

## A New Mix – Learning In and From Workplaces in Singapore Today

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### Abstract

*Workplaces in Singapore today are often marked by a mix of diverse workers – some native, some new to the country and of different generations and gender, all striving to achieve personal career goals. This article lays bare the changing face of these workplaces, and analyses how workers view, adapt to and learn in them. Through the workplace narratives that form the core of the article, we also delve into how, as a society, Singapore can learn from such workplace scenarios. The two narratives are drawn from workplace landscapes with enough variance to allow for different aspects of impact to be examined. The creative fictionalisation of worker stories, gleaned from interviews of workers and observations within different industries, allows readers to immediately recognise and identify with the very real contexts. Narrative Inquiry then powerfully enables reflection on the impact of the disruptive new mix, analysis of the reactions to and hence, learning from the lessons evoked by the narratives.*

**Key Words:** Workplaces, learning, narrative inquiry, diversity, Singapore

### Introduction

Workers in the myriad of different workplaces in Singapore today are working amidst and alongside a diverse mix of colleagues, and this mix is on a scale and complexity not previously encountered. Mirroring the many societal changes in Singapore, this diversity has come about as the population ages, through an increase in immigration numbers and because of an open economy that has courted a large number of foreign workers from different countries to enter certain sectors. There has been impact on workplaces, workers and work, and this article aims to uncover some measure of this impact which the changes have had on the social community that is the workplace. Thus, how workers work, interact, adapt to, cope with and learn within each workplace will be brought out via two narratives re-presenting actual experiences of workplaces in Singapore. Further observations on the power patterns present in workplaces as a result of this new mix, how such patterns shape learning in workplaces and how we may endeavour as a nation to tackle some of these inhibitions to quality workplace learning will also be drawn out. The article will be an opportunity for workplaces in Singapore to feature as the rare focus of research. The close examination of these workplaces, expressed in the creative rendering of the worker / workplace narratives, will lay bare the ways in which diversity, variance and power assert themselves, presenting new situations which workers have to navigate without either map or guide. The analysis and recommendations on new learning strategies needed for all ranks of workers within a workplace will lend value to global workers, and to Singapore, as we look towards handling this potent new mix.

### *The New Mix in Singapore Today*

In the fifty years since Singapore's independence, Singapore's total population has grown to 5.54 million as of June 2015 (National Population and Talent Division (NPTD), 2015,3), and the figure includes 3.38 million Singapore citizens, 0.53 million permanent residents and 1.63 million non-residents (NPTD, 2015, 5). Whilst the ethnic mix 'has remained stable' (NPTD, 2015, 10) according to the traditional Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) classification, those categorised as 'Chinese' for example, may be native Chinese Singaporeans, or they could be new citizens from China. Hence, the numbers cloud the undercurrent of feeling that has grown palpable enough to register with the government, when Singaporeans speak of a 'divide' or of 'overcrowding', the remarks are aimed at such new citizens who may be ethnically similar but distinguishable as being different, from the way they behave. Add to this the non-resident workers, with their large representative numbers of Southeast Asian and South Asian citizens, in sectors ranging from construction to domestic work to service jobs, and we see a semblance of how potentially great a mix this could be.

Aside from varied races and ethnicities in the population and workforce, a larger group of females is also in today's workforce - 60.4% as at end 2015 (Ministry of Manpower, 2016, 3). Finally, the labour participation rate of older workers aged 55 – 64 has also increased from 56.3% in 2006 to 69.5% in 2015 (Ministry of Manpower, 2016, 3). This potent mix then, distributed unevenly across both large and small workplaces in Singapore, is a source of many uncaptured stories, as we try to navigate the new environment and the changing combination of people within Singapore and her workplaces. Workplaces are then recognised as a social construct for sites where work communities both work alongside and compete with each other, and are the contextual focus of the article. They present a rich backdrop for the examination of a new mix within these workplaces that renders them less recognisable than ever. Whilst workplaces and the worker mix in them have never been homogenous, there has never been a time when workplace worker differences have been so pronounced. The two narratives present a sample of the wide gulfs in individual understanding of how such new mixes should or could be navigated. Underneath the apparent reality of everyone touting workplace and organisational togetherness and bonding lie subtle and hidden undercurrents of power play and intense competition. This struggle is perhaps marked more distinctly by the diversity and combination of members that make up the new mixes we see today.

### ***Narrating the New Mixinour Workplaces Today***

The altered landscape we are examining cannot be simply codified for us to impose rules and guidelines on how we may manoeuvre around the differences, since each workplace would have a different mix presenting different issues to those in each unique situation. To get a grip on the issues at large, I used creative fictionalisation to lend me a way in, as it provides a means to re-present the landscape in order that I may situate these changes referred to, and be able to note any subtle or emotional reactions so we may learn how to handle the very human phenomenon of successfully working alongside people who are very different from us in distinct ways. I am thus exploiting how the social role of stories – how they are connected to the flow of power in the wider world – is an important facet of narrative theory. (Riessman, 2008, 8). The power of creative fictionalisation to imaginatively combine and re-construct the stories of various people and their different experiences can be taken to be an approach termed 'narrative ethnography' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, 241), which focuses on the everyday narrative activity that unfolds within circumstantially situated social interaction, with an acute awareness of the myriad layers of social context that condition narrative production. [...] We use the term narrative ethnography to signal the combination of epistemological, methodological, procedural and analytical sensibilities that must be brought to bear to understand narratives in social context. (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, 251). Through presenting these narratives of workplaces, I also hope to provoke reactions to a phenomenon which hovers unacknowledged in the background, whilst Singapore actively tackles ways to keep her economy progressing. However, workplaces and the people who form the foundation of that economy need to know that what they observe and feel about the situations in their workplaces are legitimate, acknowledged and recognised, and that there are ways to tackle the discomfort, if any, that anyone may be feeling. As Trahar puts it, a much proffered reason for using narrative inquiry is that it supports silenced voices to be heard and that it has an overtly political purpose – to challenge or trouble established ways of thinking. (Trahar, 2013, xiv). It is hoped that the two narratives offered here do the same.

### ***The Hospital***

She walked in just as visiting hours were coming to a close. This would signal the end of the day for most, but for Enrolled Nurse Zar, it simply meant the start of the night shift. Zar dropped her bag and container of food for a quick meal during her break later into her locker, and proceeded to get ready for the handover briefing which preceded the start of each work shift. As Registered Nurse Chua went through the details of each patient currently residing in ward 56, she was careful to look attentive and take notes, having learnt the hard way when she had first reported for duty that Nurse Chua had a harsh temper and sharp tongue, with no qualms about ticking off any of the team – nurses, trainees, assistants or attendants, if she felt any of them were distracted in any way and not paying sufficient attention to her. It was her way of making sure that they all knew nothing had gone wrong under her watch, and that if anything happened during their shift, well, it was because their team was just not as competent or adept as hers. Nurse Chua was already in her 50s and an obvious veteran, but Zar's shift leader was the younger Nurse Lim, who had joined the hospital at about the same time as she had two years ago.

Nurse Lim had been from another hospital, but they had undergone the hospital's compulsory initial training programme for newcomers together, although Zar had been fresh from her Nursing Diploma course at one of the Polytechnics then, and had kept to the other Enrolled Nurses, observing carefully that the different groups – the Registered Nurses, the Enrolled Nurses, the Healthcare Assistants and Attendants all wore different uniforms, and that they did not seem to mix outside of their group beyond the certain activities where they had been deliberately placed in different groups. The short training course had also been an experience on its own, being about the hospital's service culture and values, which had been a different way of looking at a topic they had covered very generally in school, and in Myanmar, not really touched on.

That feeling of difference between Nurse Lim and herself from two years ago had never completely gone away. Nurse Lim was not a bad boss, certainly nowhere as strict as Nurse Chua, who she had learnt from one of the assistants in that team, could be nasty throughout their shift if they did anything wrong. They did however say, that Nurse Chua would 'act nice' in front of the doctors or Nursing Manager, whom she reported to, and even the patients sometimes saw her firm, no-nonsense manner applied directly to them. However, patients here seemed to meekly accept her authoritative manner, whereas they tended to be a lot less respectful of the Healthcare Assistants and Attendants, since they were probably seen to be the ones who did the more menial tasks, such as bathing the patients and delivering their meals. This had taken Zar some time to get used to, as she knew that in a ward team, they relied a lot on the Healthcare Assistants and Attendants to bear the weight of the literally heavy lifting of patient care work, which freed them, the Enrolled Nurses, to do what they had to, like monitor the dispensing of medication, accompany the doctors on their rounds etc. In Myanmar, where she had started off before the opportunity to train and work here had been given, patients tended to be very ill once they got to hospital, but otherwise, perhaps because it was a familiar language and people, she was sure they were friendlier, as they would seek assurance that they were getting better, laugh at her little jokes and be appreciative of her efforts to make them feel more comfortable. Here, it seemed as if it was all a given, and that she should just be doing her job. Not all patients and their families were the same of course, but by and large, this was what she felt about the work and the hospital.

The ward was quietening down as it went past 11 pm. The patients had been given their bedtime drink, and most who could sleep had fallen asleep. She paid close attention to the newest patients – the first night was usually the worst, as the patients were still not familiar with the surroundings. Room 9's Mr Muthu was also still up, but she knew it was worry, as he was due in for surgery first thing in the morning. She popped into his room to check that he was comfortable. Her colleagues too, were going about their routines, and for now, the shift was progressing peacefully. Her colleagues were from Singapore, the Philippines or Myanmar like herself, and she had Xiang, who was from China, in her team as well. Like her, Xiang had struggled initially with English and had found the Nursing course difficult when they had just joined the Polytechnic, but once they had found their footing, they had had no problems with the clinical aspects of nursing, unlike the younger local girls who could sometimes be less detailed and less compliant of procedure, resulting in the need for the senior nurse trainers to 'drill' them in protocol. Xiang was lucky too, as many of the patients actually spoke in Mandarin to her, so that often, she could translate for the rest of them on the team!

It had been five years since she had left home -three years spent studying and interning, and two years in the hospital. She enjoyed working with her colleagues – they treated her well, and during their breaks, made sure they shared food and had a chat, but it was a small and select group that did that, not everyone. Her group tended to be from the nurses on her team, and there were days when the Myanmar staff would group quite naturally together for a good chat in their own language and to share the Myanmar food they had brought. On such days, the overwhelming familiarity would make her forget where she was. She knew she was lucky to have both experiences at once. At their level though, it was only the nurses, as they spoke to the doctors only when necessary. Most of the doctors were friendly, but they made sure never to be too familiar with the nurses or assistants. This was true in Myanmar as well, so it was probably just a natural segregation of occupations and the fact that the differences in their work did not allow for socialising. In the meantime, she was happy to be here and glad for the opportunity. The money meant so much to her family, and she knew she was living a life that many of her friends back in Myanmar could only dream of. Next year, her brother would join her in Singapore, as he had managed to gain a place in an engineering course at one of the Polytechnics here as well.

When both of them were able to work here in a few years, her parents would no longer have to worry about bringing up their two younger siblings. With this thought in mind, and with her sharp ears catching sounds of restlessness in Mr Muthu's room, Zar hurried off to do her job.

### ***The Local Enterprise***

It was F1 weekend in Singapore, and watching the high speed race cars go dizzily round the track on television, Colin thought to himself that it had been five years since he had last owned a car. Sure, cars were expensive and a luxury item in Singapore, but this was also a stark reminder that it had been five years since he had walked away from his previous job as a regional director of a trading firm. He had been 49 then, and the resulting fallout had been damaging as his boss whom he'd walked out on had bad-mouthed him to such an extent that nobody else within the industry had dared to hire him. He had had a big fight with the man; they had been very friendly before that, to the extent of being drinking buddies at one stage, but a serious difference in approach on one of their accounts had led to the fight, and the rest, as they said, was history. He had at first laughed it off when he had walked out, thinking that with all his years of experience and industry pull, the next job would be his for the choosing. That had certainly not happened, and here he was, five years later, stuck in a small office just holding down a run-of-mill job for the sake of it. Of course he had dabbled in small ventures here and there, but there had been too many obstacles and doors closed in his face, and over the years, he had lost his edge because he was not in the thick of things in industry anymore. He faithfully tracked the market indicators, but felt that unless he was in the daily cut and thrust of the action, it would not be much use just trying to theoretically keep up.

Colin was now in a small, local company with a young boss who was trying to make his mark in the business world. His boss was apparently from a well-to-do family with an established family business but had chosen to try to make it on his own. Colin thought it admirable and he would have liked to help the young guy, whom he genuinely believed had the business acumen but needed a bit of guidance on timing and savvy with the market. However, his boss was not open to his ideas and probably thought he was a mere office anybody, and not somebody who would have anything worthwhile to say about business development or the like. He had obviously not heard of Colin's past reputation in the trading world, both the good and the bad, and only saw him as an older worker who was in the Sales department. Colin shrugged it off and refused to react each time he saw his boss make a mistake – those who did not want help would have to learn to stew in their own juices, so to speak, and the mistakes were going to be costly, but no one could force advice on anyone else. He pondered the reasons for his current inability to influence his boss, or any of his younger colleagues for that matter. Was it really his age? He looked younger than his 54 years, and he certainly did not come across as a fuddy-duddy granddad. He had also displayed his deft hand at reading the market and going in for the kill, and had been congratulated by his supervisor for his keen eye in backing the right ventures.

The successes had earned him his commission of course, but he did not get the sense of camaraderie and respect he had been used to before. Of course, he had been boss then, and he was a mere salesman now. Still, he detected suspicion beneath everything, especially from the local Chinese salesmen. His Eurasian surname set him apart, as did his inability to speak Mandarin or fluent enough Hokkien beyond the few choice phrases or expletives that were carelessly tossed around during rowdy meetings. The two Caucasians were in the other departments – the lady in Marketing and a very young guy in Business Development. They drifted in and out of the office and did not mix much, although they did make it an effort to join in the occasional team drinks on Friday nights once a month. So he had to admit to himself that the high point of his career was over, all done and dusted, and that retirement was around the corner. He felt he was still too young for that, but he was worn down by the lack of success he had chalked up in the last five years. His son would soon graduate from University, and he could perhaps then better accept the very much reduced income he was now earning. He would really like to be able to own a car, and feel again the speed and control over the vehicle, the way he had once done. He turned his attention back to the television set and to the closing laps of the F1 race right here in Singapore.

### ***Uncovering Learning in Workplaces in Singapore***

These are, as van Maanen puts it, 'realist tales', and he notes that by far the most prominent, familiar, prevalent, popular, and recognised form of ethnographic writing is the realist account of a culture – be it a society, an occupation, a community, an ethnic enclave, an organization, or a small group with common interests. (vanMaanen, 2011, 45).

The two narratives display the reality of Singapore's workplaces and they derive from authentic sources – through narrative interviews with workers in a range of industries and observations of workplaces and what happens in them. I wanted to examine how learning – both conscious and unconscious, formal and informal, took place or had the potential to take place in these workplaces with this new mix experienced more closely in workplaces in Singapore today.

The narratives reveal the workplaces to be structured entities, with certain power patterns surfacing through them, both overtly and otherwise. The patterns run in both expected and unexpected ways, and do adhere in most instances to traditional markers such as hierarchy and knowledge bases, while also reflecting the less frequently observed markers of youth and certain ethnicities as power categories. Workplaces can thus be seen to be Landscapes of power, that is, landscapes that reflect and reveal the influence of those who construct, define and maintain them. (Ho, Woon and Ramdas, 2013, 3). Hence, if we look at the hospital which is the workplace in the first narrative, we see an agent of power in Registered Nurse Chua who, by virtue of her position, commands strict attention during her briefings and adherence to 'correctness' on her watch. This is inevitably supported by the structure of the workplace that runs on a highly stratified system that leaves young beginner nurses like Zar fairly voiceless. Zar is a fully competent nurse when left on her own, and has adapted to the workplace as best as she feels she needs to. She is therefore not entirely without power, even if she is lower on the hierarchy and conscious of the differences between ranks. How will such power striations in a workplace drive the social aspect of learning then?

My contention is that a workplace such as the one depicted in the first narrative would face certain limitations when trying to encourage learning in a workplace as a means to grow into a job and take on the full responsibilities that the job role would entail. Unwin, Felstead and Fuller have noted the importance of understanding the social context in order to learn in workplaces, and contend that uncovering the "‘hidden curriculum’ of the workplace" (Darrah, 1996, quoted in Unwin et al, 2007, 4) is essential as in order to perform their jobs, progress, and survive in the workplace, employees have to gain an understanding of the cultural norms, sources of power, accepted levels of behaviour and other invisible, but highly important, characteristics of their organisation. (Unwin et. al, 2007, 4). Hence, Zar is learning, but is she learning what would help her grow as a nurse and what would help her workplace benefit fully from her contribution as a worker in the institution? She understands the nature of her workplace, but whether she is inspired to use this understanding to further positive learning remains to be seen. This is illustrative of how the community's 'signals' about its attitude to how learning in a workplace would happen will kick in and affect the actual learning. Registered Nurse Chua and Nurse Lim would be who Zar and Xiang should look up to as role models to learn from, but it does not appear to be evident in the narrative that Zar and Xiang would take up such an opportunity. The use of fear instilled as part of a regiment of maintaining discipline and hierarchical power would stunt the desire to regard the Nurses as suitable role models to learn readily from. Instead, the learning and support each young nurse gives to and derives from the other, and from their respective cliques at work, seem to be more necessary for their sustainability at the job. The way the cliques are race-segregated to some extent could also be a telling indicator of how the eventual community, regarded as distinct both formally and otherwise, may themselves be a barrier to successful and quality informal workplace learning taking place. This has been observed by Billett (2001, 210) to contribute greatly to the enactment of positive learning in the workplace.

Workplaces thus need to 'afford opportunities for learning' (Billett, 2001, 209), and this is based to a great extent on an enterprise's 'readiness' (Billett, 2001, 209) to provide such opportunities, where readiness is perceived to be more than the preparedness for guided learning to proceed. It includes the norms and work practices that constitute the invitational qualities for workers to participate in and learn through work. (Billett, 2001, 209)

The second narrative illustrates this point as well. While the leader in the organisation is young and supposedly enlightened, he seems blinkered when it comes to seizing learning opportunities, because he sets store by his position in the hierarchy – that as a leader, he need no longer consciously learn from unexpected sources, since he has 'learnt it all' so to speak. This elitist power position is not uncommon, with the superiority a result of, most often, privilege, and the advantages that this may bring. Being unable to appreciate diversity, he is not able to socially discover Colin's rich work history and the learning opportunities that this could possibly afford him, even if it is in the mistakes not to make in one's career. The description of the colleagues and their lack of social glue binding them together bring out the social handicap that would hinder their ability to capitalise on the rich learning that could take place in their day-to-day work activities.

Of course, Colin in his jaded state is possibly as much a threat to quality learning as he is an example of someone who has himself, not been able to learn because of his cynicism, his ideas about his previous success, how he thus expects to be regarded as superior in his field, and the environment he has now found himself in. There is evidence then that learning in a workplace requires to some extent, the conscious setting up of a conducive environment and conditions, which include an appreciation of and for diversity and difference. To do that, some of the underlying difficulties in managing the new mix have to be taken on and harnessed, so that learning in a workplace can benefit from this new mix.

### ***Learning From Workplaces in Singapore Today – Harnessing the Benefits***

Space and place theory marks workplaces as sites where more than just work unfolds, as they also go on to become sites where communities grow and thrive (Tan, 2015 b, 88-91). This makes workplaces very important, as they are then microcosmic examples of how navigation around this new mix in Singapore may also inform us as they occur beyond workplaces. This could be in housing estates, schools and other public spaces for example, and the jarring effect of this new mix jostling for space and primacy may be detected in a range of scenarios, from quiet observation of how loudly a group of foreign workers talk whilst in public, to a political manifesto and slogan put forward by an opposition party at the recent General Elections<sup>ii</sup>. We in Singapore are thus all similarly learning to navigate the less familiar, with most of us also anxious not to cause offence whilst doing so, as we seek to enact and embody the socially-lauded traits of welcome, neighbourliness, integration and peaceful coexistence within this changing landscape.

Denzin puts forward that ethnography is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are per formative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political, by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (Denzin, 2006, 333). The pedagogical impulse is keenly felt as we recognise the awkwardness of Zar and Colin and the people around them awkwardly trying to ‘integrate’ and better work together. Social integration is the prevailing national narrative and ‘political call’ addressing the diversity issue in Singapore, and there has been an appeal for better social balance through a re-calibration of our national narratives and the public education that these national narratives seek to be the tools for. (Tan, 2015a, 41) However, social integration will not come about simply because we wish for it to happen. The two narratives here outline a reality that contests the national narrative to some extent. To better exploit the new mix in workplaces, and reap its potential benefits through learning in them, we should strive to learn from them and better re-orientate the national narrative to portray inclusivity as authentically as possible, and hopefully, better educate the citizenry towards more successfully handling this issue of diversity and difference.

Another lesson to be learnt from workplaces is for leaders of enterprises and the nation to be consciously schooled to more sensitively handle diversity, inclusivity and learning issues. Leaders need to realise that learning on the job occurs in many ways, observation of bosses being one. Supervisory and management staff should understand that they are role models to their staff, and that an engaged staff who feel they work amongst colleagues who are personally interested in each other and respectful of differences will generate better returns on learning investments, and thus, economic investments. Junjia Ye also puts forward the interesting possibility of the new mix negotiating their differences through “highly nuanced codes of conduct, [...] or *guiju*<sup>iii</sup>[...] to set the contours of local ‘knowing’”. (Ye, 2015, 135) In other words, the new and the native may need to undergo a period of adaptation and adjustment to work out the formal ‘template’ of behaviour towards each other, in order to be able to live, learn and grow together. This is certainly a hopeful idea, and one which we can more closely examine as we try to come together to respect, enjoy and celebrate our differences whilst working and learning together.

### ***Conclusion***

We live in a diverse world, and globalisation and our open economy have certainly brought a new mix to our shores. Some will be here temporarily, whilst others may wish to sink deeper roots. The shape and face of our workforce has thus changed, and we in Singapore need to better calibrate this mix both in our workplaces and social spaces. The concept of working and learning together, of sharing as a community, would need to be embraced by all as we learn to build this community and then, enjoy the better learning and living that will come about.

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<sup>i</sup> Non-residents comprise work pass holders (of various categories), dependents and international students (NPTD, 2015, 5)

<sup>ii</sup> The General Election was held on 11 September 2015. The Singaporean First Party campaigned on the manifesto of putting Singaporeans before foreign talent.

<sup>iii</sup> A Mandarin phrase translated to mean 'guidelines on the forms of civility'.