

## HONOURING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING



### Annual Teaching Excellence Award Ceremony and Outstanding Educator Award Public Lectures 2009

At the Annual Teaching Excellence Award (ATEA) ceremony held on 28 April 2009, 45 faculty members were honoured for their outstanding performance, dedication and commitment to teaching. They received their awards from Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost Prof Tan Eng Chye.

Another event highlight was the Outstanding Educator Award (OEA) Public Lectures, presented by Assoc Prof Goh Say Song and Assoc Prof Kenneth Paul Tan. Assoc Prof Goh gave a stimulating lecture where he shared his thoughts on the multiple roles university educators take on to inspire students to be active and independent learners. His lecture was peppered with examples of strategies he adopted to help students reach their full learning potential, such as the “bottom-

up” approach to make abstract mathematical concepts concrete and accessible.

Assoc Prof Tan’s presentation was just as thought provoking. He emphasised the importance of equipping students not just with knowledge and technical competence, but also the capacity for philosophically informed critical thought, to guard against the dangers of uncritical pragmatism. He shared examples of projects he devised which challenged students to adopt an action-oriented approach to imaginatively apply the knowledge they have acquired, from 24-hour “takeaway exams” to case studies and role-play sessions.

From the lectures, it is clear that both OEA winners are committed to nurturing active learners and are truly inspiring educators. ■

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# AN OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE AND INSPIRE

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
OUTSTANDING EDUCATOR  
AWARD (2009) WINNER  
GOH SAY SONG

Assoc Prof Goh teaches at the Department of Mathematics and has won several teaching awards at both faculty and university level. A dedicated teacher who has successfully made mathematics accessible and enjoyable to students from different faculties and backgrounds, he was also placed on the 2007 Honour Roll. *CDTLink* has a chat with him to find out more.

## **Congratulations on receiving this year's award! How did you feel when you received the news?**

I felt very happy and grateful at the same time. It is a great honour to be selected; after all, there are many outstanding and dedicated teachers in the University. To my teachers, students, colleagues and all who have encouraged and supported my teaching, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

## **What drives you in terms of teaching?**

I have wanted to be a teacher since my younger days. I believe in education's ability to empower and that everyone deserves a good education, which is an important driver for Singapore's success. It plays a significant role in the development of an individual and the progress of our society. I find it gratifying that I am able to contribute, in whatever way I can, towards shaping Singapore's education landscape.

I had the privilege of being taught by many excellent and dedicated teachers in junior college, university and graduate school, and I aspire to be like them. I hope to inspire my students just like how I was inspired by my teachers.

## **You mentioned that as an educator, you play different roles for your students at different stages of their learning journey. Could you relate some challenges you have encountered while doing this?**

For first-year students, my main task is to help them build up fundamental knowledge so that they are equipped with the background capabilities for subsequent modules. These classes are usually large

with students of different aptitudes and learning mindsets. Many students also need to get used to the significant jump in standard when they progress from pre-university to university education. There are issues like how to accommodate weaker students while motivating the more advanced ones, or how to challenge all students effectively.

For my research students, I become their mentor in inventing new knowledge. Unlike coursework, research contains a great amount of uncertainty and there is no guarantee that one will obtain the desired results after embarking on a problem. Challenges in this area include finding ways to encourage, guide and motivate research students to ensure their potential is effectively realised.

## **How do you maintain your enthusiasm for teaching as you manage such challenges?**

I view every challenge as an opportunity; an opportunity to inculcate skills in my students and to make a difference for them. I consider myself part of the education ecosystem in which all educators play meaningful roles. Every student deserves a chance to grow and progress.

## **The student population in NUS has changed and diversified over the years. How have you adapted your teaching style in the face of these changes?**

The "one size fits all" formula seldom works. With the diversity of student population in NUS, I employ different approaches in teaching my modules so as to reach out to students with different backgrounds and abilities. These strategies include taking students on a progressive learning path and providing opportunities for them to achieve multiple levels of understanding in lectures and tutorials. To generate and sustain students' interest in my modules, I have drawn examples from daily life, incorporated IT tools and Internet resources into my lessons, and illustrated the relevance of materials taught with ideas from my research programme.

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# FROM THE FACULTIES: TEACHING WORKSHOP ON FRESHMEN SEMINARS

The Faculty of Science (FOS) held its Annual Teaching Workshop on 22 April 2009, and this year's discussion centred on Freshmen Seminars. FOS teaching staff and guests from other faculties were introduced to the aims and rationale of running such a programme in NUS, which is elucidated in this statement from Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost Prof Tan Eng Chye:

Freshmen Seminars provide an unparalleled opportunity for first-year students ("freshmen") and faculty to explore a scholarly topic of mutual interest together, in a small group setting of about 15 students. Designed with freshmen in mind, students' intellectual curiosities are sparked as they are orientated into becoming an active member of the NUS intellectual community. Faculty benefits too from interacting directly with a handful of bright and talented new students, which can be inspiring and energizing. Obviously, senior students could also benefit from such seminars. In addition to fostering an exciting intellectual environment, the close interaction and early building of rapport between students and staff in these seminars is expected to set the stage for mentoring relationships that could extend to later undergraduate years. Looking forward, Freshman Seminars will become an important learning component of residential life in the University Town.

The workshop featured presenters from FOS, the faculties of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Engineering and the School of Design and Environment (SDE), who shared their experiences teaching such seminars, including how the small group teaching format helps to break down communication barriers between students and faculty, thus motivating students to be more active and independent learners. The presenters were also candid about the challenges they encountered, such as getting enough teaching staff to conduct such seminars regularly, especially in large faculties such as FASS. Participants also had the chance to hear from two distinguished educators, Prof Satoshi Ogihara from Osaka University and Prof Jeremy Bloxham from Harvard University, both of whom provided valuable insights into how the Freshman Seminar programmes are conducted in their respective universities.

Students who attended some of these seminars also shared their thoughts about how it has influenced them academically. According to Ms Chua Pei En from SDE, attending "Policies for Building Sustainable Cities", conducted by Dr Asanga Gunawansa and Dr Kua Harn Wei, was a breath of fresh air after years of "being schooled in the 'Ten-Year Series' mentality, where learning was rarely about discovery or serendipity".



*Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost Prof Tan Eng Chye delivers the keynote address.*



*Ms Anisah Ahmad (FASS) and Ms Chua Pei En (SDE) share their Freshmen Seminar experiences.*

She added that she greatly appreciated the small class size as it put her at ease to ask questions, and being able to learn through discussions enabled her and her peers to take greater ownership of their own learning journeys. Anisah Ahmad, who attended Assoc Prof Paulin Straughan's seminar "Love Actually? The Social Construction of Romantic Love", also had positive things to say about her experience:

I thoroughly enjoyed discussing an "airy fairy" albeit non-exclusive domain, such as Love, that has otherwise always been spoken about in a casual and untailed manner almost comparable to fluff. In this class, however, fitting Love to an academic grounding was the challenge that kept me on my toes. Finally, rounding up the module with an extensive research paper on Portrayals of Romantic Love in Bollywood Movies, was by far the most exciting and engaging assignment I've undertaken. A fantastic lecturer like Prof. Paulin to top it off, takes the Freshmen Seminar to a whole new level!

It is evident that such seminars have made an impact on their attitudes towards learning. Hopefully it will be incorporated into the university curriculum so that more students may benefit from it. ■



# LEARNING FROM STUDENTS: MANAGING STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

**Dr Sujeet K. Sinha**

Department of Mechanical Engineering

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Teaching is a multi-dimensional activity in which a teacher can make his lecture effective in enhancing students' learning in various ways. However, there are some fundamental principles that permeate all types of teaching. The fact is, while university students are a diverse group who come from different backgrounds and are reading different disciplines, they share similar expectations. A good source of finding out what these expectations are, would of course be the students themselves. Hence, student feedback collated at the end of each semester provides some important indicators of how they perceive us as teachers. However, the feedback provides little information that can help to guide us as teachers in the right direction. Also, the feedback questions tend to be very generic and may not give teachers all the necessary cues to effective teaching. For example, students may use the same positive descriptors but the meaning could be totally different for different teachers in different disciplines. An important descriptor like 'interesting teaching' falls into this category. We do not know what the student means by 'interesting' or 'not interesting' teaching.

To supplement the qualitative and quantitative student feedback I receive, I interviewed many of my students after the exam results were released. I wanted to find out what their expectations were for my modules and what they considered to be effective teaching that motivates them to learn more. These students were from the graduating batch of the Bachelor in Engineering (Mechanical Engineering) programme and have read one or two of my modules.

## Student-teacher communication

Many of my students have said that their interest in learning depends upon how the teacher communicates with them in class, during consultation meetings and online (via the IVLE forum and emails). Firstly, a friendly lecturing style helps in reducing the teacher-student gap we often experience because of cultural barriers or other reasons. Effective communication also relates to the way we answer students' questions or engage them during

discussions. Designing some classroom activities which increase communication levels would be helpful. For example, deliberate attempts to discuss some cases or to pose a question which leads on to a discussion improves classroom communication.

Secondly, how we handle our online discussions also has a significant impact on teacher-student communication. Emails have become a very important tool in the learning process. How quickly and how we respond to students' email queries can have a tremendous influence on whether students maintain an interest in the subject. While there is no set rule on how soon or how often a teacher, who is also busy with teaching other modules and his own research, should respond to a particular student's email, some effort towards making one is considered helpful. This will keep their interest in that subject alive and they will also be willing to ask further questions. It is also important that we provide comprehensive answers and avoid one-liners or worse, just a yes-or-no response. Perhaps, the manner of our response shows them that we care about the difficulties students face in the learning process and demonstrates that we are also working hard to facilitate their learning.

Thirdly, we should not overlook other avenues of communication. For example, the online IVLE forum is a good place for a teacher to respond to students' queries or comments. I also feel that it is important for the teacher and students to have as many one-to-one meetings as possible throughout the semester. Mass emailing may not be as effective in building the learner's interest in the subject or the teacher for that matter. Individual communication that is conducted properly would also make students feel that 'the teacher is approachable'.

## Organisation of the module

My students have always appreciated it when I give them a complete overview of the modules, with the important instructions and learning materials provided sufficiently and on time. This can be done at the beginning of the semester (even before the first lecture) and provided in written form or told in the class. This overview includes the learning outcomes, detailed syllabus, lecture notes with slides, home assignments, assessment components (type and

format) and what they expect to learn in the module. This gives them a clear sense of direction and “security”, especially as tests and exams draw near. Though students are usually ready to do additional research for a given assignment, they often prefer the lecturer to provide sufficient reading materials on the topics covered for that semester. It is also fair to do so since the semester is too short (only 13 weeks) for them to conduct comprehensive research on the entire module, since they have to spend time on other modules and projects as well.

### Encouraging class participation

All of my students have said that they like a lecturer who encourages class participation by creating the right learning environment. In my own modules, I have used engineering case studies to elicit student participation. Also, for each slide, I keep some questions which I ask students as I discuss the topic. I feel that it is not just asking questions but also the way we make students feel valued in the class which will matter as far as their interest in the subject is concerned. I have dealt with the issue of class participation in an earlier article for CDTL (Sinha, 2009). My general observation is that when the teacher makes a sincere effort at engaging the class in discussion, it makes the students think and speak. They are also much more attentive when their peers are answering the questions. In a way, they teach themselves when there is active class participation. In fact, one can see this happening when we encourage them to actively participate in the online forums. The teacher’s role here and in class discussions would be to create the right environment and guide the discussion with counter-questions, instead of just settling for a yes-or-no answer.

### Classroom activities

As the popular saying goes, “experience is the best teacher” (*Brainyquote.com*, n.d.), and my observation has been that students would like lectures to be not just a time to take notes but also an opportunity to experience learning. It is up to the teacher to think of how to fill the time with stimulating learning activities. For those of us in engineering disciplines, we understand that each theory we teach has some real life applications and students would like them demonstrated in class. Such activities may be done in a fun way that injects some element of interest in the subject. As one student commented, “[It is] not easy to teach engineering module[s] in [an] exciting or fun way. The module should relate to life...bring [the] module to life.” For example, a student told me that in a physics module, the lecturer brings magnets and liquid nitrogen into the classroom to demonstrate the magnetic levitation effect. This kind of classroom experience can leave a deeper impression than a verbal explanation of the theory using only equations

and diagrams. It will inspire students to explore the theory by themselves, which will complete their learning process.

In my own modules, I have used videos as teaching aids. These videos are often related to the case studies I use for class discussions. They are usually short and relate to a practical use of the theory or concept to be taught. For example, there are many instances of actual engineering failures which are often related to materials or design and these are very interesting to my students. Perhaps the most important thing about classroom activities is that students appreciate the teacher’s effort (and passion) in relating the theory to real life and these activities can inspire them to learn more. After all, we learn better when we discover knowledge for ourselves.

### Relating theory to industrial practices

As I have taught mostly engineering students, I have observed that students prefer to see the real life and industrial application of every theory or topic they are taught. They appreciate it if the lecturer brings his or her own experiences (for example, from consulting or the industry) and presents it to the class in a way that challenges them to think and see the link between theory and practice. Most feel that what they are studying in university should have an immediate application in real life, especially when they join the workforce. In fact, some have seen the benefits of such exposure during their job search and interviews with prospective employers. When employers interview a candidate, they usually want to know what the student can do for them after he or she is hired. Students find it easier to explain what they can do if they have already learnt to apply these theories and concepts. In fact, my students often prefer hands-on experience such as lab-work or site visits. Similarly, they are also keen when a practising engineer gives a seminar on a related topic in the class.

In addition, students prefer to gain further experience in handling some engineering work or equipment by themselves. In this aspect, third-year design projects and some design-centric modules have become very popular. Even an assignment which requires them to think through a practical scenario or to do some research of practical data are appreciated. In fact, tutorial questions can also be related to practical applications so that they can see how the theory works in practice. In a nutshell, as a teacher, depending upon the discipline we teach, there are many ways we can bring actual application examples to the lecture.

### Closing each topic

Students tend to place more importance to a topic learnt if it ends with a good summary. It basically

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# DIGITAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Mr Jyh Wee Sew

Centre for Language Studies

Digitalised language play is an activity that can be shared favourably in telecommunication. A forwarded SMS (short message service), containing words associated with phonetically similar characters in another language, remains amusing with each viewing. The digital script has the Malay word “mahu” (want) linked with the Mandarin character for “cat” while the phrase “tak mahu” (don’t want) is linked with the Mandarin characters for “beat” and “cat”. This approach is similar to the Linkword mnemonic system. The pronunciation of lobster in German (“hummer”), for example, is phonetically linked to the English word “humour” in a similar way. The commercial site *Unforgettable Languages* ([www.unforgettablelanguages.com](http://www.unforgettablelanguages.com)) promotes its language learning business based on such cross-language homonymy (Sew, 2004). Similarly, in the print medium, Susan Keeney uses corresponding phonetic links to teach Malay pronunciations with English phonemics (Sew, 2006).

Digital language creations are defying physical and theoretical conventions. Words and phrases are constantly reconfigured on the mobile screens by different users. Digital media is shaping and reshaping language content by cutting across the boundaries of structural, interactive and semiotic viewpoints on language. According to Baron (2008), digital domestication is now so commonplace in our daily life that even the quote “conscience is an email sent to our brain by God” by Reverend Billy Graham (Baron, 2005/2003) is comprehensible to most people. Thanks to these developments, we are connected both horizontally and vertically.

In view of these rapid digital developments, the NUS Centre for Language Studies’ (CLS) Teaching Development Committee organised a sharing session on teaching foreign languages in Web 2.0. The discussion began on 23 April 2009 and was followed by a hands-on session on 24 April 2009 at CDTL. Many current online symbols were highlighted as being at the foreground of digital tools in Web 2.0. During the discussions, participants had to:

1. Gauge or recall the digital symbols representing Google, Facebook, Instant Messenger, MySpace, RSS Feed, Twitter and Technocrati.
2. Write a definition for Web 2.0 in relation to the learning of foreign languages.



(From left:) Mrs Chen Ing Ru, Mr Thah Ngoc Minh and Mr Martin G. Dopel give a presentation on using podcasting technologies for foreign language learning. CDTL’s Charina Li Ong also gave a presentation on Web 2.0 technologies (page 7).

These activities form an intelligible awakening effort to channel attention to these developments (Lazear, 1999).

Further in the first session, Web 2.0 was introduced as a continuum of Web 1.0 and this innovation provides businesses with commercial possibilities. Other definitions of Web 2.0 include the fact that it enables information sharing in an interlinking fashion among users that leads to learning beyond conventional means. This in turn leads to the development of a collective intelligence among users that propels learning into dynamic interactivity online. A push factor can become a built-in feature in Web 2.0 with RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds incorporated into the system. Updated information from a site can be delivered to the users’ online repository using RSS feeds (Ong, 2009).

Digitalised language material appears daily even if one shuns handheld devices, notebooks or desktops. Mobile phones and MP3 players are powerful tools for disseminating text messages and resources respectively. The ways in which a mobile device adds value to the management of teaching and learning are remarkable. For one thing, it generates telecommunication technology in seconds. By simply sending an SMS, the learner can be contacted when a technical issue related to information sharing arises. Immediate counterchecking can take place to address situations such as when replies to successive electronic queries are not properly disseminated through the server.

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# SPOTLIGHT ON CDTL STAFF

## CHARINA LI ONG, EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIST

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This is the first installment in a new series where we introduce some of the faces and personalities behind the workshops and training programmes CDTL offers.

**Thanks for taking time out to talk to us, Charina! Tell us more about yourself.**

I am from the Philippines and I grew up in Manila, where I received an M.A. in Learning and Teaching (MaLT) from De La Salle University-Manila. I also have an undergraduate degree in Business Administration, with a major in Computer Applications from De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde. I am also a certified Microsoft Office Specialist.

**How long have you been with CDTL?**

I am a recent addition to the team, having only joined CDTL in January 2009 as an educational technologist.

**What were you doing before you came to Singapore?**

Previously, I was an academics coordinator and a senior lecturer for the Multimedia Arts programme at De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde. During my stint there, I was also the head of the school's Instructional Technologies Unit under the Centre for Learner-Centered Instruction and Research, where I managed their learning management system using the Moodle platform. In addition, I facilitated workshops which covered online course development, application programs such as Microsoft Office, Adobe and some open source programs for faculty and staff.

**What are your plans as CDTL's educational technologist?**

In my current role with CDTL, I will focus on enhancing faculty members and students' awareness of pedagogy and learning technologies. I will be doing this through a series of workshops on teaching-

learning and learning technologies and assisting faculty in courseware development. For faculty, I plan to cover workshops that concentrate on e-learning. Some of these include problem-based learning, online assessments and games for learning. In April, I conducted workshops on using Web 2.0 tools such as blogging and podcasting, as teaching aids for academic staff from the Centre for Language Studies (CLS). For students, I want to share my knowledge in Microsoft Office, web design and development and desktop publishing.

**How do you feel about your working experience in NUS so far?**

Integration into any multi-cultural organisation requires a high degree of openness to change. I have been fortunate to have such a supportive team during this adjustment phase. NUS has high expectations from all its staff and I shall respond accordingly to this opportunity and challenge.

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*If you would like to find out how pedagogical tools and learning technologies can enhance your students' learning experience, you can get in touch with Charina at [cdtclo@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cdtclo@nus.edu.sg). ■*

# REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING BY ATEA & HONOUR ROLL RECIPIENTS

*In their own words, some of this year's ATEA and Honour Roll recipients share their perspectives on good teaching, including advice for new colleagues and what they find most (or least) fulfilling about teaching.*

Ms Peggie Chan

Centre for English Language Communication, ATEA winner



My chief message to the Engineering students I have taught over the years has been this: engineers have a responsibility to society. As the interface between technology and society, they should be concerned about whether technology poses problems to people who use it. Safety is an important aspect in this—unsafe bridges, systems (e.g. circuits), workplaces—these should be their concern even as engineers-to-be. Likewise, university students in general should have a keen awareness about controversial issues that the society at large is debating about. My experience is that students know little about the world beyond their own. As instructors, we can change that! We need to shake students out of this complacency and ‘teach’ them that they have a social responsibility to society and the world. Today’s students do not seem concerned enough about issues around them—it could be because there are few platforms to engage them in a problem solving stance. Instructors can give them opportunities to do so through teaching materials that require them to grapple with such problems and devise solutions. ■

Ms Izumi Walker

Centre for Language Studies, ATEA winner



*Ms Walker (in dark blue) and her family with the late Professor Emeritus of Cornell University, Eleanor Jordan*

We want our students, as much as possible, to be active, innovative and creative. To make that happen, teachers need to be the same. However, there is a tendency for teachers to rely too much on ready-made teaching materials. It is indeed efficient and effective to have materials already customised for NUS students, which require little time and effort for lesson preparation. However, it is also important for teachers to innovate and create something from scratch. For the process of development to be successful, we really need to have thought about what to teach and how to teach it. Through this thinking process, we will understand the content better as well as reflect more deeply on our own teaching, since we have ownership of the idea and materials. Eventually, the process will make us better teachers. One of my mottos is ‘practice makes permanent’. If we rely on old materials, our teaching loses its freshness and becomes boring. I learnt this some 20 years ago from Professor Eleanor Jordan of Cornell University, a pioneer of Japanese language education, and I am assured that this is really true. Being active, creative and innovative is not only important for students, but for teachers too. ■

Assoc Prof Milagros (Millie) Rivera

Communications & New Media Programme, ATEA winner



New teachers tend to spend most of their effort and creative energy developing the content of their lectures and often forget that the way the information is conveyed to their students is also very important. My advice is this: when you are planning your lectures, ALWAYS incorporate ways to present the information in engaging, interactive, and fun/creative ways. It does not matter how large the class is, as this will probably require a shift in your teaching approach. It might also force you to get out of your comfort zone. But the payoff is awesome! When students become actively engaged in learning, they

will continue learning even after the lecture is over. They will talk to their friends about what they learnt and will remember the material more vividly than if you had presented it in a traditional way. The best part is that after a while, devising interesting and engaging ways to deliver your lectures will become second nature to you. An added benefit is that YOU will also enjoy teaching a great deal more. ■

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**Mr Alexander Ian Mitchell**

Communications & New Media Programme, ATEA winner



For me, what I find most rewarding about being an educator is when an ex-student comes back to visit. Seeing how an ex-student is doing after graduation, and how he or she is (hopefully!) making use of what I've tried to teach, makes all the hard work worthwhile. It's very difficult to think of what is least rewarding. I think I'd have to say that having to fail a student in a module is the least rewarding part of being an educator. Unfortunately this is sometimes necessary, but I much prefer to work with a student to try to help them to understand the material and learn something from the module. Failing a student means that, in some way, I've failed too. Fortunately, this doesn't happen very often. ■



*A/P Holden (in red T-shirt) with one of his graduate classes, EN5231.*

**Assoc Prof Philip Holden**

Dept of English Language & Literature, ATEA winner

When I first started teaching full-time after graduate studies, I was eager to share the knowledge that I was excited about with my students: I would skip over details in the literary texts I taught in order to cram in as much historical, critical, and theoretical material as possible. In time, I realized that I was following what radical Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire has characterized as the "banking method" of education in which I thought of students as possessing savings accounts to which I might simply transfer knowledge from my own more plentifully endowed central fund. My efforts in teaching over the years have thus aimed to challenge this model, and to create a space of learning and critical pedagogy

within institutional constraints, in which students may appropriate and create knowledge for themselves. I'm not sure I have always succeeded, but I continue to try.

My advice to a graduate student or a young faculty member would thus be to maintain a critical self-awareness and, above all, to develop an autonomous sense of vocation as a teacher. This sense of autonomy ultimately won't rely on formal awards or incentives, or meeting key performance indicators specified by institutions. Rather, it will evolve from reflection on teaching experiences, and interaction with communities of teachers and learners both inside and outside the university. It will be enhanced by a recognition that as teachers we are all students, and that as we teach we continue to learn. ■

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**Dr Simon Avenell**

Dept of Japanese Studies, Honour Roll recipient



For me, quality teaching and meaningful research contain essentially the same ingredients: clarity, coherence, originality and a digestible take-away message. I have found that students respond very positively to modules organised around these intuitive—yet fundamental—principles. Personally, these principles remind me to consider not only the message I want to deliver but also—and importantly—the perspective of my audience. They underscore the necessity for empathy in all effective communication processes. I see teaching as one pillar of the communicative aspect of academic life—the other three being written publications, spoken research presentations and public outreach. I am convinced these four activities can be mutually reinforcing and produce synergies that result in improved overall performance. In other words, their combination makes me a better teacher, researcher and communicator. So my advice to those teaching for the first time would be to always keep your audience in mind and never forget that teaching can enhance other aspects of life as an academic. ■

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## GUEST LECTURE ON THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING & LEARNING BY DR HARRY HUBBALL

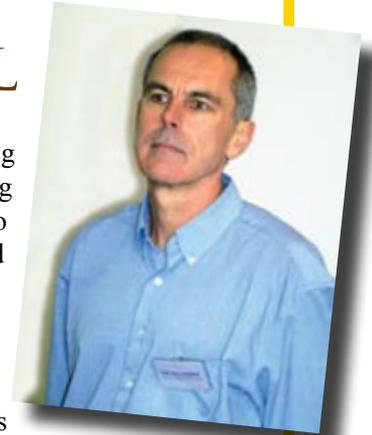
In February 2009, CDTL was privileged to have as guest lecturer curriculum development expert, Assoc Prof (Dr) Harry Hubball from the University of British Columbia (UBC). Dr Hubball is a 3M National Teaching Fellow and was instrumental in developing the UBC Faculty Certificate Program on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. He is also the co-chair of this programme.

During his lecture, entitled "Integrating program-level learning outcomes and institutional teaching development plans: The scholarship of curriculum and pedagogical practice in higher education", Dr Hubball highlighted various strategies for implementing effective learning-

centred curricula, one of which is

the importance of cultivating curriculum learning communities. He also talked about evidence-based indicators for a successful programme, including the quality of its demonstrable learning outcomes, the quality of its graduates as well as its research profile. The lecture was interspersed with lively discussions between Dr Hubball and the audience, several of whom related the challenges of implementing learning-centred curricula in their respective disciplines.

*Dr Hubball's lecture is available online at CDTL's channel on NUScast (<http://www.youtube.com/user/NUScast>), under the title "CDTL-The scholarship of curriculum and pedagogical practice in higher education". Dr Hubball will be visiting NUS in February 2010 for a follow-up seminar. We look forward to learning more from him. ■*



## STUDENT DIALOGUE SERIES: DIALOGUE WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS

As part of CDTL's ongoing efforts to engage with students, the first installment of the Student Dialogue series was conducted on 13 March 2009. Graduate students from the School of Computing, Faculties of Science and Engineering, as well as the Communications and New Media Programme met Assoc Prof Chng Huang Hoon and Dr Wu Siew Mei to exchange ideas and share perspectives about their learning experiences in NUS.

During the session, participants discussed several issues, including the pros and cons of having a faculty-specific or mixed Teaching Assistant Programme, whether the postgraduate syllabus should be less exam-centric, as well as the importance of cultivating effective research skills and developing good working relationships within academic practice. As most of the participants were overseas students for whom English was their second language, they also

shared their experiences of having to overcome various communication and language barriers, such as understanding different accents and taking notes effectively in English. One participant related his experience of teaching undergraduate students for the first time and opined that CDTL could conduct more workshops on teaching and engaging students, especially since many of them lacked prior experience in teaching. They also suggested making past CDTL workshops and seminars available as archived videos on IVLE, so that they could learn from these sessions.

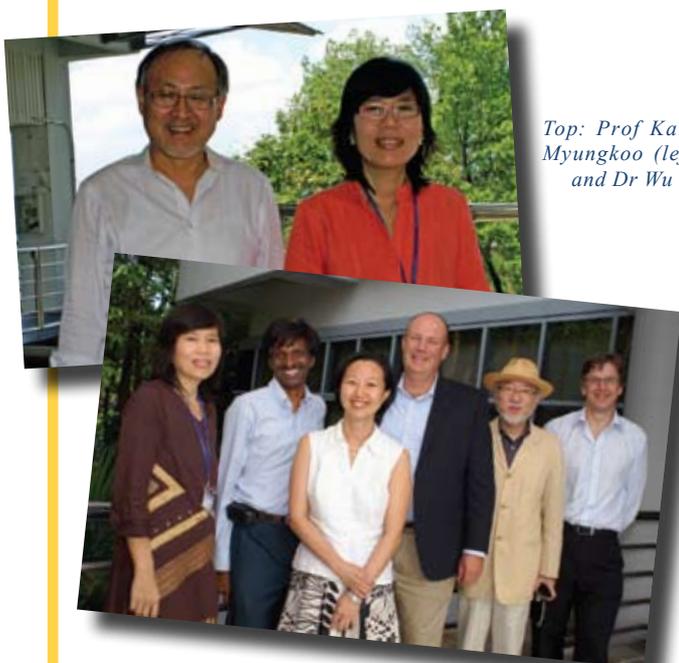
The dialogue session ended on a positive note, the issues raised providing greater insight into graduate students' learning needs. ■



## Visitors to CDTL

Over the previous semester, CDTL played host to several overseas guests who were in Singapore on fact-finding trips to learn more about our educational facilities and teaching practices.

In February, CDTL received Assoc Prof Ngo Sy Tung, Vice Rector of Vinh University, Vietnam and his team, as well as Prof Kang Myungkoo, who is the Dean of the Faculty of Liberal Education at Seoul National University. Both groups were introduced to the functions of CDTL and the extensive range of programmes and pedagogical support services the centre provides to NUS faculty and students. A five-member delegation from Osaka Prefecture University, led by Prof Nagateru Araki, also visited CDTL on 16 March. In addition to being shown around CDTL, they also sat in to observe a workshop on basic inferential statistics conducted by Mr Krishna Booluck, CDTL's Research Assistant. ■



Top: Prof Kang Myungkoo (left) and Dr Wu

Bottom: Prof Bloxham and Prof Ogihara (third and fourth from left respectively) with their NUS hosts.

On 23 April, CDTL had the pleasure of receiving education experts Prof Jeremy Bloxham, Dean of Arts & Science at Harvard University and Prof Satoshi Ogihara of Osaka University, who were guest speakers for the Annual Teaching Workshop organised by the Faculty of Science. Together with Assoc Prof John Richardson (Director, University Scholars Programme) and Dr Lakshiminarayanan Samavedham from the Faculty of Engineering, it was a good opportunity for CDTL to share information on pedagogy with both guests and also learn about teaching and learning initiatives in their respective universities. ■

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

CDTL would like to congratulate:

- Dr Wu Siew Mei on her appointment as the Director of the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) from 1 June 2009. The CDTL team has benefited greatly from her leadership and guidance over the last five months, especially in terms of developing the various programmes CDTL offers to faculty and students. We wish her every success in her new appointment. ■
- Three of our colleagues received their Long Service Award in March 2009. They are: Management Assistant Officers (MAOs) Ms Aini Jaafar and Ms Doreen Thia who have been with the centre for 10 years, and our Specialist Associate Ms Ma Lin Lin, who has been with CDTL for 15 years. We would like to extend our appreciation for their dedication and valuable service to the centre and the University. ■



CDTL's long service award recipients. From left: Doreen, Lin and Aini

CDTL would also like to welcome:

- Ms Charina Li Ong, who joined our team in January 2009 as an Educational Technologist. You can find out more about Charina on page 7 of this issue.
- Ms Pansy Kok Mee Hwa, who joined our team in March 2009 as an Assistant Manager for our Centre. ■

## REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING (CONT'D)

*...continued from page 9*

Dr Goh Pei Siong, Daniel  
Dept of Sociology, ATEA winner



I see myself first and foremost as an enabler—enabling my students to think about their place in society, to learn how to study and understand the people and practices around them, to intervene in the world as responsible social agents pursuing the good in society. My goal as an enabler is to equip students with the cognitive tools for reflection, research and experimentation, and provide a safe place for doing so without the fear of discomfort and making mistakes. When my students take ownership of their own thoughts, their actions and their very life, when they don't look up to me or anyone else but have become their own person, when I become a mere advisor and supporter, then I have succeeded. ■

Assoc Prof Lim Kian Meng  
Dept of Mechanical Engineering, ATEA winner



I would advise new colleagues to work on reaching out to the students and getting them engaged in learning the subject and the learning process itself. This can be challenging, especially when they teach a big class (200–300 students or more). A big class size covers a wide spectrum of students, with diverse interests and aptitudes. The key to engaging students is to be able to empathise with their learning goals and struggles, while at the same time be able to convey to them the importance and motivation of the subject taught. In engineering, relating the principles taught to practical applications helps to generate among students an interest in the subject and show its relevance to their future careers. Also, the use of information technology, such as animations and videos, would often help to illustrate and convey abstract concepts and ideas. References to websites like Wikipedia and YouTube will also help them to understand the subject matter better, especially when they learn at their own pace during self study. Students nowadays are very tech-savvy and we need to adapt new tools to complement traditional teaching methods. ■

Assoc Prof Sanjib Kumar Panda  
Dept of Electrical & Computer Engineering, ATEA winner



My teaching advice would be to set goals to: (a) cultivate an interest in the subject matter by creating the right environment in the classroom for students to feel comfortable, which would allow students to open up and start interacting, (b) arouse their curiosity and thinking abilities by throwing hypothetical questions which contradict basic theoretical assumptions, (c) demonstrate difficult and complex concepts using simulation tools, (d) perform experiments to validate theories taught and show them how simulation and experimental results differ from theoretical predictions, and (e) engage them in performing variants of these experiments to find new things and in doing so, stimulate their interest in performing research. ■

Prof Ip Yuen Kwong, Alex  
Dept of Biological Sciences, Honour Roll recipient



Teaching excellence cannot be achieved simply by the mastery of teaching skills, techniques and strategies, because it relies predominantly on the teacher's motive, desire and value in teaching. Excellent teachers in higher education are master learners who have spent years developing a deep understanding of what it means to learn in their respective fields of study. They have reflected on their own learning experience and intuitively understood that a deep learning experience is what they want for their students. They also have a fervent desire to understand how students learn, and therefore constantly relate students' learning with their own learning and explore methods to facilitate that kind of learning in their students. Through practice and experimentation, they have developed effective teaching skills and useful strategies to help students acquire a deep learning experience. However, excellent teachers would not be satisfied with receiving the highest possible student ratings or the greatest number of teaching awards. Instead, they gain the greatest satisfaction from seeing their students' achievements as master learners. Thus, excellent teachers frequently reflect on and modify their conception of teaching and learning, constantly examine their own academic identities as master learners and continuously conduct research on methods that would help their students learn more effectively. ■

Assoc Prof Rudolf Meier  
Dept of Biological Sciences, ATEA winner



New to teaching? Don't be apprehensive; just explain why you like the subject.

Teaching for the first time is a daunting task. You have to familiarise yourself with the syllabus, select a textbook, fit the content into a schedule and so on. You are also likely to be apprehensive about public speaking. All this may distract from what probably matters most in education. According to George Bernard Shaw, "what we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child."

The safest way to achieve this goal is to look at a module as a long argument that explains why you think the topic is important enough for you to dedicate your working life to it. The safest way to miss this goal is to behave like a "syllabus robot" that dispassionately covers everything in the same vivid detail. Instead, focus on a few important concepts; they are also likely the very ones that motivated you to join this field. Find effective ways to present them. Also, don't introduce abstract ideas without first discussing a case study. Reinforce them with additional examples but make sure they appeal to different modalities (e.g. use video clips, practical exercises or the IVLE forum). There is also nothing wrong with letting the students know why you are particularly passionate about certain ideas. After all, you're a teacher and not a textbook. ■

Assoc Prof Chan Aik Hui, Phil  
Dept of Physics, ATEA winner



Good teachers can master the art of learning by adopting a more global perspective of the subject. For example, it may be useful to think more in words, not just in efficient mathematical symbols, especially when teaching cross-faculty modules like GEMs. After all, the American scientist Carl Sagan once said that "science is a way of thinking, much more than it is a body of knowledge."

To achieve this mode of thinking, one could read widely for different viewpoints on a particular theory or physical phenomenon. As French philosopher Auguste Comte noted in his *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830), "to understand a science, it is necessary to know its history."

Reading (i.e. making notes and writing essays) helps one to think, crystallise and articulate one's thoughts, and to determine which parts of the theory are epistemic (relates to knowledge) or ontological (deals with the nature of existence). As the Greek dramatist Sophocles put it, "It is necessary that one must learn by doing the things; for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try."

Finally, what we teach are mostly standard undergraduate materials that we had also learnt as students. The fact is that because it is so time-consuming to do so, we do not normally scrutinise the philosophical aspects, such as epistemic-ontological knowledge issues, until we teach. Aristotle probably expressed it best when he referred to teaching as "the highest form of understanding." ■



Dr Chan (second from left) with his graduate students and research staff

Dr Chan Chun Yong, Eric  
Dept of Pharmacy, ATEA winner

Teaching is more than a technique; it is an art. Good teachers challenge and inspire the strong students, encourage and motivate the weak ones and by their own passion and positivity, instil in all students a love for the subject. ■

*continued on the next page...*

## REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING (CONT'D)

*...continued from the previous page*

Dr Tan Seow Hon  
Faculty of Law, ATEA winner



A teacher must believe in the worth of the persons we are teaching. Over the years, I've learnt to start off from the belief that my students' lives are significant and that they can go on to impact others powerfully. As teachers, we only have a partial glimpse of our students' full potential. I've discovered a teacher should be prepared to lead a class and relate on the basis of what students can become, and thereby help them to achieve their potential, rather than to react to who they are. It's good to provide an affirming and authentic classroom environment in which students feel valued as persons and safe enough to put their views to the test and stand up for what they believe in. It's helpful for the teacher to seek to understand where students are coming from individually, and use culturally current language and examples to engage them on familiar grounds. At the end of the day, I believe every person hopes to have an abundant life. Everyone has an innate need for her life to count for something, and desires to be inspired and motivated. It's great if a class becomes a space for students to find out who they are and what they really believe in. ■

Dr Soo Yuen Jien  
Dept of Computer Science, ATEA winner



There probably isn't any universal, sure-fire way to become a good teacher. For me, the following tips work pretty well. To be a good teacher, you need to:

- **Become a child again.** Remember the thrill you felt when you first understood the beautiful and profound ideas in your field? After spending years immersed in your discipline, such ideas may now seem mundane and just common sense to you. However, don't forget that most students would have just embarked on this same journey you took years ago. Discard your preconceptions and relook at these ideas. Approach the subject as if this is the first time you are learning about them. Share the joy and thrill of (re) discovering these beautiful ideas in your subject.
- **Become an "entertainer".** Grab your students' attention by any means. You can only facilitate learning when they are willing to listen and follow you. Most, if not all, of us feel that the subject we teach is the most wonderful and interesting in the world. However, if you can't retain their attention, all your knowledge and effort would be for naught. "Entertain" them with a well timed and funny joke, or sing a song (if it works for you), as long as it grabs their attention for another 20 minutes, so that you can deliver another important lesson. "Entertain" first, drop the bomb later.

Enjoy teaching and may you have a fruitful semester ahead. ■

Assoc Prof Ling Yean Yng, Florence  
Dept of Building, Honour Roll recipient



Dear new faculty member,

If you have just received the Students Online Evaluation of your teaching and you feel that your scores are not high enough or do not reflect the effort that you put in, may I offer three possible reasons:

1. **Public speaking skills.** Many of our students are not used to listening to accented English spoken by a non-Singaporean. Speak at a slower pace to help them understand what you are saying. Check if you are projecting your voice sufficiently. Don't swallow your words.
2. **Absence of presence.** For students to learn effectively, the lecturer needs to be engaging. Ask yourself if you have enough 'presence' in class and if you give students sufficient mental and intellectual stimuli. Use examples, anecdotes and stories to illustrate the concept, theory and principle that you are teaching. Enlighten them on how the lecture will be of some relevance to their lives. Start the lecture by telling them what's in it for them in today's lesson.
3. **Over teach.** A new faculty may prepare undergraduate lecture materials which are pitched at Level 6000. The new faculty may feel that their notes and slides should contain all

the essential information undergraduates must know—so the new faculty thinks. Simplify what you need to teach. Tell students where they can get additional information and let them read up on their own. They are not impressed by lectures that they do not understand. Don't behave like they read only one module—your module. They have a life to lead too.

Of course, there could be other reasons. Just ask your students. ■

Assoc Prof Wong Nyuk Hien  
Dept of Building , Honour Roll recipient



An effective teacher is one who is passionate about his teaching. It is not just about you as a teacher imparting knowledge to your students but rather, to ensure that they are able to understand your teaching. This can be done by bringing yourself down to their level, showing concern and trying to understand the difficulties they are facing. An effective teacher should also be one who is able to connect their teaching to the real world. This can be done by connecting the teaching content to real life examples so that students can understand the link. It is important that the teacher constantly look out for new information related to the subject they teach and keep abreast of the latest technologies. Lastly, an effective teacher is one who should be versatile and willing to explore different approaches to make their teaching more lively and interesting. ■

Dr Gerald Koh  
Dept of Epidemiology & Public Health, ATEA winner



When it comes to good teaching, my personal ten commandments for teaching are:

1. **Start with the end in mind.** Some call it outcome-based education but I call it purpose driven learning.
2. **KISS (Keep it simple, stupid).** Your job is to make a complex subject understandable and not induce awe at its complexity. Doing the latter is vanity, pedagogically futile and just plain stupid.
3. **Ask the right questions.** This applies to both the classroom and during exams. In the classroom, ask questions that build upon what was just taught. It alerts you to whether your students have understood you and challenges them to think at incremental levels. In exams, ask questions that really matter. Assessment drives learning and unimportant questions lead to students learning unimportant things.
4. **Ask your students to ask questions.** Remember to create the right environment for this. I do this by telling my students: "There's no such thing as a stupid question, only students who remain stupid because they don't ask questions."
5. **Make it real.** The more abstract your subject, the more you need to contextualise it to real life. A four-minute YouTube video of a woman recounting her husband's mental decline is more effective in driving home the importance of dementia as a disease than a 30-minute diatribe on its epidemiology.
6. **Link what you teach with what students already know.** Tertiary education is so modularised now that students have difficulty making connections between foundation courses and advanced ones. Students learn faster if they can build upon what they have already learnt.
7. **Remember the soft stuff.** Give extra credit for initiative, teamwork, professionalism, ethical behavior and other soft skills. Tertiary education is not only about knowledge transfer; it is also about cultivating in our brightest all the skills they need to succeed decades after graduation.
8. **Use the right tool.** Every teaching and assessment method has its strengths and weaknesses. Choose the right method, more than one if necessary, which will maximise the learning outcomes for your subject.
9. **A teacher who is serious about teaching should treat teaching-related peer review seriously.** We depend on peer review to improve the quality of our research. Do not have double-standards.
10. **Don't neglect your research.** No matter how great your teaching, it is of no use if you do not achieve promotion and tenure to continue teaching. ■

# THOUGHTFUL TEACHING— THE SPIRIT OF TEACHING

Ms Chua Siew Beng

Human Resource Management Unit

At the end of one lesson in Semester 2, AY 2008/2009, my student Kamran asked me, “Ma’am, you’ve asked this question so many times. Why do you persist when there’s always no reply?” I was taken aback.

**The “question” in question is, “Do you have any questions for me?”**

Like many teachers, I often check whether students understand what I just taught by asking a variety of questions. After explaining a certain concept, I habitually end by asking students if they have any questions for me. I would proceed to the next task if there were none. Until Kamran’s feedback, it had not occurred to me that there would be any issue with asking such a question.

Kamran, giving his reason for the remark, felt that it is the student’s responsibility to take the initiative to ask questions without any prompting. He felt that, as a teacher, I should not bother asking the question anymore if it has not been eliciting any responses. Another interesting insight!

**Have I been asking a redundant question? Is it the question or my methodical approach to asking the question that requires examination?**

I have taught classes with students clamouring to ask questions, and classes with quiet and unresponsive students. The former energises me and I look forward to meeting these students week after week. In contrast, the latter, which is characteristic of Kamran’s class, saps my energy and forces me to question how long I can maintain the energetic front of a committed and passionate teacher, patiently waiting for questions that would never be asked.

Very often, after a session with a class like Kamran’s, I would experience a tinge of sadness, followed by a little disappointment and anxiety. Why? This is because I feel that I have not done enough for the class. Inevitably, my response to these feelings would be to continue searching for a ‘better’ method of instruction.

**Have I neglected something that is more important while being caught up with attempting alternative teaching methods to engage and elicit participation from an unresponsive class? Did I ask questions by way of routine? More importantly, have I, in my eager pursuit of effective pedagogical approaches,**

**fallen into the trap of using these methods and processes without passion?**

While I had lamented about the dwindling spirit of learning among students in an earlier CDTLink article entitled “Thoughtful Teaching—The Spirit of Learning” (Chua, 2008), it occurred to me that I have forgotten an important part of the equation in successful learning and teaching—the spirit of teaching.

The spirit of teaching is about teachers. It denotes a force that energises and inspires. It is emotional and passionate. It gives meaning to a teacher’s work and is the *raison d’être* for pursuing this profession.

Beyond having mastery over their content and applying effective pedagogy, great teachers do much more. For them, the same lesson, repeatedly taught, is never the same. Likewise, the same question, asked many times, is never the same. The spirit of teaching imbues each encounter they have with their students with a spiritual impulse that influences a student for life:

A student’s growth as a person can be greatly aided by a teacher of spiritual sensitivity. Even the best of biography is second-rate company compared to the living acquaintance with such a teacher. A learner’s spirit can be so awakened and quickened that he may have an enduring appreciation of Shakespeare because the soul of a great teacher was spent in his learning it. Or history may forever hold him in its power because it was interpreted by a teacher whose subject and character become as one. (Hammond, 1948, p.130)

A teacher’s love for the subject, affection for his students, and the meaning he finds in his work provide the basis for how he defines his role and his commitment to the art of teaching. Hence, the challenge that lies before many teachers is the need to recognise and remember this spirit of teaching as the force that makes the difference in every teacher’s and student’s classroom experiences.

It is difficult to articulate the spiritual impulses that drive me as a teacher, but Kamran’s feedback has come at an opportune time. It has made me realise that I have focused too much on the technicalities of teaching, like an actor simply reciting lines from a script and performing without spirit. I have fallen into

a mundane routine as I deliver lesson after lesson, year after year. In the process, I have left behind the very spirit that brought me to this profession. Indeed, while methods and processes are necessary in successful teaching, of equal importance is the need to have the intangible quality that each teacher brings to every class and student-teacher encounter.

So, the next time when I teach the same module or ask the same questions in my classes, I will be careful not to carry the notion that I am merely repeating myself. Instead, I will remember why I became a teacher in the first place and will continue to bring to class the energy and enthusiasm which

characterised the very first lessons that I taught—with passion, meaning and purpose, all in the spirit of teaching!

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## DIGITAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

...continued from page 6

Sometimes, other important information such as groupings in a centralised test may not be distributed, and using a mobile device can mitigate any potential difficulties in assessment management. SMS is also effective in reminding learners whose mailboxes are full. The advantage of sending an SMS becomes obvious when overloaded mailboxes become a chronic symptom of ineffective learning. User doubts, which are usually prompted by the postmaster sending them alerts for a variety of reasons (e.g. a possible failed delivery), could also be eradicated via the mobile. An SMS in such instances can ease the stress caused by the anxiety of preventing further miscommunications in learning.

On a lighter note, the mobile phone can also be an incubator for memes. In the context of digital media, a meme is a contagious idea which is spread through electronic networks, creating a new form of digital bonding (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Memes sent and distributed via SMS may be funny as well as risky. For example, the homonymic word pun between Malay and Mandarin terms mentioned earlier can provide some mental respite from the monotony of learning. Yet one must remember that the effects of mobile devices on language use suggests that (new) literacy is currently being reshaped by the digital behavior of a new generation of techno-savvy young adults.

The complex digital soundscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century includes multiple audio files, with the mobile ringtone being one of them. Ringtones are dished out as part of popular culture on websites which cater to trendy young netizens who are also mobile phone users. Starlets from MediaCorp TV and the Channel U programme *Campus SuperStar* represent the pretty and cool faces endorsing certain tunes packaged and marketed as ringtones, giving rise to a genre of digital tones differentiated by age group or season. In this respect, mobile phones and MP3 players are devices which enable a target language to travel digitally. Language learners subscribing

to such digital culture can enhance their command of expressions and vocabulary when the process of language acquisition is infused with fun through engaged listening of such ringtones.

A common advantage of telecommunicating foreign language learning is that it dovetails with the daily digital activities of young adult learners. Incorporating a digital element within the pedagogy design to develop linguistic intelligence among learners is thus a practical and positive step forward. As a word of caution, language gurus should be judicious and not incorporate such technology lock, stock and barrel into their teaching. Instead, they should align the technology with practical language learning.

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# CRITICAL THINKING AND CREATIVITY IN A DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM

AN INTERVIEW WITH OUTSTANDING  
EDUCATOR AWARD (2009) WINNER  
KENNETH PAUL TAN



Assoc Prof Kenneth Paul Tan teaches at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and is also the School's Assistant Dean (Academic Affairs). He previously taught at the Political Science Department and the University Scholars Programme. A recipient of more than ten teaching awards since 2000, his research interests include political theory, comparative politics and cinema studies, specialising in Singapore studies with a special focus on topics such as democracy, civil society, media, the arts, multiculturalism and meritocracy. *CDTLink* caught up with Assoc Prof Tan to find out more.

## **Congratulations on receiving this year's OEA! How did you feel when you received the news?**

I felt deeply honoured. In January this year, I was awarded tenure and promoted to associate professor. So this award was the second piece of good news I received this year, making 2009 a really great year for me.

## **Tell us more about your teaching philosophy.**

My philosophy, if you can call it that, has evolved with my practice. Both are driven by the complex pleasures of teaching and a belief that education is a noble vocation. I have set myself a few personal goals. I want to inspire and empower students to take active ownership of their own learning and to be comfortable with the notion that they themselves are sources of learning for other students and their teachers. I want to set high standards for my students, challenging them with complex ideas and questions that require full engagement with the readings and class activities.

I also want to get students into the habit of continually re-examining the familiar in the light of the new and unfamiliar. I want to encourage them to embrace and not fear the messiness of knowledge and understanding. I want to help them to think, express themselves and communicate with others in ways that are clear, critical, creative and vivid. I want to encourage academically inclined students to pursue graduate studies and

eventually a career in academia. Finally, I want to play at least a small part in helping my students to fulfil their potential in life and develop as intelligent, sensitive, critical, open-minded, imaginative, creative, practical, communicative and active citizens equipped with a moral and ethical compass to make sense of the big questions for humanity, nation, government, community, society and self.

## **Who, or what inspired you to teach?**

I come from a family of teachers. My father began as a school teacher before going into business, while my mother was a school teacher from the start to the end of her career. My wife is a school principal, the youngest in Singapore to become one. I started thinking like a teacher when I was an undergraduate student in the UK. We had a very heavy reading load and I devised a way of studying that involved imagining how I would teach whatever I was reading to a class of college students. Later, I was fortunate enough to begin my academic career at the University Scholars Programme, where my progressive teaching values were formed.

## **What for you is the most rewarding part about being an educator, and what is the least rewarding?**

I love the classroom: preparing for it, performing and interacting in it, and reflecting on what went well and not so well at the end of the day. I love the opportunity to meet new students with each new semester: getting to know them, their experiences, interests, hopes, fears and ambitions, and getting them to fall in love with my subject. I love how students I meet later in life remember my courses and tell me with enthusiasm how my teaching has had an impact on the way they think and act. (I sometimes wonder whether it was the content or manner of my teaching that made the strongest impact.) I love the way designing new modules and preparing materials for them can be dovetailed with my own research interests. In fact, my research agenda has been partly driven by teaching needs and the teaching itself has been continuously refreshed by developments in my own research. What I don't enjoy doing is grading essays—I recognise the

importance of giving detailed feedback on students' work (I usually give a page of detailed and constructive remarks for each essay), but I also feel exhausted doing it.

**You mentioned that teaching must extend beyond mere mastery of content to an expanded mode of reasoning and judgment about their appropriate and beneficial application in the world. How has this aim informed your teaching style?**

It is important to go beyond teaching students how to achieve goals through technical application. We also need to be able to question the assumptions underlying these goals, locate the often unintended and unexpected consequences of our actions no matter how well-meaning they might be, and think and communicate not just in narrowly technical ways, but also through moral-political and aesthetic modes of reasoning. I have therefore tried to make my classroom as democratic as possible, encouraging philosophically informed dialogue that is enriched through creative modes of expression and aimed at developing critical thinking, empathy and imagination. In my OEA public lecture, I described some examples of how I have attempted this: through a dialogue-writing exercise, case-study and role-play approach and service learning.

**How has your teaching style evolved since you started your academic career in 2000?**

I think I have become less of a control freak! When I started teaching, I wanted to generate full and active

class participation through lessons that—looking back—were over-planned and over-designed. I really enjoyed designing and executing pedagogical innovations. I treated the classroom as a kind of theatre production with highs and lows, and richly suggestive moments that would stimulate unconventional thought and discussion. Now, I am much more comfortable with less structure, though I still believe in the value of bringing academic materials to life by introducing thoughtful stimuli to draw out productive reactions. I have also developed a mind-mapping technique to enhance Socratic discussion as a way of working with student reactions.

**What makes a good teaching day for you?**

It's a good teaching day when I feel that the key ideas and concepts I wanted to discuss were dealt with in a participative, wide-ranging and non-superficial way; and when ideas I had not even thought of emerged during class dialogue, making the classroom a more genuine community of collaborative learners.

**What advice would you give a graduate student/new academic when it comes to teaching?**

Take ownership of the teaching assignments that you get. Don't allow them to be a chore. Bring yourself and your research interests fully into the teaching, and be open enough to allow your teaching experience to relate with your research activities in a synergistic way. ■

## AN OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE AND INSPIRE—AN INTERVIEW WITH OUTSTANDING EDUCATOR AWARD (2009) WINNER GOH SAY SONG

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**What makes a good teaching day for you?**

I always try to make sure that every lecture or tutorial is a quality learning experience for my students. To me, a good lesson should capture their attention from beginning to the end, explain the materials covered clearly and stimulate their interest in the topic. From students' reactions and facial expressions, I can tell whether I have achieved my teaching goals for the day. In the event that I do not succeed, I would identify what the problem is so as to do better next time.

**As an educator, what do you want your students to learn from you, aside from mastering content?**

I would like to equip my students with the ability for further and independent learning, as well as to bring out their full potential. In addition, I hope to cultivate their interest in learning and teaching. I am particularly happy whenever some of my students indicate interest in a teaching career and subsequently join the education service.

**What advice would you give a graduate student/new academic when it comes to teaching?**

Teaching is an area that requires much dedication and commitment to do well. I describe them as the three C's of teaching. The first C is the commitment for us as educators to perform each and every one of our teaching tasks to the best of our abilities. The second C is about the commitment to venture into novel teaching methods as well as to initiate and drive new educational programmes. The third C, which requires even more from us, is the commitment to sustain and continue our efforts in education and teaching over an extended period of time.

While teaching can be demanding, it is particularly rewarding because we are given the special opportunity of educating and inspiring the next generation. ■

## LEARNING FROM STUDENTS: MANAGING STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

... continued from pg 5



A humorous observation about teaching. (Illustration by the author)

helps them understand the important points that were taught and refreshes their memory. My experiment with giving very extensive summaries of my lectures at the end of the semester through email has been appreciated by my students as it has helped them review each lecture thoroughly. Summaries can also be given at the end of each lecture.

The above tools I used in my teaching have helped me in catching the students' attention as they have all shown a greater interest in the subject. I gauged their increased interest in my teaching through the extensive questions they ask me through e-mail or in person and their increased participation in the classroom and online forums. However, what surprised me during my interviews with them has been that there was no mention of the examination when I discussed their interest in module and my teaching. Thus, when it comes to their interest in a teacher's teaching and the subject, their worries about grades may not be as strong as their curiosity to learn new things and to see whether what they learnt will be used in their life journey ahead.

The assessment of student satisfaction through these interviews correlates well with a recent study by Assoc Prof Daphne Pan, where she analysed the student feedback reports of teachers across different NUS faculties (Pan, 2009). She observed that the top four descriptors students use for effective teaching are "interesting", "approachable", "clarity" and "ability to explain". "Humorous" came twelfth on this scale. These descriptors are applicable to all disciplines. While it is understood that the tools to achieve effective teaching might vary from discipline to discipline, I think the important point to note is that as teachers, we can try various means of generating students' interest in the subject and provide them with a clear understanding of the subject matter and in particular, how they could use that knowledge when they graduate.



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