise, government-built, dormitory-like housing

estates and contrastingly spectacular shopping malls. The population had multiplied and diversified. A new generation of Singaporeans filled the schools and a new throng of immigrants crowded the public spaces. Among ethnic Chinese residents, Mandarin is now heard more than dialect, and in many settings "Singlish," a heavily accented creolized form of English, predominates over the so-called "mother tongues" (i.e., Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil). The state-sponsored language policies had taken certain effect. Many young people now reject the native languages of their parents and grandparents, as well as those of millions of people who inhabit countries surrounding their tiny island because, as Singaporeans will tell you, these languages are "not useful."

Prior to my return in 2012, I had imagined that Singapore, by dint of its mix of Chinese, Indians, Malays, and Others (the four racial categories by which Singaporeans are officially identified) might be the ideal place to create and teach a multicultural core texts course. The course at SUTD would be taught in ethnically neutral English, which has been the primary language of instruction in all government-run schools since 1987 when the state closed vernacular schools and mandated that mother tongues be taught as second languages. The imposition of Singapore's bilingual education policy is, of course, related to its declaration of English as the working language of government and business. This can be understood as a matter of practicality. Faced with the need to ensure jobs and rising incomes for Singaporeans, the state has long attracted multinational corporations to the island and educated locals for jobs in foreign-linked enterprises. Behind the state's marginalization, even stigmatization, of vernacular languages is its concern to blend Singapore's different races and ethnicities into

a single society. Only after returning to Singapore in 2012 and experiencing the classroom situation at SUTD did I fully appreciate the consequences of Singapore's bilingual education policy for the development of critical thinking skills.

A Curriculum Development Proposal

During the weeks leading up to SUTD's inaugural term in May 2012, I drafted a curriculum development proposal for "World Civilizations and Texts." It lauded the SUTD administration for including a "great books"-type course in the core curriculum at a technology-based institution, but its deeper purpose was to ascertain full backing from an administration composed of practical-minded engineering professors. If "World Civilizations and Texts" were to have a long and happy life in the core curriculum, it would require a substantial commitment of resources, especially for hiring new faculty who could teach it. With that in mind, the proposal, with quotes borrowed from SUTD's promotional literature, reaffirmed the benefit of a core texts course for technology students:

> "World Civilizations and Texts" can and should make a valuable contribution to SUTD's stated mission of "*becoming an intellectual hub and an engine of growth for Singapore and the world*." As a cross-cultural study of great ideas and fundamental beliefs that shape the minds and lives of persons who inhabit the world's largest and most influential spheres of culture, [this course] must be a worthy complement to SUTD's creative approaches to technology

> and design and a key part of preparing our students to "*become technically grounded leaders and innovators to serve societal needs*". . . . The global impact of SUTD design education will be strengthened by providing our students with greater awareness of cultures that inform and motivate different groups of people around the world.

In retrospect, I would no longer describe the course as a "*a cross-cultural study of great ideas and fundamental beliefs*." But having started with that noble, if misplaced, conception, it was then a matter of choosing which cultures would be textually represented in this global-oriented course. Giving weight to Singapore's location, demographics, and history—with its deep layers of Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic influences—it seemed sensible to draw a set of core texts from those four cultural groups.

Sensible, but also logically inconsistent. Three of the groups refer to geographic regions in which the cultures, despite being diasporic, remain centered, while one of the groups refers to a religion whose adherents live mostly outside the geographic region from which it first emerged. Although problematic, this set of cultures was nonetheless workable. Not only are all four abundantly represented in Singapore's population, but these same four also account for a majority of the world's population. Moreover, all four have produced great bodies of literature from which a few core texts could be drawn for the course.

The primary emphasis of the course over the past three years has shifted from cultural content to critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills have always been an important component of the course, but these

skills were originally subordinated, at least rhetorically, to the dialogic teaching method. As stated in the proposal:

> [Dialogue] requires [students] to challenge assumptions and to work out the meaning of things that have no clear answers. Dialogue is about learning to see the world in different ways and to appreciate different perspectives…. [The] nuanced language [of core texts drawn from Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic cultures] reflects the complexity of human experience…. Intensive and close reading of these texts paired with dialogue fosters the development of critical thinking skills.

The proposal emphasized dialogic method for internal reasons. "World Civilizations and Texts" had to show that it was in full compliance with the SUTD administration's mandate to introduce "active learning" into every classroom. This catchphrase signifies a variety of pedagogies that engage students as fully as possible in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. Its incorporation into the classroom brings welcome change to undergraduate engineering programs that traditionally consist of a one-way flow of information from professors to students in lectures delivered to large audiences. SUTD seeks to revolutionize traditional engineering pedagogy in Singapore by assigning students to small cohorts in which they interact with instructors, with each other, and with gadgets in order to assimilate concepts that are applicable to the physical world. "World Civilizations and Texts" felt pressure to adopt the active learning pedagogies that were being developed for Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and other courses in

SUTD's first-year core curriculum. Hence, the decision for the proposal to emphasize dialogue—the original form of active learning that has lost none of its effectiveness over time. No gadget in the classroom can deepen understanding of human meanings as effectively as interlocution between a student and a knowledgeable teacher.

A crucial part of the curriculum development proposal was its plea for hiring the right sort of faculty to become those interlocutors. The success of the course depended on having instructors who could translate and interpret core texts from Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic traditions. As stated in the proposal:

> [The course] requires scholars who have assiduously compiled a wealth of cultural knowledge that enables them to reconstruct the mental world of images, symbols and meanings in a [core text], and to interpret its content.

The ability to facilitate students' interpretations of textual artifacts drawn from distant times and alien places should not be taken for granted. Not every Ph.D. is trained to do this, nor has an aptitude for it.

The administration showed its appreciation of this point by approving a round of job searches for faculty with relevant training and experience to teach "World Civilizations and Texts." In the following months, SUTD was fortunate to attract accomplished new faculty with complementary areas of expertise. These included a scholar of South Asian classical languages whose research interests included the transmission of Buddhist texts from Ceylon to mainland Southeast Asia; a classicist in Greek and Latin literature and philosophy, whose research was expanding to include Persian

Neo-Platonism; a newly minted Ph.D. in comparative literature and critical theory, whose pursuit of doctoral studies followed upon his success as a journalist covering Islamist movements; and a student of Ming literature, including Neo-Confucian philosophy and lyrical works of fiction. These new faculty went a long way toward fulfilling the teaching needs for a humanities-based core texts course with global content.

Having assembled a multicultural, multilingual, and multidisciplinary team with shared interests in philology, literature, and history, I had hoped, perhaps a little too idealistically, that we might form a college of fellows in pursuit of shared knowledge. As this hope was expressed in the proposal:

> The instructors will meet weekly to share their expertise, providing each other with greater cultural context for the next assigned reading and conducting a dialogue about it. They will thus hone their classroom pedagogy by practicing it with each other.

In reality, everyone's time has been constrained by various demands, making it difficult for the team to run its own formal seminar each week. Nevertheless, the collegiality among us leads to fruitful discussions when we gather informally, even if our High Table has a red plastic top and sits under a whizzing fan at a nearby *kopitiam*.

A Syllabus

Syllabus design has been the most challenging and contentious of all tasks related to "World Civilizations and Texts." Indeed, the problems with our syllabus have yet to be fully resolved. This should not, however,

discourage anyone at other institutions from starting a new multicultural core texts course. Any group of persons drawn from different humanities disciplines and area studies who collaborate for this purpose will inevitably clash over many things, but that does not preclude the possibility that they might produce a more coherent set of assigned readings. To help prepare the path for others, I recount the bumps and curves of the course run at SUTD.

Ancient and Classical

Having secured resources for the long-term development of the core texts course, the next step was to come up with a syllabus design. Conceived as a two-term sequence, "World Civilizations and Texts I" and "World Civilizations and Texts II" would be organized chronologically: ancient and classical texts in the first term, modern texts in the second term. A single term at SUTD has 14 weeks, but the number of weeks that can be devoted to reading and discussing core texts shrinks when the following allowances are made: introduction (Week 1); mid-term break (Week 7); final exams (Week 14); and "2D," a signature component of the SUTD undergraduate education, in which for one dedicated week, first-year courses stop coursework and instead simultaneously work on a design challenge problem (Week 9). This leaves only ten weeks to cover a set of core texts drawn from Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic cultures and to engage students in critical thinking about them through dialogue and other exercises. Cramming both broad coverage and particular skills into one short term would become a drawback to the syllabus.

Choosing texts for the first term seemed as if it would be relatively easy. For each of the four cultures we would simply select among their

greatest books of wisdom literature (i.e., texts often reverenced as scripture) and their greatest works of literary imagination (i.e., epic poems or prose narratives). This mix of literary genres seemed pedagogically sound. It also seemed feasible. Such works from Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic cultures are readily available in English translations. Adhering to a principle of selecting one core text of wisdom literature and another text of literary imagination from each of the four cultures, the syllabus quickly started to fill with titles: *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Ramayana*; the *Analects* and *Journey to the West*; *Genesis* and *The Odyssey*; the *Qur'an* and *The Arabian Nights*. These eight core texts were assigned for eight of the ten weeks. So far, so good.

But the principle behind this selection presented problems in practice. The foundations of European culture are both classical and Christian, which complicated our selection. We decided to represent both classical and Christian traditions, each by a piece of wisdom literature and one of literary imagination. Thus, Homer's *The Odyssey* was paired with Plato's *The Republic*. We kept *Genesis*, as part of the *Torah*, but added *Letter to the Romans*, which pivots on a Christian interpretation of the *Torah*. We also added *The Divine Comedy*, which synthesizes Europe's classical legacy with its medieval Christianity. Chinese culture, understood as composite of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, also complicated our principle of selection. Our choice of wisdom literature now included *Chuang Tzu* and *The First Sermon of the Buddha*, the latter having a geographic locus of origin in India, but a more enduring influence in China. *Journey to the West*, which we had already chosen as a work of literary imagination, syncretizes the three composite traditions of China. Our reading list thus swelled with

five additional core texts, but there were only two weeks on the syllabus for which no readings had yet been assigned: one of these weeks would go to *The Republic* and the other to *The Divine Comedy*. To squeeze in the three other texts we doubled the readings for three other weeks: *Letter to the Romans* would be paired with *Genesis*, *Chuang Tzu* with *Analects*, and *The First Sermon of the Buddha* with *Journey to the West*.

This adjustment in our selection of texts resulted in a cramped syllabus that looked like this:

Week 1	Introduction
Week 2	*The Odyssey*
Week 3	*The Republic*
Week 4	*Analects* and *Chuang Tzu*
Week 5	*Journey to the West* and *The First Sermon of the Buddha*
Week 6	*The Bhagavad Gita*
Week 7	Mid-term Break
Week 8	*Ramayana*
Week 9	2D Week
Week 10	*Genesis* and *Letter to the Romans*
Week 11	*Divine Comedy*
Week 12	*The Qur'an*
Week 13	*Arabian Nights*
Week 14	Exam Week

Immediately, the question arose: how much reading could we expect students to complete each week? Seeking to uphold the academic standards

of SUTD's collaborative partner, we checked the syllabus of a comparable introductory humanities course taught at MIT. For many lengthy texts that course also allotted one week, and in most instances assigned only partial readings rather than the entire text. We followed MIT's example in this case, but with greater leniency. About 20 percent of the undergraduates at SUTD would be from other countries in Asia. Many of them, unlike Singaporeans, would not have received twelve years of primary and secondary schooling with English as the language of instruction. I was concerned more about the pace required for these students to do the reading properly than about their ability to do it properly at any pace. We halved the amount of reading that introductory humanities courses at MIT assign to undergraduates, setting the target for SUTD students at 100 pages per week. Our syllabus may have been packed with titles, but it skimped on the total amount of reading.

Despite the attention lavished on the design of this syllabus, it glared with shortcomings and inconsistencies. First, assigning European works for six of ten weeks in a course that is supposed to be global in content skewed the syllabus toward a Western bias, even though the cradle of human civilization lies in the East. Second, assigning certain versions of a work raised the question of whether the text being assigned really counts as a core text. For example, *The Ramayana*, consisting of 24,000 verses, is too lengthy to be assigned in its entirety. Wanting to familiarize students with the narrative of *The Ramayana*, an integral part of folklore virtually everywhere in Southeast Asia (except Singapore), we chose to assign R. K. Narayan's re-telling of *The Ramayana*, published by Penguin with the subtitle, "*A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*." Assigning prose chapters from this text allowed students to grasp the basic narrative,

but also deprived them of experiencing the journey of Rama in its classic verse form. A similar problem was encountered by assigning the central chapters from Richard Lattimore's prose version of *The Odyssey*. And then there was the problem of chronology. How late into history can the "ancient and classical" period be stretched? Far enough, presumably, to include *The Divine Comedy*, written in the 14th century, when the universe was still described in Ptolemaic terms and the Christian culture of Europe subsumed the pagan culture of Greece and Rome. But we were not certain whether this period could be stretched far enough to include *Journey to the West*, composed at the end of the 16th century. The Chinese literary tradition challenged our criterion for selecting core texts. The earliest Chinese works of literary imagination that qualify as epic seem to be its four great classic novels, of which *Journey to West* is one. But even the oldest of these, *Water Margin*, was not written until the late 14th century, ages after *The Odyssey*, the *Ramayana*, and even *The Arabian Nights* had appeared in other parts of the world.

In the end, this experience of syllabus design showed that no reading list composed of ancient and classical texts and aimed at global content will ever please everyone. This conclusion holds even more strongly in the case of designing a syllabus of modern texts aimed at global content.

Modern

For the second term syllabus, we again chose Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic cultures to stand in for "World Civilizations," but we had to adjust our categories for selecting texts. Anything modern is almost certainly too recent to have gained status as "wisdom literature."

Comprehensive conceptions of the universe and humanity's place within it now fall under more discrete categories like philosophy, ideology, the novel, and even the essay. Thus compelled to adjust the selection criteria, we decided to choose from each of the four cultures at least one modern text that might be categorized as theoretical and at least one other that might be categorized as narrative. These two adjusted criteria seemed straightforward, but they led to a syllabus with unintended results.

Before selection of texts began, we first had to define "modern" and decide when and where this break with the past occurred. Our definition had to be sustainable across Indian, Chinese, European, and Islamic cultures, and be extendable to the rest of the world. There are, of course, multiple forms of modernity, each determined differently, from culture to culture, but making all those determinations in a way that stands up to rigorous examination lies beyond the scope of our course, and even outside the academic competency of our small faculty. Nonetheless, we ventured to say that the modern era begins with the release of an uncontainable new dynamism that transforms, obscures, or eradicates traditional modes of thinking and acting. No Ph.D. is needed to see that between the 17th and 20th centuries European culture and its offshoots manifested such dynamism with a degree of global influence unmatched by any other culture. No single event in Europe was the catalyst for everything modern in the world, but the periodization of our syllabus compelled us to specify something that marks the onset of modernity. This might have been anything from the Copernican Revolution to the French Revolution. Having conceived "World Civilizations and Texts" as a humanities-based core texts course concerned with critical thinking, we decided upon the Cogito Argument posited by

Descartes in the 17th century. This event, clearly and distinctly, inspired an intellectual revolution of tremendous consequence. From this point on, authority and tradition no longer went unchallenged in the determination of knowledge. Intellectual legitimacy would increasingly be claimed by the rational mind of the individual. Here is the basis for key aspects of many, if not most, modernities—individual liberty, secular rationalism, democracy, gender equality, and the ascendancy of markets as shapers of society. The first text we selected for our syllabus was *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

It was not necessary that every text on the syllabus be characterized by this "epistemic turn" that we had chosen to denote modernity. Indeed, the rest of the syllabus was filled with texts that had little or nothing to do with epistemology. Two exceptions were *Othello* and *Frankenstein*, both of which happen to raise the question of how we know what we know. But our primary reason for including these two texts was our concession to a sliver of advice from MIT humanities professors (which was their one and only direct intervention in the design of our syllabus): the modern sequence of "World Civilizations and Texts" should include a play by Shakespeare and at least one work by a woman author. *Othello* and *Frankenstein* fit the bill. The drama of "the Moor of Venice" captures modern tensions about race, gender, and multicultural encounters that have roused the world in recent centuries. As for the novel of "the Modern Prometheus," we thought it might serve as a cautionary tale to enthusiastic inventors of the future who enroll at SUTD in the spirit of the university's marketing slogan, "A Better World by Design." The desire of SUTD students to master technology is not just altruistic, but probably also self-interested. Certainly, their parents,

who foot the bills for tuition, see the SUTD degree as a ticket for securing a niche in a competitive world dominated by global capitalism. So we rounded out the European core texts for the second term with both a moral justification and a moral repudiation of that system: *Wealth of Nations* and *Communist Manifesto*: Our syllabus so far had three works that fit the theoretical criterion and two that fit the narrative one.

It was much more challenging to select modern works of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic origins. Surprisingly little literature produced by these three cultures between 1600 and 1900 is easily available in English translation. We did not want students to think that these cultures were merely tardy latecomers to modernity, but it would be hard to avoid giving this impression if we could not find any supporting texts by Indian, Chinese, or Muslim authors that date from the three centuries prior to 1900. But nearly every modern Indian, Chinese, or Muslim text of major cultural significance that has been translated into English is the work of a 20th-century writer. As long as there exists a dearth of translation for non-Western literature for the period 1600–1900, it will be difficult to design a core texts course that is both modern and global in perspective.

Searching for modern Chinese narratives that are available in English translation, we encountered a conspicuous void between the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when rapid growth of an urban merchant class coincided with the appearance of the four great classic novels of China, and the Republican era (1912–1949), when a cacophony of new ideas and literary forms sprang from Chinese youth. For the entire Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which spans most of the period we had defined as modern, we came up with only one translated narrative that qualifies as a core text, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Among the many translated narratives composed after the collapse of the imperial system in the early 1900s, we turned to the short stories of Lu Xun, widely regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature, and chose "Diary of a Madman." Seeking gender balance, we added two short stories by women authors, *Miss Sophia's Diary* by Ding Ling and *No Name Woman* by Maxine Hong Kingston. The latter was born in the United States and writes in English, but we included her Chinese-American narrative because it captures tensions about race, gender, and multicultural encounters, as mentioned in our selection of *Othello*.

There seem to be even fewer obvious choices for modern narratives produced by Indian and Islamic cultures. As in the Chinese case, we found a paucity of English translations for modern works composed prior to the 20th century. Our choice of a modern narrative from Indian culture quickly boiled down to a novel by Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1913). *Broken Nest* was selected primarily for its brevity, secondarily for its gender focus. Seeking a modern narrative from Islamic culture, we considered the works of the only two Muslim writers who have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Naguib Mahfouz (1988) and Orhan Pamuk (2006). We also considered Salman Rushdie, both as an Indian and as a Muslim writer. But works of these three writers perhaps need to withstand the test of time before they are indisputably deemed core texts. Furthermore, most novels by Mahfouz, Pamuk, and Rushdie simply have too many pages for our students to read them in a single week. Brevity again dictated our choice. We selected *Season of Migration to the North* by Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih. Translated into a score of languages in the half-century since it was written in Arabic,

it also has a clear inter-textual connection with *Othello*, which was already on our syllabus.

Selecting modern theoretical works by non-Western writers, we again found that few works composed between 1600 and 1900 are available in English translation. When I queried some humanities scholars of modern China, India, and the Islamic world who are based at American universities (but not all of whom are American), they concurred that such a dearth exists. Moreover, they similarly opined that important theoretical works emanating from these three cultures during the modern period tend to be more ideological than philosophical. So, I compiled a short list of enormously influential ideologues. In the case of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi; hence our selection of *Hindu Swaraj* (1909). In the case of China, Mao Zedong; hence our selection of *Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature* (1942). And in the case of the Islamic world, Sayyid Qutb; hence our selection of *Milestones* (1964), a foundational text for some of the major Islamist movements of the past half-century. Although we had reservations about their lack of literary merit, these texts have held unquestionable influence within their cultural spheres. Moreover, the three texts by Gandhi, Mao, and Qutb had the virtue of being short enough to be read in their entirety in one week. They made the cut.

Our second term syllabus ended up looking like this:

Week 1 *Othello* (1603)

Week 2 *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)

Week 3 *Wealth of Nations* (1776) / *Communist Manifesto* (1848)

Week 4 *Frankenstein* (1818)

Week 5 *Dream of the Red Chamber* (mid-1700s)

Week 6	*Diary of a Madman* (1918)/ *Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature* (1942)
Week 7	Mid-term Break
Week 8	*Miss Sophia's Diary* (1927)/ *No Name Woman* (1976)
Week 9	*Hindu Swaraj* (1909)
Week 10	2D Week
Week 11	*Broken Nest* (1901)
Week 12	*Milestones* (1964)
Week 13	*Season of Migration to the North* (1966)
Week 14	Final Exams

This was an improvement over the first term. It gave greater representation to non-Western cultures, which now accounted for nine of the fourteen works on the reading list. It also represented women writers, a group entirely missing from the ancient and classical syllabus. And all these texts, except for *Wealth of Nations* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, were short enough to be assigned reading in their entirety.

The improvements on this syllabus were, however, offset by imbalances that were unintentional, even irresolvable. It would be difficult to counter the impression that Asia was a slow responder to modernity if we could not find more than one non-Western work composed between 1600 and 1900 that is easily available in English translation (i.e., *Dream of the Red Chamber*). Consequently, all but one of the works of Indian, Chinese and Muslim origin on the syllabus date from the 20th century. The syllabus was lopsided with modern European works from the 17th, 18th, and 19th

centuries. Contrary to our intentions, this carefully constructed syllabus suggested that modernity is a Western phenomenon to which the rest of the world reacted slowly, and in important cases (i.e., Gandhi, Mao, Qutb) reacted negatively.

As for the mechanics of the course, each week there would be a one-hour lecture and a two-hour recitation conducted in small groups not exceeding 17 students. The administration gave "World Civilizations and Texts" a 3-0-9 designation, meaning each week students must have three hours of in-class contact with faculty, zero hours of lab, and nine hours of preparation outside class. Final grades would be assessed on the basis of participation in recitation, two five-page papers, and a final exam. The first would be most heavily weighted, given that dialogue about the core texts in recitation was intended to provide students with their most valuable learning experiences in this course.

Our syllabus was now ready to be tested.

An Experiment

The core texts course at SUTD from the start has been an experiment. Even before distributing the first term syllabus on the first day of classes, we knew that it had flaws. Some were due to our own shortcomings. For example, we emphasized coverage of all four cultures, yet we also allotted a disproportionate number of weeks to European texts. Others were due to shortcomings of a start-up university still a few months away from opening its doors. At that early point we had not yet assembled a faculty that included

at least one literary minded scholar for each of the cultures represented on our syllabus. Teaching certain of these core texts for the first time would be a case of the blind leading the blind. Trial and error was our only way to go.

If, on the other hand, this global core texts course was to be run as an experiment, then what better laboratory could be hoped for than Singapore? By all appearances, Singaporeans ought to be extraordinarily cosmopolitan. "Multiculturalism" is a mantra in Singapore, appearing in statement after statement after statement. Singaporeans entering university have already undergone twelve years of education in English as a so-called "first language," and they have been required to study to the point of proficiency, it is claimed, either Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil (or, in some cases, another South Asian language) as so-called "mother tongue." If the world is now entering the Asian Century in which dynamism shifts from West to East, then no place seems better positioned than Singapore to become its hub. A major motivation for my accepting the job at SUTD was a desire to take part in educating a generation of technological innovators who are expected to become citizens of the world in this new century. I envisioned SUTD as the ideal place for designing and implementing a multicultural core texts course.

Moving from the design of the syllabus to its implementation in lectures, recitations, and graded assignments, I would learn more about Singapore and the Singaporean way of doing things. While globalization of society and specialization of academic degrees are phenomena found everywhere, in Singapore they combine with local factors to create a particular classroom environment. Given the strong relationship that usually holds between language and culture, I had imagined that

Singaporean students, supposedly proficient in their so-called "mother tongues," would bring valuable insights into the reading of texts drawn from the cultures that are their own heritage. I further thought that twelve years of primary and secondary education conducted in English would have prepared them to read, think, and talk in meaningful ways about texts written in or translated into that common language. Our syllabus was thus designed in anticipation of multicultural Singaporean students who would share a high degree of fluency in English. This proved a miscalculation on our part. In reality, Singaporean students at SUTD are more multiracial than multicultural. Their racial identity seems much stronger than their affiliation to any culture historically associated with that identity. This is due in part to their lack of fluency in a language that might provide full access to such a culture. Many are barely able to communicate with their own grandparents. If they are ignorant of the language and culture of their own grandparents, they are all the more ignorant of the mother tongues and cultural legacies of other Singaporeans whose racial identity differs from their own. Many are trapped in a language limbo from which it is hard to move beyond a contemporary culture of work and consumption. Our syllabus would need rethinking and revising.

Lectures

As originally conceived, "World Civilizations and Texts" was not meant to include lectures. Students would be better served by engaging them more actively in dialogue about the texts. But teaching the course entirely in recitation sections capped at 17 students would have stretched our faculty to a breaking point. When SUTD's doors opened for the first

time in May 2012, the entire first-year class of 340 students would be registered for "World Civilizations and Texts I." In order for the course to fulfill three hours of faculty contact per week, we could have scheduled either small group recitations of 90 minutes twice a week, or a 60-minute lecture at the start of each week followed by a 120-minute recitation later in the week. We opted for the latter. Every original member of the small HASS faculty had been conscripted to teach "World Civilizations and Texts I," including social scientists whose graduate training was far afield from the humanities disciplines best suited for teaching a core texts course. Even the most suitably trained among us would be prone to conduct a dialogue with flagging enthusiasm and worn-sounding ideas, if forced to repeat that dialogue too many times in one week.

Seeking first and foremost to ensure high quality instruction, we also needed to prevent faculty burnout. The 60-minute lectures on Mondays, delivered to all 340 students by individual members of the HASS faculty on a rotating basis, helped achieve both objectives. Lectures not only provided an antidote for exhaustion from repetitive teaching, but also provided a block of time each week for introducing historical and cultural contexts for the assigned readings. Despite these advantages, lectures during the first year strained our faculty in other ways. Our lectures had to cover certain texts and topics for which HASS did not yet have instructors with relevant training or experience. Some lectures were written and delivered by faculty forced to think and perform too far outside of their own disciplines. Content suffered.

Three years later, we have added new faculty, as mentioned above, who are better prepared for teaching this humanities-based core texts course.

Original members of the faculty who hold degrees in a social science or another discipline have meanwhile been transitioned to teach courses within their own fields. With a reconstituted team of instructors, "World Civilizations and Texts" has been able to deliver lectures more consistent in format and quality. Our lectures introduce the history of a text, provide close readings of some key passages, and suggest different interpretations.

Recitation

Recitation, which allows the sort of intensive and continuous interaction between faculty and students needed to teach critical reading, writing, and thinking skills, has put to the test everything involved in the syllabus design. The team of instructors has debated *ad nauseum* the suitability of certain core texts, written assignments, and pedagogical methods for developing critical thinking skills. For my own part, I have also given much consideration to exogenous factors that affect the acquisition of these skills by SUTD students. In the spirit of SUTD, I hope to contribute toward a better world, or at least toward the betterment of students who seek "A Better World by Design." Each step in that direction springs from observations made in recitation.

Before the first term began I was already aware of problems with the syllabus. After the term began I grew increasingly aware of other problems concerned less with the syllabus *per se*, and more with the students' ability to read even the simplified and truncated readings on the syllabus. Students who arrived in recitation each week having completed the assigned reading were an exception. Students, who were able to understand fully what they had read, even when close readings of key passages were conducted in

recitation, were perhaps just as much an exception. This was often the case not only for foreign students, but also for Singaporeans, whose twelve years of schooling in English as the primary language of instruction should have bestowed them with an advantage. All students were capable of reciting long strings of words that appeared on a printed page, but few could adequately interpret their aggregate meaning, or even define all the vocabulary. Students able to recite the text, without being able to explicate it, would nonetheless claim to have read it. But that is like swallowing food without chewing it, let alone digesting it. The nutritional value is lost. Their passive mode of reading was largely disconnected from the activity of thinking. The amount of time students set aside to prepare for recitation each week seemed nowhere near the nine hours stipulated by the course's "3-0-9" designation. There were, of course, exceptional students. I readily acknowledge and praise those students who arrived at SUTD not only with the quantitative skills needed to compute data, but also with the verbal skills needed to interpret texts. These students were as good as any undergraduates in any humanities course taught at MIT or elsewhere. Aside from these exceptional students, instructors generally faced the same two problems: how to get students to do the assigned reading properly before recitation, and how to get them to reflect upon it well enough to develop an interpretation that they could defend in speech and in writing.

Resolving these two problems was all the more important in light of the particular texts we were introducing. Most SUTD undergraduates have been tracked for math and science from an early age with little or no training in humanist disciplines. This void may be attributed, at least in part, to the elevation of what many educated Singaporeans term "useful" knowledge

and skills; i.e., what is directly applicable to performing a task or landing a job. Consequently, some students seemed by default to read everything as if it were a textbook or an instruction manual. Other students in the first term tended to read works of wisdom literature either literally or canonically. In the second term, they showed a similar attitude to the ideological works by Gandhi, Mao, and Qutb. So it did not help that our syllabus had described this global core texts course as "*a cross-cultural study of great ideas and fundamental beliefs*." Some students assumed that these texts were being assigned for didactic purposes, when the actual purpose was to provoke them into questioning their contents and developing their own well-argued and evidence-supported interpretations. The flame of free inquiry barely flickered.

Moreover, many students tended to read these texts synecdochically, as representative of the entire civilization out of which the work emerged. They ended up essentializing cultures in distorted ways. Singaporean students of Chinese ethnicity did this even in the case of Chinese culture after having read Confucius' *Analects*. In de-Sinicized Singapore the *Analects* is a foreign text. Evidently, many Singaporean students know little about even the culture historically tied to the race marked on their own ID cards. Misconstrual is hard to avoid among readers with little predisposition to think about culture. If SUTD students are to become "*technically grounded leaders and innovators to serve societal needs,*" they will need to know many things that are not directly applicable to performing a task or landing a job.

Becoming aware of the misconstrued ways that students read core texts, our instructors have retreated from cultural content (without surrendering

it entirely) while shifting more toward critical skills. Experience has taught us that the course cannot cover both equally well. The course can, however, focus on critical skills to a degree that steers students away from simplistic interpretations and helps them avoid reductive thinking about anything as complex and protean as an entire culture.

Just as the close readings in recitation showed a strong need for improvement in critical reading skills, the submission of five-page papers showed an even stronger need for improvement in critical writing skills. Most students struggle to describe or explain in writing anything that is humanly complex or ambiguous. This is at least partly attributable to their general failure to look below the surface of a text. Hence, a shortcoming in critical thinking accompanies the weakness in writing skills. It is not unusual for SUTD's foreign students, who come from India, Malaysia, and elsewhere, to outperform local students in this skill area. It seems that regular study and practice of critical writing skills are often pushed aside in Singaporean secondary schools to allow greater concentration on math and science skills. As a consequence, we could not ask students who are unable to write a proper paragraph to write a five-page paper. We needed to come up with written assignments that are more concise, more focused, and more frequent. "World Civilizations and Texts" was not meant to be a remedial course, but most students enrolled in it are unable to develop a defensible interpretation of a core text without being instructed in some basic forms of literacy.

The excellence in mathematics and natural sciences that Singaporean students achieve prior to matriculation at SUTD contrasts notably with

their underdeveloped language skills. Curious about this situation, I visited a group of English teachers at a two-year junior college that sends a number of its graduates to SUTD. They nodded in affirmation as I shared my observations. They lamented the excessive pressure to prepare students for the "General Paper" portion of the Cambridge A level exams. This compels them to use class time for presenting magazine articles and newspaper editorials, rather than any meaningful literature. Students on the math and science track who clearly need remedial instruction in English often succeed anyway within the existing secondary school system. There is little motivation for them to master language skills (in English, as well as in mother tongue) to the same degree that they master skills in mathematics and the natural sciences. It is unfortunate that the Singaporean system overemphasizes quantitative skills at the expense of verbal skills. Those who supervise the system might heed the aphorism: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

In order to get our students to complete the assigned reading before recitation, the instructors developed in-class quizzes. During the first ten minutes of recitation students are given a sheet on which is printed a key passage from the assigned reading for that week. If students have diligently read the text, they should quickly recognize the passage as one that indicates, for example, a turning point, a climax, or a thesis. Ten minutes are sufficient for students to: (1) situate the passage within the text (e.g., Where does it appear? Who is the speaker?); (2) interpret its meaning within the immediate context where appears; and (3) explain its significance to the text as a whole. At the beginning of the term, when even

the most diligent students struggled to read humanist texts, many students failed the quizzes. But a failing grade can motivate in positive ways. Nearly all students decided that it was in their interest to complete the assigned reading before recitation. Consequently, they showed notable improvement on their quiz scores.

I try to motivate students by playing to their existing strengths. One way is to encourage them to think about empirical methods they have mastered in the natural sciences. When I rhetorically ask whether they observe biological or chemical phenomena in the same manner as they view images in a kaleidoscope (i.e., something at which they might momentarily take a look, and then cast aside) they laugh. Nevertheless, the kaleidoscope example comes close to the way they read words formed by ink on the white page of a core text. When it comes to observing natural phenomena, however, SUTD students instinctively gather data, search for patterns, and develop explanations. Works of literature, I suggest, are intricate compositions analogous to chemical bonds and living organisms. To interpret a piece of writing it too must be analyzed into parts and patterns. There are certainly other, and better, ways of reading literary texts, but this particular way helps first-year students at SUTD gain confidence to tackle a piece of writing that might otherwise intimidate them. I guide students in this exercise every week until they are able on their own to identify parts and discover patterns. Most are competent by mid-term.

This method helps students connect form with content. When we switch focus to the latter and seek to interpret that content for meaning, SUTD students face a different set of challenges. This may be attributed in part

to their misplaced belief that every question has only one correct answer, a prejudice perhaps developed from habitually solving problem sets in math and science courses. Singaporean students in particular suffer an obvious dread of giving a wrong answer in the presence of their peers. Convincing them that a work can be interpreted in different ways, each valid as long as it is well reasoned and backed by textual evidence, is perhaps the most valuable outcome of this entire method. This is not easy to do.

Many students tend to respond to texts with feelings or beliefs that they are unable to ground in the text. Some are frustrated by my repeated insistence that they direct their opinion back to the text and indicate a passage that can ground it. This is especially true for some core texts drawn from a culture that a student thinks is "his" or "hers." A persistent minority seems incapable of performing a critical reading of a scriptural text such as the Bible. I suspect that some such students may adhere to one of the Pentecostal forms of Protestant Christianity that have grown rapidly in Singapore. This might help explain some of the strongly held attitudes against any critical reading of the Bible. I did not anticipate that some students would hold greater prejudice toward a text they consider their own than one drawn from a culture of the "other." Insofar as it is unlikely that readings widely regarded as scriptural will be removed from a syllabus of ancient and classical core texts, the challenge of persuading students to apply critical methods to their reading of the Bible, the Qur'an, and other scriptural texts will persist. Regardless of which core text we are reading in class, I prioritize the importance of questions over answers. As I repeatedly remind students: not every human problem can be solved, but

this does not diminish the problem. The fulfillment of one's human potential is fundamentally dependent on being able to identify human problems and ask meaningful questions.

A Revision

After three years of experimenting with "World Civilizations and Texts I" and "World Civilizations and Texts II," the faculty is embarking on a radical revision of the course. Most apparent is the change of title to "World Texts and Interpretations." The new title reflects its shift away from cultural content and toward critical thinking skills. Also apparent is the dropping of its roman numerals. The two-term sequence has been reduced to one-term for institutional reasons, explained here. As part of a start-up university with limited resources, the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, or HASS, program deployed its recently increased humanities faculty full-time to teach the core texts course to all first-year students. The social sciences faculty were transitioned to develop and teach elective courses to upper class students. An unintended dichotomy ensued within HASS: the core course was humanities-based, but nearly all electives were in social sciences. By reducing the core texts course to one term we were able to open a space in the first-year curriculum for a new mandatory course in social sciences. This has also freed the humanities faculty to develop and teach elective courses in the humanities. The redeployment of faculty resources will be optimized by increasing the size of recitation sections to 20 students, which HASS holds as the upper limit. Beyond this number it is hardly possible to hold a meaningful discussion in which all can

participate. The improved balance between humanities and social sciences within HASS (the "A" for arts has yet to be introduced) should benefit undergraduate education of SUTD.

In reducing the core texts course to a single term, the faculty contended over which works to include on the revised syllabus. Most insisted on reducing the number of titles for assigned required reading. Many were dissatisfied with having to teach texts from different cultures for which they lack formal training. Some, resisting the presence on the syllabus of wisdom literature that holds canonical status among various world religions, proposed interesting alternative texts from those same religious traditions. When the dust had settled, however, everyone had finally come to recognize the value of retaining a multicultural selection of texts, and retaining even some of the most canonical titles from the original syllabus. Our reasons for this are reflected in the new course description:

> Before the development of the *humanities*, there existed *textual expressions* of human experience. Such texts have endured for centuries and spread far beyond their locus of origin. As a result of their enduring influence, these texts have invited and continue to invite a diverse array of interpretations from many different perspectives.

By including core texts such as *Genesis*, *Qur'an*, *Analects*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, the revision introduces students to works that, having served for centuries as spiritual, moral, and intellectual reference points, also exist as sources for the inter-textual character of much literature. The content and skills included in SUTD's revised core texts course are thus expected to

serve as prerequisites for a number of upper-level elective courses in the humanities.

The assigned readings for the revised course appear on the syllabus as follows:

Week 1	Introduction
Week 2	*Symposium* (entire)
Week 3	Secondary text paired to *Symposium*
Week 4	*Genesis* (entire) and *Qur'an* (selected readings)
Week 5	Secondary text paired to *Genesis* and/or *Qur'an*
Week 6	*Analects* (entire)
Week 7	Mid-term Break
Week 8	Secondary text paired to *Analects*
Week 9	*Bhagavad Gita* (entire)
Week 10	2D Week
Week 11	Secondary text paired to *Bhagavad Gita*
Week 12	*Arabian Nights* (selected readings)
Week 13	Secondary text paired to Arabian Nights
Week 14	Final Exams

Thus, each primary text is paired with a secondary text to create a two-week module. In the second week of each module students will be exposed to a thematically related text that acts as a lens through which they can explore the meaning of the core text in new ways. This dialogic process enriches students' reading experience and provides a model for constructing an argument about the core text. With each instructor having discretion to choose the secondary text for his or her recitation sections, the revised core

text course will no longer have a completely uniform syllabus. Instead, a great deal of variation is built around a uniform set of core texts and similar written assignments. This variability is the inevitable result of encouraging faculty to take a greater stake in the course by allowing them, within certain parameters, to tailor the course to their own strengths and interests. Taking into account the relative popularity of modern texts that were assigned reading in the second term of the original course, but which have been dropped from the uniform portion of the revised course, I have decided to pair each primary core text with a relevant modern work in the second week of each module. For example, in the first iteration of the revised course I am pairing *Symposium* with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*; *Genesis* with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; and *Analects* with Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*. Other instructors are pairing the primary core texts with quite different secondary works.

We will continue to combine lecture with recitation, although the number of lectures is halved because there is only one lecture for each two-week module. On alternate Mondays when there is no scheduled lecture, instructors will meet with their recitation sections for independently organized activities. I plan to use this additional time to work with students on their critical writing skills. Line-by-line, even word-by-word, we will critique student responses to in-class quizzes, which are retained in the revised course. Written assignments for the revised course include three short papers that require students to focus on the dialogic dimension of a primary text, which is read by all first-year students, and a secondary text, which is chosen at the discretion of an instructor. The importance of writing skills for effective communication cannot be overstated. The

university administration, which has come to appreciate this importance for technology-based students, is now establishing a writing program within SUTD. It must become the responsibility of all faculties across the university, and not just the humanities faculty, to support students in achieving better writing skills. SUTD recognizes that engineers must develop their uniquely human capacity for language if they are to become effective "*innovators to serve societal needs.*"

The rump lecture component of the course may not have a long life. As soon as SUTD hires an ample humanities faculty, we should drop lectures altogether and embrace the original idea of conducting the course entirely in recitation. These small sections are better suited than lectures for teaching critical reading, writing, and thinking skills.

The revised core texts course at SUTD, at least as much as its predecessor, is being run as an experiment. I believe it stands up to measure as a *core texts course*, although the variability in its content, introduced to encourage greater innovation and responsibility among faculty, renders it less a *core course* that delivers uniform content. I anticipate continued haggling over the degree to which SUTD's core texts course should also be a core course. On the other hand, I expect continued consensus about the emphasis on critical reading, writing, and thinking skills. Launching this revision at SUTD, we are certain to learn even more about what works and does not work in a core texts course with global content taught in Singapore.

A Conclusion

The experience of designing and implementing a new core texts course with global content in Singapore has been an education in itself.

Some of the challenges of the past three years would have been encountered anywhere in the English-speaking world. Job-driven curricula in academia and instantaneous global communication through digital networks will draw students everywhere away from the protracted effort needed to acquire strong language skills. Consequently, virtually all core texts courses have to accommodate a systemic under-preparedness of students. The lack of English translations of pre-1900 modern literature from outside the West will everywhere distort syllabi that seek to represent culturally diverse forms of modernity. Consequently, virtually all syllabi have to accommodate a systemic shortage of core texts that are both global and modern.

Other challenges met in Singapore are more particular to the place. A core texts course with global content for all first-year students at SUTD can succeed only insofar as Singaporean schools, during the twelve years in which students are placed in their hands, motivate greater acquisition of language skills. Given that Singapore administers the world's top education system in math and science, as measured by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), the widespread underdevelopment of language skills among the world's best students at math and science seems to result from a lack of will. If Asia in this century is to become the most dynamic part of the world and Singapore hopes to be its hub, then young Singaporeans would be well-served to become truly multicultural and truly bilingual, rather than merely multiracial, minimally proficient in English, and unable to communicate effectively in their mother tongues. Virtually all Singaporean students entering SUTD are ready to apply differential and integral calculus to a variety of complex problems, but only a few can develop a coherent line of thought into a well-structured paragraph with correct grammar and spelling. It seems that Singaporeans

believe genius can be achieved without much serious reading and writing. I would wager instead that genius blossoms in societies more supportive of critical thinking and the requisite language skills.

The challenge of finding local faculty to teach a core texts course at university level also seems to be particular to Singapore. Given the strong focus on math and science in Singapore's schools, no more than a minority of students are likely to be well prepared for, or even much inclined toward, undergraduate majors in the humanities. Of these only a fraction are likely to pursue such study at the graduate level. The small number of Singaporeans who complete doctoral studies in humanities disciplines at top universities around the world will have worked long and hard to acquire excellent critical thinking skills, for which reason they may be reluctant to return to a place where their accomplishment is grossly undervalued. As long as the small number of Singaporeans who hold Ph.D.s in humanities disciplines from top universities abroad are reluctant to return, the hiring of humanities faculty at local universities ends up, by default, skewed toward Westerners. This is more than a shame. A core texts course with global content needs accomplished faculty who are multicultural and multilingual to carry it out—just as Singapore needs a well-educated multicultural and multilingual work force in order to be a vibrant global center of economic and cultural activity. If Singapore is to become such a place, then Singaporeans must cultivate all types of talent that make such vibrancy possible.

It is extraordinarily difficult to counteract global trends that inhibit young people from acquiring language skills and fully developing their capacity for critical thinking. But not every inhibiting trend is global

in scale. Some are regional and even local. Perhaps institutions and communities can marginally roll back trends that operate on this smaller scale. It is worth trying. One of the ironies of the core texts course at SUTD is its popularity among students with excellent preparation in math and science, but relatively little preparation for reading, writing, and thinking about meaningful works of cultural significance. This goes to show that human beings, even those placed firmly on the math and science track in Singapore, are meaning-seeking creatures. SUTD students are quick to perceive that man does not live by the computation of things alone, but by interpretation of the meaning of things.

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