

MY TEACHING STORY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2019-20
(SECOND ISSUE)

THE HANG SENG UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING



教與學發展中心
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Message from the Director of Centre for Teaching and Learning

By Dr Ben Cheng

HSUHK is small but BEAUTIFUL!

We have a group of beautiful teachers at HSUHK! They love teaching and always spend extra time after classes coaching students to develop their potential. You will see how students are transformed from passive learners to active knowledge seekers by this group of devoted teachers. To pursue excellence in teaching, they are willing to improve their teaching skills continuously through “Learn to Teach and Teach to Learn”.

In the second issue of “My Teaching Story”, I have invited four Teaching Excellence Awards Recipients (2018/19), Dr. Eko Liao (Management), Dr. Daniel Mo (Supply Chain and Information Management), Dr. Jay Parker (English) and Dr. Wong Muk-yan (Social Science), to share their interesting stories with us.

I hope you find inspiration in their stories!
Enjoy reading!

Ben Cheng
Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning



Teaching Incognito: My Teaching Story

By Dr Eko Liao (Management)

"If the conscious mind - the part you consider to be you - is just the tip of the iceberg, what is the rest doing?" Right before writing my teaching story, the book— "Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain" written by David Eagleman—that I am obsessed with, paused on the "conscious mind" section. It then dragged me all the way back to the day from which I started to be "conscious" about wanting to be a teacher, becoming a teacher, and being a teacher.

Of all sorts of ways that people embarked on their career choices, mine is quite a straightforward one.

Age 10, Chinese teacher, "scripted speech".

Thinking back, Ms. Xu probably was the one who had planted the little seed in me of wanting to be a teacher. I never thought listening to someone's lecturing can be so enjoyable and memorable. All the interesting history stories, the vivid examples, and the inspiring questions made her classes so involving and engaging. Whilst I was a little admirer of her teaching, a not-so-secret "secret" task between her and me had even strengthened my joyful experiences. Two weeks before the school's teacher-parent meeting, Ms. Xu assigned me the task of giving a 5-minute sharing at the meeting—to talk about how we were taught to write essays. As much as it was a proud moment for a student, I was nervous.



The rest ten days were then packed with one-on-one coaching meetings and discussions with her. She helped me with working out scripts for almost every sentence I was going to say, all the tips for body language, the facial expression, ways to answer questions from the audiences, etc. For the first time, I was so empowered and felt like things I talked and shared may make changes! The actual meeting was a blur to me now, but one thing I was sure — teaching can be fun, and that I also want to be that encouraging teacher just like Ms. Xu.

After almost making my mind to be a teacher, the journey of becoming a teacher started.

Age twenty (something), Dean Tjosvold, “cooperative goals”.



Dean was the supervisor of my MPhil study for two years, and has been my advisor ever since. With my eyes closed, I can still picture the first time I was in his class. “Form a group of three, turn around and face each other...make sure the members in your teams are knee to knee, eye to eye...” These were the same good old instructions from Dean. He has always insisted on having his students to share with the team one thing they had experienced in the past week at the beginning of every class, and then having them to share one thing they remember the most from the lecture at the end of every class. Students were always put in groups to work on challenging tasks and projects, and Dean’s signature guidance about teamwork is to “develop cooperative goals in your team”. “What kind of individual and team goals can you establish so that there will be win-win outcomes for everyone?” He asked, and then worked with the student groups to find the best solution possible. Being one of the students, I have observed how the class transformed from having a rather quiet and awkward atmosphere, to having everyone so eager to share ideas with and support each other in teams. There are so many memories that I have of Dean that make me appreciate the art of being a teacher, a motivating and inspiring teacher.

A thousand words may not be enough to describe the “becoming of a teacher” for me, so I will jump into the highlights along the way.

Age xx (Shh...), Po Man, “examples and interactions”.



The classroom, the students, the course... I can remember them all, in the first class that I taught as a full-time teacher. Even for now, no matter how much I prepare, how hard I try, there can still be a question of "Would it be useful and interesting to the students?". Then this question was definitely in my head for that first class of mine. And it was on the topic of employment relationships, which had proved to be quite challenging to be interesting. After class, two girls came up to me for a chat as a casual meet-up with me as a new teacher. One of them, Po Man, in answering my question "Was the class interesting?", said "I think you explained the concepts too much and for too long, but just more examples and interactions would be more helpful." Only then had I started to reflect that it probably took so much more in becoming a good teacher, than being just logical and clear, while I was so trapped with the idea of "teaching well". By the way, in that first class of mine, I don't think I asked even one question.

Fast forward to now.

Now that it has been quite some years of teaching, and as a behavioral science teacher/ researcher/ believer, my approach to teaching has been influenced by all these lovely people in my life, but more importantly, my teaching has been influenced by the idea of "Crafting".

School Spirit



When employees want to create a better fit for the job or the organizations, they can craft their job. Or when people feel stuck at work and wish to contribute more, for example, they may feel there is no new skill to be learned and everything is just a boring routine, or when there seems to be no hope for promotion, or no challenging or impactful tasks at all, they can also resort to such “crafting”. It happens on three levels: craft the tasks you do, craft the relationships that you deal with at work, and craft your own cognition of the job. While this craft-your-job idea is relatively new to the behavioral science world, it is rather inspiring for me.

In striking a balance between teaching and researching for better time management and striving for satisfactory results of both, could it be “crafting the tasks” so that both can be well addressed?

In spending time on managing relationships with students from different years, from different backgrounds, with different needs, would there be a solve-it-all formula?



In thinking of the teaching—the incognito, would the changes in the way you perceive teaching make a significant difference to the way you teach, or even the effectiveness of your teaching? To all three questions, my answer is “Of course YES!”

To strive for the most effective way to think about teaching, to communicate to students with various characteristics, and to arrange teaching in the most informative, clear, and enjoyable way possible, all it takes is to CRAFT. Ms. Xu crafted her teaching by involving students in various activities; Dean crafted his teaching by motivating students to work in highly effective teams; and Po Man “pushed” me to craft my teaching by seeking ways to realize the importance of engaging students. To craft teaching means so much more than just have different activities in classroom, it is about understanding yourself more, exploring what is possible and what is beyond satisfactory for you.

It is not an end, but possibly a new start of my teaching incognito.



“Imagine for a moment that we are nothing but the product of billions of years of molecules coming together and ratcheting up through natural selection, that we are composed only of highways of fluids and chemicals sliding along roadways within billions of dancing cells, that trillions of synaptic conversations hum in parallel, that this vast egglike fabric of micron-thin circuitry runs algorithms undreamt of in modern science, and that these neural programs give rise to our decision making, loves, desires, fears, and aspirations. To me, that understanding would be a numinous experience, better than anything ever proposed in anyone's holy text.”

— David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*



Raising the Next Generation

By Dr Daniel Mo (Supply Chain and Information Management)

Teaching for me is to raise the next generation. My earliest memory of teaching in a university environment was being a teaching assistant during my MPhil study in the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). On one hand, I was inspired by various professors who were experts in the field, and how they inspired students to face the future challenges. On the other hand, I also found myself lack the industrial experience to guide students' growth. As a postgraduate engineering student in HKUST, providing "model answers" for undergraduate students on their assignments, midterms, and examinations was not difficult for me. However, when some students sought my advice for their career plan, I knew model answers wouldn't work. In reality, jobs involve many uncertain, unseen and ill-defined problems. They cannot be directly solved by the methods stated in any textbook. We need to develop our own answers!



My second stage of teaching development, therefore, did not occur in any university. It happened in the commercial world. I would say, “My business knowledge was learnt in a business environment, rather than in class.” After graduating with a master’s degree, I gained a valuable opportunity to work as a senior service logistics analyst in an international company which was ranked the top in the list of “100 best companies to work for”. In that company, I worked hard in the 7x24 global operations, played hard as a team member and grew fast with the company together. Most of the employees in that company were empowered to make critical decisions, which could result in millions of dollar being gained or lost. Our decision accounted for our rapid growth. In such a dynamic environment, learning how to ask questions and to act proactively was the first step in front of new problems. Then, after you had developed the solution plan, the next step was to communicate with the senior management and peers who could have very different backgrounds. The effectiveness of solutions would be amplified only when other people understood. I learnt the importance of effective communication through practice. The rule is simple: “Practice makes perfect”.



After gaining the real industrial experiences, I came back to HKUST to pursue my PhD study in industrial engineering and logistics management. I would say: "I learnt to be a teacher because of my teachers." Over the years, I was given chances to conduct tutorial sessions, joined various seminars, met overseas experts, and managed research projects. At that moment, those experiences seemed normal. But when I look back now, those are all graces for me to raise. Sad to say, my MPhil and PhD academic supervisors are no longer nearby. Their invaluable lessons are not found in any class anymore, but their lessons keep teaching me new things in my heart.

Personally, why do I like teaching? This is because I like learning. This answer may sound strange from any employer's perspective. But from an educator's perspective, I truly believe everyone needs to learn new things and prepare something new for our next generation to raise.



”Try again. Fail again. Fail better” - My Teaching Journey

By Dr Jay Parker (English)

Did my teaching journey begin in middle school? When as a C grade twelve-year old, I vowed never to be like the teachers who failed to inspire me. Was it later, when after four years of effort I had turned my studies around and achieved one of my school’s top results at GCSE?

Was it when I changed schools for my A levels and discovered that teachers who could enthuse and inspire students? When I abandoned my intention to be a scientist or a doctor, worked hard, and won a place at Cambridge to study English literature, my passion and my talent.

Or did it begin after I graduated from Cambridge, when I realised that my dream job in publishing was really a nightmare?

It’s hard to say, but I do know that it was teaching others which helped me to find answers to my own questions. The turning point came not when I was studying English in a university, but as a High School Teacher in Hong Kong, teaching Theory of Knowledge. It was a course where we encouraged students to ask how we know what we know, and why it is important. Not to get a place at university or a better paid job, but for the good of society, the pursuit of knowledge, and to better understand ourselves.



But when I asked my student about those big questions, I realized for myself that although I loved teaching, I still wasn't happy with it. I wanted was my learning and my teaching to come together better, and to do this, I had to make a change.

So, with my first daughter just born, I quit my job as Head of Department in an international school, returned to the UK and went back to university. It was a gamble that paid off. After completing my PhD, when I returned to teaching, at Hang Seng, I was a better teacher.

Not because I knew more about English Literature, but because I understood two things that I hadn't understood before. First, I had grasped the purpose and value of my discipline. Literature had been my passion, but I had always felt decadent doing something or teaching something simply because I enjoyed it. Second, I had mastered the fundamentals of my discipline through experience. And it was only by going through the long process of writing a PhD thesis and research articles that I had achieved this.

This was not the most important lesson. What I also learned was that my love of English literature and my talent for close reading had held me back. The joy I took in analysing and interpreting texts, and my ability to discover hidden meanings had led me to undervalue and neglect other aspects of my discipline. Teaching Theory of Teaching Theory of Knowledge in High School then returning to university to study myself, I discovered why we call subjects disciplines. I had never been interested in understanding the historical context of the books I read, or reading great thinkers' interpretations of those texts, or crafting the structure of my writing.



I had focused my attention on the joy I took in finding my own interpretation and in playing the game with words that all great literature invites us to join, and had neglected those parts of my work that I did not love.

I didn't value the work of literary study, and this meant that my work had been second rate. Until I had grasped the discipline required of research and the importance of all aspects of my discipline, until I understood why these things mattered, my thinking had been impoverished. But studying for my PhD, my supervisor insisted that I pay more attention to these things. He was a great teacher who helped me to improve, not by telling me the answer, but by encouraging me to better myself.

The most startling thing I realised was that after learning to do them well, those parts of literary study that I had taken no interest in – scholars, context, crafting the structure of my argument – had also become part of the joy of doing research for me. One of my favourite poets, Geoffrey Hill, writes that when a poem is finished it 'comes right with a click like a closing box'. Though far from poetry, I discovered the pleasure of that satisfying, almost tactile sense of closure in my own writing, but also that this pleasure depended upon my newly learned confidence to judge myself when I had written well.

POSITIVE
VIBES

The text 'POSITIVE VIBES' is rendered in a hand-drawn, chalk-like style. 'POSITIVE' is in blue with a light blue shadow, and 'VIBES' is in pink with a light pink shadow. The word 'VIBES' is flanked by two sets of three short, radiating lines, one on each side, suggesting a glow or energy. The background features a diagonal split between blue and yellow.

Throughout my teaching career, I had always believed that students should be active in their learning. But now I really understood why. I could feel the change in myself that had only come about through practice and experience: through doing something rather than simply reading about it in a book. And ironically, this helped me better to see the truth of the things I read.

It strikes me, reading back over this reflection on my development as a teacher, that I have written mostly about my own learning. And this is exactly as it should be. It has become a cliché that teachers should be learners too, but nevertheless, it hardly seems possible to reflect on a teaching journey that was not, primarily, a learning journey as well. What have I learned about teaching? First and foremost, that it is hard to learn to do something we don't value or believe in and just as hard to teach it. But also, that belief is something we live and feel as much as think. Another poet, John Keats, wrote 'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses'. He was writing about the pulses of poetry – its rhythms and flow – but first and foremost about our bodily pulses, the beating of our hearts.



To believe in something, we have to live it, to learn it by experiencing and doing. And because of this, real understanding takes time. For me it took twenty-five years, from my middle school days to the completion of my PhD, to feel the value of my study and my work in my pulse. I hope my students can benefit from my experience, and learn to feel it a little faster.



Much Ado About Teaching

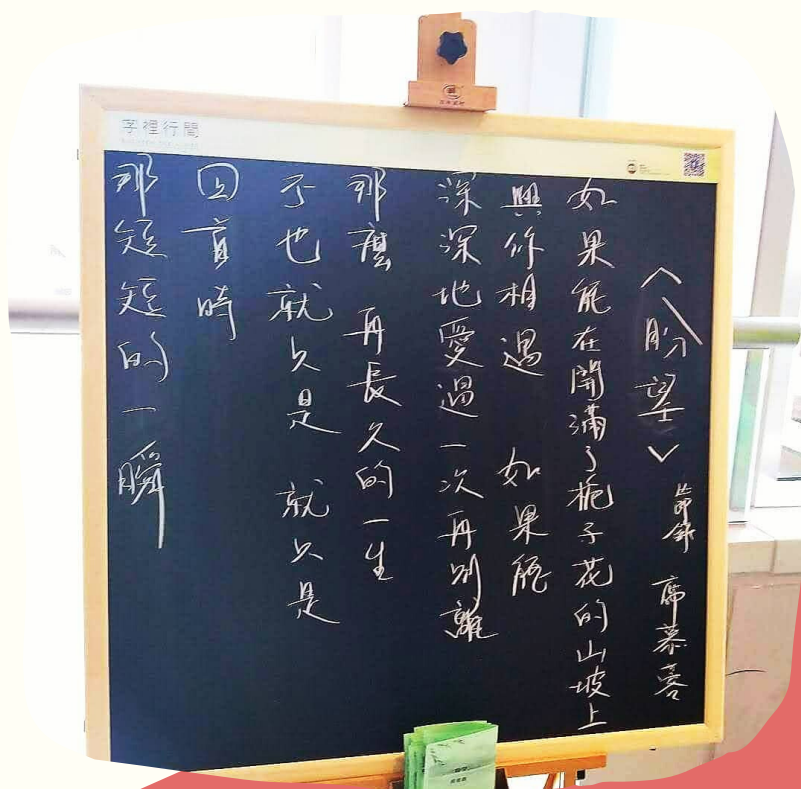
By Dr Wong Muk Yan (Social Science)

Teaching is not so much about what teachers teach. Teaching is more about or even ALL about what students learn. We may as well name all that fancy pedagogy as we wish, like flipping classroom, outcome-based learning, criteria-referenced assessment, you name it. We may also spend hours and hours teaching teachers how to teach. However, none of these make any sense if students do not learn. Therefore, the questions that really matter are: What is learning? What does it mean to be educated?

To learn is to be enlightened

“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” Googling everything won’t turn an idiot into a scholar. Memorising pages of Wikipedia won’t turn one into a historian, a scientist, or an artist either. Spoon-feeding students with tons of information is not just an old style of teaching; it is NOT even teaching at all. Worse still, pretending to teach in this way is more pathetic now than ever, as students are way better at digging out data from the internet than us teachers. That’s not what students really need. What they really need is to KNOW what they really need.

I call it enlightenment.



German philosopher Immanuel Kant once said, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity." Immaturity means that you rely entirely on others telling you what you want. It is self-imposed when your reliance is caused by a lack of courage to discover who you really are and to follow the life path that you really want.

I believe that students don't need a standard map of life; instead, they need an atlas that contains different kinds of maps that they can freely choose from. One way to build up their atlas is to show them the diversity and variety of the beauty of life. Hopefully this may lure them out of their small comfort zone that is pathetically built up by the conventional education and social values of Hong Kong.

One of the greatest beauties of life is demonstrated in novels. I hosted reading clubs with students to read Milan Kundera's *Farewell Waltz* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in the previous two years. We discussed the deep meaning of the plot, chapter by chapter. We talked about meaning of life, significance of love and sex, authenticity of living, and ethical and aesthetic value, all made alive by the characters. The historical richness and prophetic accuracy of Kundera's insight opened up a new world to them.



Another great beauty of life is poetry. I launched a campaign named “Between the Lines” with the collaboration of the Library. Two blackboards are now standing proudly at Block A and D. Students are invited to submit their favorite Chinese or English poems, discuss how the poems touch their heart in our regular gatherings, and write them on the blackboards by their own hand, twice a week. Till today, over 50 poems have been written and posted on our social media platforms, with over 30,000 views. Three of our students participating in this project have even won the President’s Commendation Award (Art and Culture). I truly believe that, as long as the intellectual interest of our students is aroused, with their youthful enthusiasm and creativity, what our young fellows can achieve is beyond imagination.

To learn is to be transformed

Jean-Paul Sartre said, “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.” Life is like a piece of music. You may learn everything about its rhythm and melody, about its mood and intonation, and about all the instruments required to play it. However, if you don’t actually play the music, all the knowledge about the music is pointless. If knowledge is nothing but a series of intellectual games that entertain us in leisure time; if reading a thousand books cannot transform us into a better person who can make a difference to the world; if a thorough study of the history, culture, and civilization of human beings cannot cultivate a sense of justice and an affection of benevolence in our students, what is the point of learning at all? To learn, therefore, is to learn to be a responsible public intellectual who is always concerned about the welfare of society and the happiness of the humankind, being critical and never submissive to the authority, and ready to fight for justice and defend what is right at all cost.



Such a transformation is especially important when cruel and grave injustice occurs in our hometown. Since June 2019, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement has driven millions of Hong Kong citizens to the street to protest against the unjust law and the unlawful brutality of the police force. Many of my students, who participated directly or indirectly in such a dangerous social movement, faced some of the hardest decisions to make in their lives. For example, should their action remain peaceful even though the government didn't respond to their demands at all? Or should violent actions be adopted? Should they risk their own future to fight for the future of Hong Kong, or should they tolerate the injustice in exchange for a good job or a wealthy life? Are freedom and democracy worth risking 10 years in jail to fight for? There is no simple answer to these questions. As their teacher, all I can do is to engage in deep and rational discussions with them, by showing them similar democratic movements in other countries, evaluating why they succeeded or failed, and analyzing to what extent we can learn from their experiences. While many government officers emphasize that teachers should remain politically neutral, I discuss and explain my own stand to students in detail. It would be hypocritical to encourage students to fight for the righteous values yet remain silent towards right and wrong, good and evil, and white and black myself. That's not what a teacher should do. I taught them how to be a public intellectual by being one. Nonetheless, the courage, kindness, and wisdom of my students demonstrated in such a movement are so impressive that I ended up learning more from them than they learned from me.



At the end of the day, to teach is to learn. I learn to be a good teacher, a good learner, and a good student. Isn't it too lonely to travel around this boundless universe of knowledge, conscience, and wisdom all by ourselves? There is no definite role of a teacher or a student along the infinite road of knowing thyself. We are all companions. United we stand, divided we fall.



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