

Digital Career Highways

Digital communication skills give students a competitive advantage—no matter what career they are pursuing. This is the first of a series of interviews on professionals who have employed their digital skills into successful careers. In this inaugural showcase, we put the spotlight on two training instructors in Singapore



From school teachers to Adobe master trainers.

An interview with Shirley Tan and James Lee from ACE Training Pte Ltd, Singapore.

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ACE Training Pte Ltd is a software training company making waves in Singapore. With dynamic staff and relevant cutting edge syllabus at its core, it should be no surprise to hear that this company delivers the best in up-to-date support and structured insight on all Adobe suites. With a motto like “With ACE it’s never a dull moment”, I had to find out for myself what it takes to become a world-class software trainer.

On my warm welcome into the fresh and creative office of ACE, I was introduced to two of their most esteemed trainers, Shirley Tan and James Lee.

Shirley started using Photoshop when the software was in Version 2. Now with over fifteen years of teaching experience in graphic and web design plus numerous certifications from Adobe and Macromedia, she is certified as an Adobe Master Trainer. Most overwhelmingly, I am taken aback by her continued enthusiasm and love for what she does. She continues to draw inspiration from the world around her and epitomizes the adage—“Do what you love and you will never have to work another day in your life”

As if that wasn’t enough, James is another that lives and breathes his passion. With over 10 years of teaching experience in the Adobe packages, he is patient and committed to bringing out the best in every student through creative reinforcement of concepts and most

importantly fun.

As I began to ask them about their careers and their love for the software they share with others, I knew I was in for a heartwarming treat.

Diane: What was it about this field that made you want to go into it?

Shirley: I came into this field as a childhood ambition as I always wanted to train others. All along I have been in the visual side, as a child I liked to draw and doodle. My mother thought it was rubbish but I felt that if I became a designer, I could work in a field that interests me. Better yet, if I became a design trainer, I could help many people by educating them in the software the industry use to create designs. So my childhood dream came true.

James: I moved into this field after working in the industry and attending some training courses. It was then that I noticed that the trainers and the content were not considerate of the different levels and learning styles of the students. So I set this as a personal goal to train others as I would expect to be trained myself.

Diane: How did it all start?

Shirley: My family’s expectation was not for me to work in design, so I did not realize my talents until later on, studying business first to please my family and then moving to teacher training as an avenue to express my abilities. I started in traditional education as a secondary teacher. The software available at that time was limited

and the design work I could allow my students to embark upon was restricted. So I decided to move into the private sector where I could work with graphics more directly. This happened by chance and was not planned but I realized that I understood the tools and application of design very quickly and thus could share my knowledge with the sector. It has since been 15 years and my family is obviously proud of my achievements.

James: For me, I was originally qualified in computer science with most of the curriculum then based around logic and its processes. Like Shirley, I moved into secondary teaching, building a passion for developing minds. Although my work now is completely different from my areas of academic origin, the processes and techniques found in web technologies are similar. When I moved from state to private education, and got my first taste of graphics tools, I realized that combining these processes lead to new discoveries and new processes.

We both now teach graphics and technical courses to industry and combine the teaching styles we learnt as state teachers with our love for the Adobe tools we explain and digest on a daily basis.

Diane: What was the most difficult part of getting to where you are today?

Shirley: The path to get to my job today was not that difficult. More so, it was hampered by

my family’s lack of understanding in this area as a career. Once they saw that teaching and design was a natural fit for me, they allow me to grow from strength to strength.

James: My journey through computer science and education has been quite smooth. I have been lucky in the sense that I progressed naturally from teaching in schools to private training without many barriers. And my enthusiasm for the tools as I have found them and become adept has only fuelled my passion in this area.

Diane: Has anyone close to you been a direct or indirect influence on your career choice? Who and why?

Shirley: Interestingly, the biggest influence on me did not come from someone close. It all started when a previous colleague thought I was not good at graphics. Call it pride but I wanted to show myself and this person that I could do it and do it well.

Diane: So you proved them wrong?

Shirley: It’s more that I proved myself right!

James: I think the person that has influenced me the most is actually Shirley. Her training is very steadfast, consistent and always of the highest standard. I can relate to her attitudes and this has helped me learn and to achieve my goals.



Diane: Who are some of your creative influences? What is it about their work that inspires you?

Shirley: My creative influences do not come from any particular artist or designer. My reason for this is that I feel it may make my styles and examples biased. My directions therefore, come from the latest market trends. I believe that creative work is a lot like fashion, processes and styles go in and out in this field to. Personally I do draw on design influences from my passion for flower arranging. Floral art allows me to see things differently, to see things I might have otherwise missed and to appreciate things from different perspectives. I feel that this hobby has affected my sensitivity to colours and shapes and so forth and feeds well into my design classes.

James: My inspiration comes from books, in particular, from author Scott Kelby. One of my favorite is Kelby’s series on Photoshop for Digital Photographers. His books are fun and straight to the point and bring a unique humor into his work, which I try to emulate in my own classes.

Diane: You always try to bring humor into your classes?

James: Yes, humor is very important.

Diane: In your opinion, how has the field of technical training changed since you started?

Shirley: Certainly, huge changes have occurred since I started teaching. When I first began, designers were new to computer intervention in their work and I would still have to explain a mouse and what it did! I had seen and heard so many stories on mice, I could write a joke book on the subject. Nowadays, our users are getting better and local school education has improved students’ exposure to the tools and applications we teach.

Diane: Do this ultimately make your job harder?

Shirley: It certainly makes my job more challenging, but it paves a very good foundation. For that reason it makes training easier because you can leave the very basics out and concentrate on the tricks and tips of the Adobe applications rather than wasting valuable time on file management and explaining how to use web browsers.

James: I would agree with Shirley. We have

saved more time now to share more skills and to advance people’s levels. However, we now have competition from other trainers out there so we need to keep up with latest techniques and listen to our customers to provide the best.

Diane: What is the most fulfilling aspect of your job? The least?

Shirley: The most fulfilling part is linked to the teaching that I do, because ACE Training deals with solutions not just the techniques needed to use the software correctly. The most fulfilling part is being able to take a user who has zero



knowledge and doesn’t know what, for example, Print Publishing is, and five and half days later, they are full of confidence and able to handle things for themselves. This is very gratifying, especially when many of them come back and tell you something that you said have influenced them or helped them in their job and life.

Thankfully, the least fulfilling aspect doesn’t happen everyday. This is when I get students that attend my classes because they are forced by their companies. In many cases, it has to do with employee’s benefits that they are required to partake in some training for their yearly allowance. The problem arises when the training they attend is not related directly to their job, so you have to pull numerous tricks out of your bag just to keep them entertained. That takes the joy out in the delivery.

James: I will start with the least fulfilling as it echoes Shirley’s sentiments. Students who sit in class with no interest in the software but because they must attend to meet an

employer’s needs. Of course we still do our job and do it well. But sometimes you are left feeling flat because they have not been very receptive to the guidance.

The most fulfilling part for me is trying to find new ways to break down difficult concepts into manageable creative solutions. I am always pleased when I am able to explain these difficult aspects and make them sound easy and achievable. For example, programming can be complex so I devise visual and graphical ways of illustrating and demonstrating complex sequences, making them more manageable for the less technical.

Diane: What important skills do you feel an Adobe products training professional needs to be successful today?

Shirley: If a person is looking to be an Adobe trainer, the first thing they need to consider is the certification process.

Diane: Is this difficult to get Adobe Certified?

Shirley: Difficult it a relative word. I would say it is not easy to pass and it is getting harder to pass which is a good thing really. To pass, you

tools you need to understand and these take time and energy.

Diane: What advice can you give to a student who is just thinking about starting out in the field of commercial/industrial training?

James: Develop an ability to portray difficult concepts in a fun and simple way. Think of your own learning and how you might break that down into bite-sized chunks to explain to others. Indulge in technology and tools as much as possible, exploring new features and expanding your taste for the new and how it might be used to simplify your work or create more impact. Above all, you need to be a patient person.

Diane: What’s the simplest tip you could give to someone else thinking about being a commercially focused Adobe trainer?

Shirley: It is a lot different from being a high school teacher although the techniques to deliver ideas effectively are very important tools I have learnt. Teaching adults can be more fulfilling if you are interested in explaining tools and working through solutions with an audience who needs to know rather than an audience that doesn’t have a choice and may not immediately see the benefit or share your enthusiasm.

The life can certainly be seen as glamorous and there is definitely a wonderful feeling being up on stage with everyone listening to you. There is also an element of travel in our work which again adds a definite exclusivity to what we do. But behind the scenes, there is a lot of planning, paperwork, research and rehearsal that goes into a polished performance. And being a trainer in that respect is no different than being a movie star.

James: Always try and approach everything you do with fun. Incorporating the fun factor into your work will always enable your audience to pick up ideas and techniques faster and they will retain more when you are done.

You must stay abreast of what’s happening in the industries you serve, so you can apply the emerging technologies readily into your work. Many of the people we teach are as IT savvy as we are, and in some cases, more so. So you must be ready to tackle their queries with knowledge and insight and not embarrass yourself by not knowing what they are talking about.



Shirley Tan



James Lee