First Two Singaporeans to Teach Marine Engineering at the Poly

I was a Colombo Plan scholar and hence bonded to serve the Singapore Government. Having indicated an interest in teaching, I was asked to choose between the University of Singapore and the Singapore Polytechnic (fondly referred to as the “Poly”). I decided on the Poly because I felt that a degree education like the one I just went through was too theoretical to be useful to our marine industry. My impression of sea farers then was that marine engineers are hands-on people who must know and be able to do or, to quote Mr. David Chin Soon Siong, “you move if the ship does not move”!

Thus on 15 November 1971, I began my career as a teacher at the Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering & Shipbuilding Division. By virtue of my Masters degree, I was given 2 increments above the bottom rung of the teaching scale and was appointed Lecturer (instead of Assistant Lecturer) with a starting salary of $950 per month. My father’s salary then was $4 a day as a labourer with which he raised 10 kids. Immediately I retired my father who was in his late 50s and not in good health. I told him to take it easy and enjoy life! I am happy that he did for a few years before succumbing to cancer (of the oesophagus) when he was 67. That’s one of the reasons why I decided to retire early and enjoy what I love doing while I am fit!

Mr. Tan Cheng Hui who studied Naval Architecture was my university batch mate and Colombo Plan Scholar. He also opted to join the Poly. We started work on the same day and were the first Singaporeans with university degrees to teach at the Division. All the other lecturers were expatriates and were qualified Chief Engineers and I can recall Messrs Pua, Upadhaya, R.K. Agrawal and N. Mistry. Mr. MK DasGupta was Head of Marine Engineering & Shipbuilding Division. I think he quickly found that this marine engineer who had never been an apprentice nor to sea was not very useful to him other than to teach pen and paper subjects. Thus by default, I was assigned to teach Heat Engines!

I knew something about Heat Engines for all undergraduate engineering students at the university including me had to take Thermodynamics. Unfortunately, we were taught by a Mr. Frost at the university whose style was to transfer all his lecture notes onto the blackboard and for sound effects, read out every word as he wrote. He could have given out handouts but in 1967 photocopiers were a luxury and handouts were not given as a standard. The 500 page textbook recommended to us was not directed at undergraduate students and of little help. Fortunately, we Singaporeans were trained to take examinations from Primary 3 and I learned to solve problems and passed the subject without understanding how steam could be wet or dry or superheated.

Fortunately for my marine engineering students at the Poly, I was not required to teach on Day One of my appointment on 15 November 1971. I was given at least a month to prepare. The Poly Library came to my rescue for while browsing through the shelves, I stumbled upon “Heat” written by somebody (I forgot who) in the 1940s. It explained in simple English what happens to water when heated in a closed container in a “blow by blow” account way and for the first time, I understood steam in whatever form it takes. Heat Engines became my favourite subject until I fell in love with teaching Instrumentation and Control.

I look forward to receiving accounts of mariners of their memories of their study at the Singapore Polytechnic, their teachers and batch mates.

Cheng Huang Leng
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Cheng Huang Leng went on to teach for the next 18 years. He held various positions from Lecturer to Head of Marine Engineering division to Deputy Principal. He then left to work in industry by joining Singapore Technologies to work in the areas of management development and quality development. At ST, he specialised in ISO9000 and became an internal consultant and certified assessor. After helping almost 90 companies inside and outside ST get their ISO9000 certificate, he retired in 2000 to pursue his personal interests – reading, travelling and golfing whenever his not looking after his grandchildren.