Interviewing faculty on teaching excellence (Part 3)

This is the third and last issue of the series on teaching excellence, a compilation of the bright ideas from fourteen faculty members and two instructors on effective teaching.

The ideas were collected through unstructured interviews in which interviewees freely discussed their teaching experiences. The discussions were not confined to the particular topics that we used to organize and present the ideas in this series. To make the presentation more concise, not every interviewee is quoted on all topics.

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for all the bright ideas.

Handling difficult situations

Students' passivity in learning

Dr. Jimmy Fung of the Department of Mathematics advises faculty who are new to the campus to prepare themselves to the fact that some students are fairly passive in their learning. This observation was echoed by several interviewees when they were asked about their difficulties or problems encountered in teaching. Various perspectives on the matter are presented in the following.

Ms. Winnie Or from the Language Centre related the students' passivity in learning to their previous schooling. She pointed out that Hong Kong students have been conditioned to absorb information and internalize it as 'knowledge' without going through a stringent thinking or experimentation process. There is little opportunity for them to articulate their own experiences and formulate individual opinions. Therefore, students feel fairly comfortable to remain at the receiving end and expect a lot of information input from lecturers. "First year students in general are fairly quiet in class and do not have sufficient mega-cognitive skills. Helping them to recapitulate their experiences, analyze and synthesize the data and establish their own points of view with sound reasoning is one of my major goal in teaching," mentioned Ms. Or. "It takes time to happen."

To help her students have better control over their own learning, Dr. Dorothy Wong of the Department of Management provides alternative teaching-learning methods in class. Three choices are offered: lecturing, group discussion and a combination of the first two. In general, students prefer the third option.

Early in a course, Dr. Wong establishes contract with students covering what work must be done and what work may be done. For example, every student must write 10 out of 12 open-book quizzes in a semester. Assessment criteria for group presentation are spelled out clearly prior to any group presentation and reinforced after the first few presentations so that other groups get a clearer idea of what constitutes an effective presentation.

To facilitate the development of self-direction in learning, Prof. K. C. Smith of the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering repeatedly discusses learning-to-learn in class. "I try my best to balance my instructional content with technological and philosophical material and never communicate any information or technology as if it were complete." Prof. Smith draws the analogy that life is a lab in which one keeps on experiencing. Trial and success—not error—is the legitimate methodology, a manifestation of using what one knows now to advance one's knowledge in the future.

Academic dishonesty

Three kinds of academic dishonesty were mentioned during the interviews:
- Plagiarism;
- Copying lab reports or essays from other students; and
- Cheating on tests or exams.

Both Dr. Ann Sherman of the Department of Finance and Dr. Jogesh K. Muppala of the Department of Computer Science emphasized that academic dishonesty may be caused by misunderstanding or inexperience. Many students, particularly first year students may come to university knowing nothing about plagiarism. They may simply be too inexperienced and inflexible with language, but have no intention to be dishonest.

As an experienced TA from the Division of Humanities pointed out, "Some students do have trouble rewording text and expressing it as well as the source. A student who puts all ideas into his/her own words is likely to get a lower mark than one who copies but is not caught." To reward original ideas, even those expressed in an awkward way, is the suggested way to handle this situation.

Sometimes, students work together on a lab report and make no particular attempt to express the same idea in different words. To educate students and explain to them how to use the ideas of others correctly has to be done at the beginning of the semester. "I have to explain in advance why copying or cheating is unacceptable and enforce the set rules," said Dr. Muppala. "If I think one student has copied the assignment of another, I'll speak to both of them privately, show them my evidence and ask for an explanation. If the explanation is valid, I accept it; if not, then I'll go through the formal [punishment] procedure."

Setting a good examples in class—e.g., using proper quotations in notes to be distributed to students—is also important to help students learn the correct way to use others' ideas.

"Even when you are faced with an undeniable case of cheating, you have to suit the punishment to the seriousness of the crime and handle with great care," stressed Professor Roland Chin of the Department of Computer Science who has initiated some departmental procedures to handle cheating. "There must be a due process, e.g., a meeting with the student(s) involved, the instructor and a departmental representative, and a fair hearing, i.e., a chance for the students to defend themselves before the invocation of academic sanction. To protect the students' future, statements concerning the case must be handled appropriately," said Prof. Chin.

(The ID Unit has collected some interesting material to help students understand more about plagiarism. Please contact the Unit for copies.)

Class attendance

Few interviewees mentioned this as a problem. Effective teachers know that classes that are well-taught, and are clearly useful, are usually well-attended.

"Some young people don't have enough experience to predict the consequences of their actions and believe they can skip classes and still catch up later," said Dr. Dorothy Wong of the Department of Management. To encourage regular attendance and help students improve their work, Dr. Wong gives small assignments that are worth only a few marks each, and provides frequent feedback. Marked assignments are returned in class and students are urged to come to Dr. Wong personally to collect their assignments in case they are not present in class. The small assignments are also a valuable early-warning mechanism.

Another way to encourage class attendance is to reduce the students' sense of anonymity and increase their sense of responsibility. When a student has been absent, instead of giving an irritated or sarcastic comment, several interviewees suggested a casual comment such as "Sorry you couldn't come last week" or "Do you need help with the work you missed?".

Disruptive behaviour in class

Students talking during a lecture is the most frequently mentioned form of disruptive behaviour in class.

Some methods suggested by the interviewees for handling such situations include:

- talking to students privately after class and explaining to them why their conversation is disruptive to the instructor and the other students in the class;

- lecturing directly to the group being disruptive. Look directly at them and slowly increase your volume until you achieve eye-contact. Talk directly to one of the offenders for a while. The group will get the idea, as well the rest of the class;

- developing a policy and including it in the syllabus. State your expectation clearly as well as the consequences that can be expected if the disruptive behaviour continues;

- talking to the group—"It seems that you have some interesting points to discuss. Can you share them with the class?";

- walking toward an offender and, in a voice that cannot be heard all over the room, make a polite request to refrain from talking.

Teaching-Learning Tips is an ETC publication which aims to provide quick and practical ideas for lecturers and teaching assistants to enhance teaching effectiveness. It will be published four times annually. Contributions of ideas and suggestions of topics are heartily welcomed. Please contact Winnie Wong, editor at ext. 6809 or email "etwinnie".