

## Teaching as a subversive activity

Dr. Y. Joseph Lian  
BA Carleton Coll.; PhD Minnesota  
Director of Undergraduate Programmes  
Lecturer of Economics

Dr. Lian is the first winner of the Michael G. Gale Medal for Distinguished Teaching at HKUST. The award was first established in 1994 to recognize excellence in teaching on campus. Students are encouraged to nominate their best teachers, through their departmental office, to the Selection Committee which is composed of faculty representatives from different departments and a student representative. The program is coordinated by the Office of Academic Programme Administration.

Dr. Lian has taught for more than fifteen years, in both secondary and tertiary settings. He was a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong before he went to the States to further his studies, which was followed by a career of teaching and research there. This is his third year at UST.

Following is the speech of Dr. Lian at the faculty orientation on October 3, 1995, followed by a record of his interview with the editor of the *Teaching-Learning Tips*, talking about his perceptions towards effective teaching at UST.

Today I will talk about two things. The first is what our students are like. The second is some pointers on effective teaching.

The students at HKUST are all hard working. In fact, I think they are the hardest working group among those of the seven local tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. I have taught for a fair number of years in large state universities in the United States before I came back to Hong Kong, and you all know what most of the students there are like. So when I first met these students here, I immediately fell in love with them. You can cram any volume of work into their mouth, they would swallow it, and hardly ever whine!

My next discovery was a disappointment: many of them don't really love what they do. I can't give statistics, but in an average class of eighty students, say, about five would be really, really crazy about the subject matter of the course. For many of the rest, you can tell that coming to class and doing the labs and problem sets are part of the price they pay for a degree. That kind of attitude often shows up as shoddy homework, inattentiveness in class, and an all-too-obvious readiness to take up a couple of part-time jobs when money should not be the main concern.

The problem, as I see it, is that many of them lack intellectual curiosity, which may be in large part due to their family background. According to the Student Profile compiled by the Student Affairs Office last year, 43% of our students' fathers and 60% of their mothers have no more than a primary education. A bit more than a third of them have secondary education. While these are disheartening figures, reading them you know for sure that we are doing society a great service by providing social mobility. So the challenge for us is to find ways to serve them better, to give to them what they lack.

### What do students expect from us?

By now they are more or less resigned to the fact that we give them a lot of work. But they still mind a lot if we don't satisfy some very reasonable demands such as: goodwill on the part of the teacher who presses them to work hard; effective explanation of theories through a lot of practical examples; and relevance of much of the things they learn here to their future careers.

The last point merits some explanation. Less than half of our students pursue further studies upon graduation (less than 5% for the School of Business and Management). Some of those who do go on do so because they worry that they may not be able to find an ideal job. Therefore, if we teach as if we expect them all to want to get a Ph.D., some are surely going to grumble. A balance ought to be struck between teaching the esoteric and the bread-and-butter (and job-market oriented) aspects of each discipline. This really requires some thought and effort on our part.

## Some pointers to more effective teaching

### Establish rapport with students

The general belief is that smaller classes are easier to handle. In my experience, there is very little difference in teaching to a 20-student class or to a 200-student class. For the latter, I still work to build a rapport with the students, and I can usually succeed in about two weeks. I regularly get into a dialogue with the students during my lectures, in my present class of 149 first-year students. The trick is to get them to feel comfortable about speaking up in class, and that can usually be done by deliberately making a couple of silly mistakes in front of them, and either correcting yourself, or better still, being corrected by them. This really breaks the ice between teacher and students.

### Give lecture notes to students

If you have reasonably detailed and complete class notes, I suggest you make them available to the students the week after covering the material in class. Don't distribute the notes before class; otherwise, you will discover very soon that attendance will become dismal. They will appreciate your notes. However, I suggest that you warn them to copy class notes all the time since what you actually cover in class may not be the same as what you have in your notes.

### Provide one-to-one help to students

Naturally students get upset if you are not available during scheduled office hours. Since such absences on your part are sometime unavoidable, a way to control the damage is to put a writing pad on your door saying : "If you cannot find me in my office during my office hours, please leave your name and contact channel here and I will try to reach you when I am free." Then make sure you make good your promise.

### Adjust your student's workload

Don't push them too hard. In our School a rule of thumb is that you must not assign more than two hours of work for every hour of class time. We used to assign in the ratio three to one, to the point that we even eliminated the time for students to take care of their own personal hygiene, and the result was a mile of Big Character Posters from a few brave ones. Students should be encouraged to read extensively, both in the discipline and other disciplines, participate in different club activities, attend to physical and aesthetic training, and so on. All these take time. The following charts show three scenarios, based on three different assignment and class time ratios: 3 to 1, 2.5 to 1 and 2 to 1. Different schools may have to construct their own ratios in consideration of the all-round well-being of the students.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Weekly classroom hours (Including 3 hrs for LANG001)	23	23	23
Weekly own study time	46 (2 hrs own study/class hr)	57.5 (2.5 hrs own study/class hr)	69 (3 hrs own study/class hr)
Total	69	80.5	92
<b>Daily</b>			
Average work time	10 (69/7; approx.)	11.5 (69/7; approx.)	13 (92/7; approx.)
Transport (2/3 students commute)	2	2	2
Three meals	1.25	1.25	1.25
Personal hygiene	1	1	1
Misc.	0.75	0.75	0.75
Subtotal	15	16.5	18
<b>All else* incl. sleep</b>	<b>9 (Very good!)</b>	<b>7.5 (Dangerous!!)</b>	<b>6 (Disastrous!!!)</b>

\*Such as newspaper reading, club activities, PE, dating...

### Crack down on student misbehavior

In academic dishonesty cases, such as cheating in exams, there is an established and useful procedure outlined in the University Calendar. I had an unpleasant experience two years ago, involving a pretty bad case, which eventually ended in my assigning the F grades to two students involved. I found the procedure very useful. Without it, I would not have been confident enough to proceed, for fear of violating student rights and University regulations. I am usually a soft-hearted person, but that time I felt compelled to act tough because of the seriousness of the offense, the firmness of the evidence of wrongdoing and the recalcitrant attitude of the culprits. When I announced the penalty to the students after due process, it was I who was almost in tears. The two did not look perturbed. So my advice here is to crack down hard and establish a reputation of being firm and fair. Following the procedure given, you will have the administration and the good students solidly behind you.

### Summary

I think in students' eyes, a good teacher is one who is firm and fair, academically enthusiastic, and personally caring. If you don't measure up in these three things, you won't get good ratings in the students' evaluation of your teaching at the end of the course. Of course, most of us are not ratings driven. We teach because we think we have something important to share with the young people. We are zealous. They may not always want to listen to us, or listen to us whole-heartedly. So a lot of patience and tact on our part is needed.

During the early seventies, when I was studying in college in the United States, I came across a book with the title "Teaching as a Subversive Activity". I can hardly remember its content now, but somehow the title impressed me and stuck in my mind. To this day, I still cannot find a better expression for how I view teaching. But to be subversive, one must be patient, tactful and zealous.

## An interview with Dr. Joseph Lian talking about his perceptions towards effective teaching at HKUST:

Q. In your speech, you mentioned the lack of intellectual curiosity among local students. What do you think is the role of teachers in fostering intellectual curiosity?

JL: As I observed, most students did not have much intellectual stimulation at home, nor during their primary or secondary school education that focused very much on the required learning and the examination. There were not many chances for discovery or exploration of knowledge and experience. Whereas in the university, what we really have to do is to help students develop their interest in enquiry and exploration. It is a bit late, but better late than never.

In my subject area (Economics), I always try my best to apply theories to daily issues - issues that students would be interested in, no matter how trivial they are. I talk about the trendy issues among youngsters, for example, film stars and their changing needs for publicity in the media. I use questions to stimulate their interest; urge them to use the learnt theories to explain observed phenomena, and challenge their habituary practices or beliefs. Sometimes, I do challenge them hard and we may end up in heated debate. That's great!

I talk both at their level and above their level. This is the trick. I think students learn from examples. So, I show my enthusiasm in learning about the subject matter, both inside and outside the classroom. I am very interested in the subject matter and I simply show it.

Q. How do you establish rapport with your students?

JL: I have 149 students in my class. I can't remember all their names and in fact, I deliberately do not do so. (The down side of remembering only a few names is that I might be biased towards these students in my grading of their assignments or exam.) But I try my best to interact with my students in class, to encourage them to speak up, and randomly select students to answer my questions. I speak in English all the time but my students can put their questions and give their answers in Cantonese if they feel inhibited in using their second language—English. I also "force" them to come to talk to me after class half-jokingly and in a

friendly way. I think one's attitude shows. Students know that I care about them and they will come to talk to me.

Q. A theme running through your speech about effective teaching is to take students as they are and build on what they have already got. How can this be achieved?

JL: Yes, I try my best to develop empathy with my students but I try to "push" or "pull" them at the same time. For example, I challenge them vigorously on their choices of their daily newspapers (mostly Oriental Daily) in relation to their intellectual development. I believe in what Confucius did to his students: teaching them according to their aptitudes.

I think streaming of students of different capabilities is a good method. ECON is doing this in the core microeconomic classes. In some classes, I emphasize students' understanding of core theories and practices whereas in other classes I urge exploration and discovery of new experiences and knowledge by students. Some students in the latter class do complain since they have to spend more effort, relatively speaking, to gain a good grade. Many simply want an easy time in an average class and get a good grade the easy way!

I don't really worry about the issue of labeling under streaming. What we have to encourage the students to do is to break the "label" and move ahead. Work hard and excel! This reflects the general practice in our society.

Q. Hong Kong students are said to be exam-oriented and pragmatic in their studies. What is your view on this?

JL: I think learning is fun. It is challenging, too! Some of my students do question the usefulness of their study of theories in economics. I always use an analogy—food to our body vs. food for thought, to answer their question. We eat not simply to satisfy hunger. We also eat to enjoy even if we are not hungry. It's the same for learning, which is a process that we can enjoy a lot. I also urge my students to think in a longer perspective. What seems to be of limited use now can be very useful in future. Who can tell?

In many ways, what we really learn in the university is the ability to explore, think and construct knowledge. The subject discipline is a tool, a framework which helps to actualize the process.

Q. How do you deal with plagiarism among your students?

JL: I would say, I should assume some responsibility if my students copy their homework most of the time. Most probably, I have failed to motivate them to learn the subject matter and they did not find fun in learning it. In my class, group work and collaborative learning is encouraged. All assignments are done in small groups.

But I would be very strict on the issue of cheating in exams. Usually there would be three or more invigilators in my exam hall. The majority of students dislike cheating. I have to be fair and strict on this issue, and most students support that.

Q. What advice would you provide to those who are coming to teach at HKUST?

JL: A teacher's enthusiasm for the subject matter and the learning process and his effort to motivate his students are the two most important factors contributing to effective teaching. We teach through 'words' and our 'behaviors'. We have to realize that what we say and what we do have great impact on our students in their most formative years.