

My students left my classroom. They didn't leave my life

For this law lecturer, maintaining connections with former students over coffee – or fried chicken – is an underrated joy.

FINDING

Joy

David Tan

I first met Joanna Tan in 2009. She was sitting centre-right, second row from the back, in the first-ever entertainment law class that I taught, and she struck me right from the start.

Unlike many of the more reverential students in my class, she was, from the outset, relaxed and convivial in her interactions with me. We would chat and laugh together before and after class, and in fact, she was the one who jokingly coined the term “David Tan Fan Club”, comprising

students who took both of my entertainment law and freedom of speech modules at the National University of Singapore’s law school.

Almost two decades on, I’m still in touch with her. In fact, I count her as one of my dear friends. Joanna is now married with three children, and has been living in London for a decade. But amid our hectic work schedules, we’ve managed to maintain our friendship.

Over the years, I’ve hosted Joanna and her husband to dinner at my place, where we tuck into roast suckling pig – our favourite dish. We’ve had candid conversations about her career as a lawyer and her eventual pivot to become a medical doctor.

Just last month, she dropped by – with a bottle of Cristal champagne, no less, to

commemorate “all those years”, as she put it.

She’s not the only one. As a law professor for almost 20 years in Singapore and Melbourne, I’ve taught many students, and I have to admit that with the passing of time, many have become a distant blur. I suspect that for many of them, their old teachers have also been relegated to a forgotten past.

But there are those with whom a magical bond remains. Maintaining those bonds – despite distances in space and time – is, to me, an underrated joy.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS

In our lives, we meet many people who are constantly coming and going. A study in the United States in 2010 asked how many people Americans know by name and found that the average person

recognises 611. I wouldn’t be surprised if the number is much higher today, with the proliferation of social media platforms.

But that does not equate to a meaningful relationship with them.

British biological anthropologist Robin Dunbar concluded that the human mind can deal with about 150 meaningful relationships or friendships. Other research postulates that in the end, the number is somewhere between 100 and 250, depending on how extroverted we are.

Dr Dunbar’s number has been humorously described as “the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar”.

I prefer a more reciprocal definition: The number of people

who would genuinely welcome you joining them uninvited for a coffee if you bumped into them at a cafe.

For me, maintaining a connection with a past student – having lunch with them, meeting up over coffee – involves more than just nostalgia. I want to learn about how they are faring now in their careers and lives, and celebrate milestones with them.

It’s always a joy when a student I have taught introduces me to his girlfriend, or invites me to her wedding. It’s even more delightful when I’m welcomed to their new home later, and I get to see their children grow up.

There aren’t many – mainly one or two from each class I taught. But it adds up, over the years.

The value of the connections comes not just from knowing that I made an impact on their lives when our paths crossed in the



The writer with his Britain-based former student Joanna Tan in London in 2025. Almost two decades after they first met, the two still keep in touch, and he counts her as one of his dear friends. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID TAN



Former national sprinter Timothee Yap, who represented Singapore at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil, was in the writer’s class at the National University of Singapore in 2017. The two share an interest in sports and fashion.



The writer with his former student Michelle Anson in Melbourne in 2022. They are looking forward to another yumcha feast and visiting a fashion showcase at the National Gallery of Victoria later this year.

lecture theatre, or through my supervision of their research projects.

It’s that they don’t just welcome me to join them uninvited for coffee, but actively seek me out for a meal or two. One even perfected a homemade fried chicken recipe for me (thank you, Kenneth!).

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM WALLS

These friendships often flourish because we find common ground beyond the law. And in fact, there is something special in seeing the relationships evolve from a hierarchical teacher-student

relationship to a meaningful friendship.

Beyond my professional life as a teacher, I also do fashion photography, enjoy sports and collect designer jackets as a hobby. Keeping in touch with former students beyond the four walls of the classroom is a delightful way of getting to know my students as people as well.

And they get to see me as a person, too.

Timothee Yap is a former national sprinter who represented Singapore at the Rio Olympics. He was also in my class at NUS in 2017. Well, I knew he could run, but I would tease him about

whether he could beat an old man – we have a 25-year age gap – at tennis.

Ever the competitive athlete, he started playing tennis with me after he graduated. He even brought his dad along on a few occasions.

Over time, we realised we had more shared interests beyond sports – like fashion. I’ve photographed him in some of my jackets for exhibitions, as well as for his social media account.

Though he’s now in Shanghai, we’re still in touch – and I’m pleased to know he’s still relentlessly practising his tennis there.

OVER SPACE AND TIME

Of course, for those who live afar, staying in contact needs greater effort. That’s where social media is a boon to nurturing the relationship as we share our posts of our meals, holidays and highlights.

I’m more than happy to make the effort to stay in touch – because the payoff is often worth it.

I’m looking forward to reconnecting with another former student, Michelle Anson, in Melbourne later this year, after years of liking and commenting on each other’s stories on

Instagram.

Seeing a close friend IRL sure beats the DMs. We’re looking forward to another yumcha feast and visiting a fashion showcase at the National Gallery of Victoria – yes, she also shares my love of fashion.

I see life as a series of interconnected moments. Each moment in our lives that we spend with someone – whether it is a meal we enjoyed, or a museum visit – is a discrete experience, like a dot. We can choose to let our lives be full of dots, or meaningfully connect them to nurture deeper relationships which require

significant investment of time and effort.

Keeping in contact with my former students makes me feel like we are both connecting the dots together.

Can I recognise 611 people by name and face? Probably yes. But then, I started counting the number of people I would be happy to join uninvited for a coffee – and who would gladly have me there.

That number is far fewer, and many of them are my former students. I’m happy with that.

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