

GUARDIAN LIFE PREMIUM TEACHING AWARDS 2008

“TEN YEARS ON: MAKING SoTL REAL”

It is a great honour for me to have been asked to give the feature address to this important event of the University calendar, especially as the first local person to have been so invited, following a number of eminent experts from universities abroad. Let me say right away that, unlike them, I am not an expert on the scholarship of teaching and learning, though I've been a university teacher for many decades.

But I am a historian, and I've chosen to approach my assignment this afternoon as history of a different kind, the history of ten years' work and achievement through the Guardian Life-UWI partnership to highlight and celebrate excellence in teaching here at St Augustine. I keep telling my students, to the point where they must be quite sick of hearing it, no sources, no history, so what are my sources for this exercise in contemporary history? My sources were portfolios presented by winners of the awards, plus other documents, some oral history, and a little bit of participant observation. What I want essentially to do is to present the ideas, insights, experiences and obsessions of our award winners since 2000.

And I think this may be useful to the campus community and the wider society, for there is a strong impression out there that we are bad teachers. Just this Sunday gone, in an article in the Sunday Guardian by Odeka O'Neil, I read the following: 'I challenge anyone who does not agree that the regurgitation of information seems to pervade throughout the education system even at the tertiary level in this country. I have been reliably informed that our professors expect our university students to be able to write exams word for word on what they taught...' Now I am not sure how reliable her informants really are, but that is the perception, so reflecting on the ideas and praxis of our best teachers should have value for us and for our several publics.

There's an American TV show called 'Curb your enthusiasm'; but that is precisely what our best teachers DON'T do! They insist that conveying enthusiasm and passion for one's subject is at the heart of good teaching and learning. The 'fascination of the topic' being taught must always come across, writes one; another says he discusses his current research projects with his undergraduates, to convey a sense of the excitement that is generated in scientific research. An engineering colleague has learnt from experience that when you can excite and engage students about the course content, they will begin to question, think, and search for connections and applications on their own. And another says he was greatly motivated by one of his postgraduate teachers who excited everyone by his passion for his subject; in a delightful phrase, 'it seemed that he was dancing with enthusiasm when he lectured'.

In the old cliché, you should teach what you research, and research what you teach. In the real university world (unless my department is exceptional) you will often have to teach subjects or areas on which you don't do research (though hopefully you will read widely). But wherever possible, our best teachers try to integrate their disciplinary research into their teaching. One sees his R&D work as part of his teaching portfolio, and makes sure that experience gained in this type of work—for instance, innovations in the design of computer hardware and software—is fed back into his undergraduate teaching. Research projects in plant genetics are frequently discussed in undergraduate classes by a colleague in Life Sciences. I believe that it is important that students should be able to interact in the classroom with well-known researchers and authors. It gives them a sense of what a university is all about, and makes them feel a part of the world of learning.

All our award winners constantly *reflect* on their teaching methods, strategies, assessment practices, successes and failures. This, surely, is at the very heart of the SoTL. Few of us will be as motivated as one award winner, who gained the M.Ed. in assessment and evaluation because she was determined to understand better what practices hindered, and what helped, her students to learn. But we can all learn from them that constant reflection, self-criticism, trial and error are required to improve our practice. 'Not how well I taught but how well the students learned', one reminds us. Few of us will actually publish on the SoTL in the academic journals, but we can all try to practice scholarly teaching based on thought, reading and self-criticism. We can learn from their experiences: for instance, one colleague's journey away from straight didactic lectures (giving notes, as the students understood it), as she came to recognise that content-rich lectures didn't necessarily reach all the students, didn't encourage application and thought. Reflecting on her own learning experiences, she realised that she succeeded because she had strong 'literary intelligence', but many of her students did not: they disliked reading and had poorly developed skills in oral and written communication. She had to develop different modes of teaching, assessment and evaluation to meet these students' needs and abilities.

Reflection is the beginning of excellence in teaching (and much else). Reflection led most of our winners to recognise that their role was not to be the sole source of knowledge for their students. Yes, there is a core of knowledge in every discipline and every course that must be got across, but course lecturers should not attempt to cover the entire curriculum or content, rather to encourage and facilitate students to seek out more detailed knowledge on areas that interest them. One said he saw himself as stimulator, motivator and facilitator of learning rather than rigidly lecturing on everything in the syllabus; he tries to reward the students who seek out information beyond the basic readings and handouts. Another used the term 'moderator' rather than lecturer. He said he shifted roles according to the course material, the level or year, the class dynamics, the students' needs, between the more directive, active, leading role, and the more facilitative moderator role.

Reflection has led many of our winners to recognise that the national and regional school culture presents a major challenge to university teaching. Indeed, one is clear that we have to try to redress the damage done by 'the traditional strict regime of courses' geared to examinations, which limits creativity and may harm students' self-esteem. He believes that the average student is negatively affected by the secondary educational system, and that teachers at UWI must work hard to provide a learning environment which is stimulating but not intimidating, transparent, participatory and nurturing. A colleague agrees, noting that the single greatest weakness of the school culture is that it generally fails to build critical thinking capacities and that this constitutes the challenge to university teachers. Another has had to make a deliberate and sustained effort to get away from the students' 'take lecture notes—don't think—regurgitate in the exams' culture brought from school to the university—and recall that was the perception of *university* teaching held by Odeka O'Neil in the newspaper article I quoted earlier. First-year students have to be 'weaned' from dependence on the teacher, says another colleague, with teaching strategies reflecting more independent learning progressively through the levels.

A colleague who is not from the region was puzzled by the lack of fit between the excellent A-Level results of his incoming students and their poor performance in Level 1 University courses—there were some with straight As at A-Level who actually failed Level 1 courses. It was due, he concluded, to the difference between expectations at school and at university: at school, you were rarely expected to do extra reading or indeed to think independently, at university you were expected to do both, while lectures aimed at coverage (surface learning) of an overloaded syllabus. As a result, this colleague tries to provide his Level 1 students with considerable information, but also seeks to create activities to encourage thinking and

independent learning, and to infuse them with self-confidence in the new, unfamiliar environment. At Level 3, he stresses the application of theory and self-directed discovery.

For all our winners, the development of critical and analytical skills, and the encouragement of intellectual curiosity and independence, are central to their role as university teachers. Through their modes of lecturing, classroom discussions, coursework assignments and research projects, they seek to develop this kind of mindset. Coursework such as book reviews, 'think' pieces, controversial videos and readings, are assigned for this purpose. One colleague learned from experience (as well as from academic studies) that take-home coursework of various kinds was more valuable than in-course tests (though it took more time to grade) because it required more reading, thought and writing—all significant for developing thinking skills. 'What do you think?' becomes the key question to be asked in the classroom. For a colleague in the social sciences, the four key 'thinking skills' are comprehension (of meaning), application (of theory to new and concrete situations), analysis and synthesis. He tries to design his coursework exercises, tutorial discussions and assessment questions to reflect these different but interrelated skills, seeing his basic role as helping to develop students' intellectual potential and opening their minds to new ideas.

Imparting knowledge is, of course, always necessary, but it's also necessary to demonstrate that all knowledge is created by human beings in specific circumstances. The social scientist just mentioned, when introducing students to a particular body of knowledge, tries to show how and when it was generated, the questions and issues it tried to address, what critiques have developed around it, how and why it may have been refuted, superseded or modified. In other words, he stresses the 'relativity of all knowledge', that all ideas are related to a time and place, that social contexts are important in the creation of theories and human thought in all fields (including the hard sciences). This postmodernist approach, especially fruitful in the humanities and social sciences, helps to encourage students to question knowledge and to see that nothing created by human thought is beyond challenge.

How to encourage critical thinking and intellectual curiosity, in the context of given syllabi, examinations, semester pressures? Our winners experiment with a wide range of strategies. One, from medical sciences, gets his first-year undergraduates to imagine there was a celestial committee charged with designing the various systems of the human body: how did it come up with the specific organs, parts and bits and pieces we have? Another, from the humanities, allows students to present their work in innovative ways which include poster displays, skits and role play which are videotaped and played back for feedback and discussion, and reports on team research projects. And a third, faced with the challenge of delivering a compulsory Foundation Course to hundreds of students, most of whom were enrolled only because they had to, developed an impressive array of teaching strategies all designed to encourage critical thought: compulsory book reports, controversial videos designed to provoke questions, written think pieces as part of coursework, the insertion of issues relating to sexuality and HIV/AIDS into the course content.

It isn't enough for students merely to absorb knowledge, it certainly isn't enough for them to 'regurgitate' what they hear in their lectures; they must gain the skills and the self-confidence to apply theory/knowledge to real situations and to the problems they will be dealing with in the world of work. This is a huge issue for our winners, especially those from the 'applied' sciences like engineering and agriculture. There must be a firm grasp of theory, allied to an 'almost instinctive' ability to apply it, developed through 'a mix of mutually supportive hands-on practice and theory'. No prizes for guessing this comes from an engineer: he insists that 'a hands-on profession such as engineering cannot be effectively taught purely from a theoretical perspective'. The Faculty's mission is to produce not merely 'competent' but also 'bold, innovative engineers',

confident in their ability to apply knowledge to real-world situations. A mix of research papers, mini design projects, final-year two-semester special projects, field visits to industry, work attachments and internships, can be deployed to try to encourage these skills and the self-confidence which is the pre-requisite for them. Computer-aided design projects, hands-on work for example on irrigation and drainage systems, help students to see the real-world applications of the theory. At the M.Sc. level, another colleague in engineering has introduced innovative, and exciting, hands-on projects involving group design exercises, Build a Tower and PAPLANE (designing paper planes), as part of the course assessment in the M.Sc. in Project Management.

Agricultural science is also an applied science, and the relation of knowledge to the real world is just as essential here as for engineering. Our colleague in this discipline tries to ensure a good fit between course content, and what is happening in the region in the relevant agricultural sector. Visits to farms and factories are essential, and data collection exercises, but this winner also developed hands-on group projects in her courses in horticulture and floriculture, in which students over a ten-week period produced plants and flowers, wrote reports for assessment, sold the plants and kept the profits! Her students also created manuals of at least 20 landscape plants, specimens they had actually seen, again for coursework assessment. This colleague admits that her relatively small classes allow her to develop these kinds of assessment exercises—she sees it as a ‘treasured privilege’ she can exploit in the students’ interest.

Of course undergraduate research should always encourage students to apply knowledge to real situations, and research and design projects of many different kinds are utilised by all our winners as part of their assessment and teaching strategies, and not only in the physical sciences. These papers and reports, as we all know, take a lot of time and energy to grade, but their value to student learning is generally considerable.

Student-centeredness has become something of a cliché or buzz-word, but all our winners illustrate what it should mean to university teachers. The personal touch is important, they all concede; students should feel relaxed and comfortable in the classroom (not too much so!), intimidation or sarcasm is an absolute no-no, we should try to learn and remember our students’ names if at all possible (I never can), we should make ourselves accessible to them outside the classroom and even outside office hours, we should help them with their problems whenever we can. We should recognise and respond in our teaching methods to the great *diversity* in our students’ abilities, needs, learning styles and personal off-campus situations. This means taking different levels of skills and types of learners into account when we decide on modes of coursework and assessment as well as delivery. It also means actively seeking student feedback and trying to use it sensibly to modify teaching and assessment strategies. One colleague involves students in creating quizzes, tests and revision questions. Another starts each course with a ‘Getting to Know You’ form for each student, and then uses the data to guide her in modifying the course structure and coursework mix.

Student-centeredness should also dictate that we take grading seriously, not only by devising transparent and clearly communicated grading systems, not only by timely return of marked coursework and tests, but also by providing written comments on essays and projects wherever possible (feedback in the opposite direction). In some disciplines, model answers are helpful after tests, mid-terms and quizzes, for as one colleague observes, students learn more from good models and examples than from criticism of their own work.

Yet the bottom line is that we must hold our students to standards of excellence, and we can do so effectively only if we model excellence in the quality of our teaching delivery and assessment practices. And we must inculcate values as we teach, our own, and our University’s (hopefully they will be compatible). One of our winners says his teaching is driven by what he sees as his

Faculty's core value or mission: to engineer (literally) positive change in the region's industrial culture. Another says that she consciously tries to uphold the University's values in all her teaching, and that her overall goal is to promote peace. And a third tells his students, at the start of each course, about himself as a professional, and about his values and expectations as a teacher.

We are all models, in other words, and have an impact on individual students (good and bad) often in ways we can't imagine and may never discover. But in our Guardian Life Premium Award winning teachers, we ourselves have excellent models. We need to thank them for their examples and pay tribute to Guardian Life, and to the IDU (itself an award winner—of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in 2004), for creating and sustaining this wonderful programme. My sincere congratulations to this year's winners, and thank you for your attention.

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