



Source: Screen capture from the EngageAsia website at www.engageasia.org.

EngageAsia (www.engageasia.org), a New York-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit with the mission of building community in the Asia-Pacific through education, was born out of a need for a new organization with Asia-focused teacher professional development at its core, through intensive discussions between its cofounders and inaugural board, and on culling best practices from years of working with US-Japan teacher professional development programs. Most importantly, the creation of this new organization was due to the desire to build deep, authentic connections among educators in the Asia-Pacific region with the goal of having them impart to their students that we all share more in common than that which sets us apart. Ultimately, the aim is to create a more peaceful world through creative, intensive, and thoughtful teacher professional development programs that build transnational personal networks of educators.

The Field

Some thirty years ago, support from the US government and a number of Japan-focused foundations helped leading educators from across the United States develop sophisticated programs to train American teachers to teach about Japan. This resulted in the establishment of an array of first-rate programs at institutions such as the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Washington, Michigan State University, the Five College Center for East Asian Studies, Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Vermont, Stanford University, and others. Furthermore, several nonprofit organizations such as Primary Source in Boston were launched with the aim of training teachers to teach about Asia. Along with these university-based centers and nonprofits came an assortment of networks that connected professionals from these organizations, such as the Committee for Teaching About Asia at the Association for Asian Studies. Publications such as *Education About Asia* were also created to help advance the field.

Today, with Title VI funding fading, foundation priorities shifting, and cuts to higher education in general, some outreach centers focused on Asia have closed, such as the Asian Studies Outreach Program at the University of Vermont; and some have ceased their teacher professional development programs, such as the University of Pennsylvania's Center for East Asian Studies. Just as Asia increases in importance to the United States, programs that train American teachers to teach about Asia are suffering from decreased support. This observation led to some of the initial discussions about the need for an independent not-for-profit focused exclusively on training American teachers about Asia that could operate flexibly and attempt to develop a diversified funding model to ensure long-term sustainability. Equally important was the thought that such a nonprofit should

also help educate teachers in Asia about the United States and about societies in the region.

From Bilateral to Multilateral

EngageAsia's design was not simply to replace some of the centers or institutes that have closed, but to engage in qualitatively different programming. A vast majority of teacher professional development programs that take place in the US (and beyond) focus on training American teachers about one country or culture such as Japan, China, Korea, or Taiwan. Rarely do US-based organizations engage teachers from these countries in programs, and rarer still are programs that are multilateral in nature and bring teachers from three or more countries together. EngageAsia aims to do just this: our goal is to build authentic and lasting friendships between and among teachers that participate in our programs so that teachers can build on these relationships and develop lasting ties. From these lasting ties they can creatively connect their classrooms, share innovative pedagogical styles, and continue to remain invested in learning about other countries and cultures.

There are at least two reasons we at EngageAsia feel such a multilateral approach is important. First, Northeast Asia is a region filled with tensions. In many ways, World War II has not ended, as battles over territory, names, and memories continue. Such struggles can become quite emotional and lead to barriers between people and nations. EngageAsia's programs aim to play a role in bringing together educators who can create transnational learning communities that penetrate barriers and foster greater empathy and understanding among students. This isn't about erasing cultures or attempting to create a common culture; rather, the aim is to realize that there are fundamental human characteristics that we all share and that there is beauty and benefit from learning about other societies.

Second, countries and cultures do not exist in isolation, and EngageAsia believes it is critical for teachers to understand the complex relationships that exist between and among societies that help shape them and lead to their continuous transformations. For example, it is critical that teachers who travel to Taiwan understand the rich and dynamic historical connections Taiwan has with both Chinese and Japanese culture, which is why, in 2020, we will bring American and Japanese teachers together in Taiwan to interact with Taiwanese teachers.

From Idea to Reality

Ideas for creating an entity like EngageAsia were building up for years, based on lessons learned from deep experience with K-12 US-Japan teacher professional development programs. The aim was to create a nonprofit that brought together best practices, fill in some needed gaps, and approach

teacher professional development in a rather different way. The years of talking turned to reality through dialogue between the organizations' co-founders, David Janes and Stomu Miyazaki. Meeting at cafés and coffee shops to discuss our mutual interest in and concern about education led to a determination to transform the concept into reality, and then the real work began. Furthermore, the organization built on years of professional experience in the field based on David's work at the United States–Japan Foundation and Stomu's work teaching architecture and design at the collegiate level. Moving from discourse to action required activities on multiple levels, including (1) clarifying our mission, (2) developing the organization's structure, (3) locating champions, (4) securing support, and (5) carrying out a program—all of which are key elements of social entrepreneurship.

Mission clarification came about through researching existing international education programs in Asia and between the US and Asia to ensure that our vision did not replicate the work of others and aimed to be innovative. Furthermore, multiple board discussions and conversations with leaders in the field helped shape our vision. However, nothing was more important than learning by doing. As we engaged in our first program that focused upon US and Taiwanese teachers, we learned lessons that helped us improve both our aims and our programmatic structure. Perhaps there is no better teacher than experience for entrepreneurs, and this lesson made us decide that the first five years of the organization's life would be a series of experiences designed to help us learn and grow so we could have more impact through higher-quality programs.

Structural issues included such topics as where to incorporate and applying for IRS 501(c)(3) public charity status. Along the way, we found many organizations willing to support and assist us, including the New York Council on Nonprofits, Nonprofit Westchester, and Pro Bono Partnership. Working together with these organizations, we developed bylaws, and organizational policies and procedures, and transformed our idea into a full-fledged not-for-profit organization. This took time, energy, effort, and a lot of learning.

Simultaneous to the above, we had to locate additional board members (David and Stomu are both unpaid volunteer board members), and



Teachers Aimee Ferguson and Tania Riccoboni in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. All photos in the article are courtesy of the author.

we were fortunate that during the earlier conversations about the organization, we already had a cohort of individuals who were excited about the mission and vision of the organization. These individuals transformed into the first trustees and played a crucial role in breathing life into the organization. As EngageAsia became more and more viable, it became clear that teams are essential to entrepreneurial projects. It is nearly impossible to bring a new organization to life without the help of strong social networks and individuals who champion your cause.

EngageAsia obtained its 501(c)(3) status in 2015. We used 2016 to think through our strategic plan and 2017 to begin fundraising, and in April 2017, we held a formal launch of the organization and continued with fundraising. We planned to run our first program in 2018. Trustees, along with an expanding group of advisers and friends, provided the much-needed essential initial funding to launch the organization's first program. The 2017 public launch was held at the home of an adviser in Greenwich, Connecticut, where the energy for the organization was palpable. This led to initial donations that funded an investigatory trip to Taiwan, as well as provided crucial support for our inaugural project.



Kickstart your career in the field of Asian Studies

AAS members may log in to the AAS JOB BOARD to browse listings and add their resumes for review by potential employers. New jobs are posted daily .

AAS JOB BOARD

<http://www.asian-studies.org/AASJobBoard>

FIND
JOB

7

HOME



Aimee presenting in October 2018 about what she learned.



April 2017 launch event.



Tania presenting in October 2018 in New York City about what she learned.

Equally important for success was finding partners in Taiwan, and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Organization in NYC provided extremely helpful connections and advice for us on this front. Through their assistance and the help of numerous other individuals and organizations, we were able to meet with schools, educational innovators, teachers, principals, and the Ministry of Education during our planning trips to Taiwan. In addition, EngageAsia needed a key person in Taiwan to help us with programing, and we fortunately found a key volunteer, Dr. Bob Chang, willing to serve as our Taiwan program director, who has provided critical support to every aspect of our programs.

With the success of the structural details behind us and a solid lineup of educational partners, we were then ready to take the next leap—to actually launch and run our first program! The first of our five years of experimental programing was 2018, when we brought American teachers to Taiwan; year two was 2019, when we brought Taiwanese teachers here. Years three, four, and five, which go into 2022, will be trilateral with Japanese, Taiwanese, and American teachers engaged.

Five Years of Programmatic Experiments

We decided from the outset that EngageAsia would prioritize quality over quantity and aim to foster an authentic and deep community of teachers across the Pacific Rim. The idea was to serve as a catalyst to build ties so that teachers could learn about each other's culture and society, share cutting-edge pedagogical ideas, and create lasting friendships that could be built on for the benefit of students. With this in mind, we launched our inaugural Taiwan Teacher Fellows Program and sought applicants from educators in the greater New York City area. We made it clear to prospective candidates that we were looking for teachers willing to connect with us over the long term.

EngageAsia selected two teachers for our inaugural Taiwan Teacher Fellows Program: a third-grade teacher from Westchester County, New York (Aimee Ferguson), and an eighth-grade art teacher from Rockland County (Tania Riccoboni). Treating both as scholars, we worked closely with them to determine their areas of study relevant to their classrooms and helped them research these topics. Concurrently, our partners in Taiwan were selecting Taiwanese teachers to engage with the US teachers for part of their trip to Taiwan later in the summer.

Aimee decided to focus on the connections between food, health, and culture, and Tania focused on indigenous and contemporary art. Furthermore, we trained teachers to utilize video cameras in order to record interviews and experiences for the future production of multimedia curricula.

In the summer of 2018, we held our first intensive US-Taiwan Teacher Fellows Program in Taiwan. For one week, the two US teachers lived with homestay families in Kaohsiung and were given the opportunity to dig into their research topics with the help of Taiwanese graduate students who served as both guides and translators. Prior to the trip, our Taiwan program director worked extremely hard to arrange meetings and interviews for the teachers. Teachers had the chance to visit with people and places that most visitors to Taiwan would not have an opportunity to see.

During the second week of the intensive research trip to Taiwan, the teachers spent time developing ties with Taiwanese teachers through a common professional development workshop focused on design thinking and cultural excursions. The two-day design thinking workshop was led by leading experts in this field and helped the teachers learn together about a cutting-edge approach to pedagogy and how to rethink their classrooms. Through this experience and time spent together visiting local sites, the teachers developed relationships that are still being maintained, and we selected two of the Taiwanese teachers from this group to participate in our summer 2019 program. These two teachers not only are stellar in their

classrooms, but also are leading national efforts to impact education in Taiwan, and we are adamant that EngageAsia have impact even though we work with small numbers of teachers.

The summer 2019 program engaged a cohort of two Taiwanese teachers and four American teachers in a program focused primarily on American culture through the lens of New York City. It furthermore had a pedagogical focus on infusing art into STEM education, thereby engaging teachers once again with three programmatic dimensions: (1) cultural/social learning, (2) pedagogical learning, and (3) fostering transnational friendships.

In 2020 and 2021, we plan to begin a three-way program that will work with teachers from Japan, the United States, and Taiwan, bringing teachers from all three countries to Tainan, Taiwan, in 2020 and most likely Hiroshima, Japan, in 2021. These programs will contain all the dimensions mentioned above but include an additional focus on the ways in which education can impact regional economic growth, which is especially important in Japan, where depopulation is having a major impact, but is also a crucial topic globally.

Beyond 2021, EngageAsia intends to expand regionally to include teachers from additional countries in the region.

Networked for Peace

The ultimate motivation for forming an organization such as EngageAsia is to foster a more peaceful world through education. Paradoxically, while the world is more connected than ever and information about other cultures and countries is at our fingertips, the barriers between societies and cultures seem to be growing. EngageAsia aims to transcend these barriers through high-quality, powerful teacher professional development programs that build friendships between and among educators from different cultures. Our aim is to slowly grow a network of educators who can trust one another and cultivate empathy and understanding among their students.

The late Edwin O. Reischauer, former US Ambassador to Japan, illustrates the long-term impact that such teachers could have on their students in his writing when he stated:

The child entering first grade this year will not be a member of the voting public for well over a decade. He is not likely to have gotten well started on his career for two decades or more. His most important period as a leader or a molder of opinion, if he ever achieves such levels of prominence, lies roughly three to six decades ahead. During the intervening years he will no doubt still be learning, but his basic attitudes are likely to have been strongly conditioned, if not completely shaped, by the perceptions and prejudices he is absorbing now.¹

Without teachers who understand other societies and cultures, we cannot have students who understand the world. EngageAsia aims to be a key partner in the constellation of organizations who share this mission. ■

NOTES

1. Edwin O. Reischauer, *Toward the Twenty-first Century: Education for a Changing World* (New York: Random House, 1974), 13.

DAVID JANES is Senior Adviser for Institutional Development in the Office of the President at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University; he serves as Chair of the Board of EngageAsia and previously served as Director of Foundation Grants and Assistant to the President at the United States–Japan Foundation.



Teachers visiting Shu-Te High School in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, in summer 2018.



The 2018 Design Thinking workshop in Taipei, Taiwan.



The 2018 Design Thinking workshop in Taipei, Taiwan.