

A Dialogue on Effective Teaching at UST

Editor's note. Dr. Kimberly A. Chang is the Michael Gale Teaching Award Winner 1997. In the form of a letter, Kim talked lucidly about her conception of teaching in an institutional context as a collaborative effort with vision and mission. She disclosed some difficulties encountered in this pursuit and pinpointed several very important issues in relation to teaching and learning at UST that urge for reconsideration and action.

Dear Winnie,

A lot of time has gone by since you walked into my office over a year ago and we started a conversation about teaching that is still not finished! You have asked me to share my experiences of teaching in your newsletter. I have been reluctant to do so. Let me tell you why.

Since winning the Gale award, I have been repeatedly asked “what is the secret to the success of your teaching?,” I have deliberately ducked this question—in part because the day-to-day experience of teaching rarely feels like “success,” to me. And in part because I don’t believe the successes (or failures) of teaching can or should be attributed solely to the individual. I know this sounds sanctimonious coming from someone who continues to enjoy the benefits that such individual recognition brings! And I certainly don’t want to discourage any attempt to reward teaching as vigorously as we do research. But I worry about the perverse effects of treating “good,” teaching as merely an individual attribute or a matter of personal style or technique. This slips too easily into the dismissive view that “some people have it, some people don’t,—the secret of teaching, that is. Or it translates into the “quick fix,” school of teaching that reduces what we do to a few shallow techniques (be prepared, speak clearly, use visual aids, etc.). Worse, it can create a divisive atmosphere where teachers compete with one another rather than working together as a department or school toward shared educational goals. In all these cases, awarding individual teachers diverts attention away from a collective consideration of what “good,” teaching is all about. I know this may sound strange. Let me continue.

What worries me most about treating “good,” teaching as an individual achievement is the corresponding view that when things go wrong, it is the problem of a few rather than the many. When we attribute either success or failure to the person, we underestimate the larger institutional contexts in which teachers teach and students learn. What happens in classrooms between teachers and students depends on numerous institutional factors—class size, classroom structure and layout, curriculum design and program requirements, school policies on registration, scheduling, and grading, reward systems for both students and teachers, and of course the larger system of education in which a school operates.

Indeed, by the time we step into our classrooms and face our students, much has already been determined. In spite of our best pedagogical efforts, we sometimes fail—students don’t come to class, or they come and spend their time chatting or sleeping, or they do poorly on papers or exams, or they cheat

and do well. These are all real problems that we face collectively and which relate directly to the system of education in which we teach (e.g., why are these so-called “discipline problems,, more prevalent in large classes?!). But all too often instead of treating them as such, we personalize the problem—by either blaming our students or blaming ourselves.

If you’ve ever listened to teachers (and I know that as an instructional design manager, you have had many opportunities to do so), you’ve heard the complaints: students are too passive, apathetic, grade-driven, lacking in creativity or critical thinking, etc. Blaming our students has become an all too familiar way of talking about teaching. „It’s hopeless!,, some despair, pointing to the stultifying practices of Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. This is of course unfair to the many students who come to HKUST looking for an education, not merely to enhance their rote memorization skills. But you may have noticed something: those teachers who complain the loudest about their students are often those who invest the most time and energy in teaching. And if you listen carefully, you discover that their complaints are not really directed at their students, but at themselves for their failure to subvert an exam-driven system that has sucked the soul out of learning and makes it very hard to keep one’s heart in teaching. When teachers blame students, they are really blaming themselves.

I suspect that most of us at some time feel inadequate in the face of the tremendous challenges we face in educating our students. Even if we are aware of the institutional constraints that we’re up against, we hold ourselves responsible for what happens in our classrooms. But just as it’s dishonest to blame our students for all our teaching woes, it’s a dangerous illusion to think that we can take all the credit for their failures or successes. Take, for example, the so-called “discipline problem,, around which so much discussion about teaching these days seems to center. Is it merely due to a few “bad,, students in the bunch? Or is it the failure of the teacher to control his/her classroom? I think you can see where this line of thinking leads: to more discipline! Surely that is not what higher education aspires to! When teaching becomes mostly a matter of disciplining students, it is time to stop assigning individual blame and start asking ourselves a very simple question: why do we have to resort to force to get students to learn?

Most teachers hope to inspire their students—perhaps as we ourselves have been inspired—to learn for the sake of learning. We are thus disappointed when we discover how calculating and instrumental some students can be in their approach to learning. This instrumentalism may be evident in the way students choose their courses (according to workload and grade distribution), the amount of time and effort they devote to study (according to the relative weighting of courses and assignments), and even the questions they ask (emphasizing form over content). Cheating is of course the most instrumental act of all. In all these cases, learning is not the goal but a means to an end: to get the grade, to get the honors degree, to get the job, to make the money, etc. If we don’t outright blame the students, we point our fingers at early school experiences that we believe have suppressed their natural desire to learn. But here is not the place to get into a critique of the Hong Kong education system, which is already taking place elsewhere. Instead, I wonder about our own institution: to what extent does the learning environment that we have created at HKUST discourage instrumentalism and encourage students to become full participants in their own education? To what extent do we help students to unlearn old exam-oriented and grade-

conscious habits and approach their studies with a genuine desire to explore, discover, think and create new understandings of themselves and the world around them?

Having taught for nearly seven years in the Division of Social Science, I have faced instrumentalism in my classroom in all its insidious forms. I have come to see it as not just an idiosyncrasy of a few students, but a more general problem of how to motivate students to learn beyond what is merely required of them. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that teachers themselves are not immune to instrumentalism! Students' preoccupation with course requirements and grades can drive teachers to be equally calculating in the ways they teach. In my own case, for example, I worry that I spend far too much time scheming to devise ways to get students to come to class, to do the reading, to prevent them from cheating, etc. And as much as I would like to downplay grades, from the moment they are posted, they seem to take on a life of their own which has little to do with the *process* of learning. It is not only students who fixate on grades: while students worry about grade distributions, teachers worry about grade inflation. There is a moment each semester in every class when I am acutely aware of the conflict between teaching and evaluating—between enabling students to learn as individuals and ranking them on some predetermined scale. This requires making absurdly microscopic distinctions among students who are otherwise doing equally well. How can we expect our students to resist instrumentalism if we teachers are part of the problem?

These are the kinds of questions that make it difficult for me to hold up my experience of teaching as an example for others. I think both teachers and students are caught in the same dilemma. Given the current debate on education going on in Hong Kong, the time is ripe for us at this university to take a serious look at the kinds of policies and practices that emphasize “The Grade,, to the detriment of the learning process. Clearly the fact that we have a four-year curriculum crammed into three years puts great pressure on both teachers and students to be calculating in their use of time and the kinds of interactions they have. Recently the university has enacted a policy called the “Determination of Undergraduate Graduation Honors,, that halves the weighting of 100-level courses. This is a step in the right direction, since the policy is intended to alleviate some of the pressure on first year students. Perversely, however, it is benefitting large numbers of third year students who because of early registration are able to elbow their juniors out of 100-level courses in the School of Humanities and Social Science. Thus, students compete with one another for the least “risky,, course, while schools battle it out for students' time and attention.

“Good,, teaching has to be a collective effort, driven by a shared vision of what we as teachers are trying to achieve, and supported by institutional policies and practices that are designed to realize those goals. Your office, since it stands outside any department or school, may be a good place to begin such a university-wide discussion. I hope this is the first of many “Dear Winnie,, letters to come!

Kimberly

Dear Kim,

Thanks for sharing your conception about teaching.

Teaching is a scholarly activity. It is not a collation of teaching techniques. The latter are tools to effective teaching at the right time with the right choice. Teaching takes place in an open (open in the sense of inter-active) environment. It is not an isolated activity but a sub-system of the whole. Whatever a teacher does is bound to be constrained by other sub-systems, the internal environment and the external one (social, economical, political and such). This 'system' view of teaching does not demean individual effort, initiatives and drive to excel since it is not easy to excel with all the given constraints. An excellent teacher will definitely face numerous barriers in his/her way to excel but persist. I think the Teaching Award aims to recognize this great effort to excel in teaching in this context. (I might be wrong, since I do not sit on the committee whereas you do. I do sit on similar committee at Lingnan College.)

Within an open and interactive system, no one single person can be held responsible for what happens inside a sub-system, like inside the classroom. Everyone is responsible for everything. It is a team effort. With so many factors affecting students' learning, both inside and outside the classroom, how could a teacher be held responsible for somebody's learning? Also, why should a teacher be held responsible for that? I totally agree with you that it is time to reconsider the overall institutional support and climate to see its impact on students' learning and faculty's work. We need committed leadership who is really concerned about students' learning to take the lead to change.

About students' motivation to learn. Some students are inspired to learn and enjoy learning for the sake of it. Great. Many students here learn to get a job. But this career-orientation does not necessarily hinder students' motivation to enjoy learning. According to SAO statistics, 92% of our graduates started working right after their graduation. They are expected to do so. To these students, the university education is not an individual endeavor but a family business, a means to have economical gains and social/status mobility.

Students are grade-conscious because they have been made to believe that high grade=learning. Is this the case? What has gone wrong with our assessment system? (John Biggs was talking about this on March 27 on campus)

Though you declined to share your "teaching techniques,, with others, your writing has definitely inspired your readers to view teaching from a more holistic approach within an institutional context. It is marvelous.

Thank you, Kim.

Winnie