

LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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From the Editor:

Thanks to Professor Eugene Eoyang for contributing this edition. I encourage colleagues to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on teaching and learning issues as they might affect us at the University. Thus I regard this as something of a very welcome breakthrough to have someone from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre providing copy for us to consider. Keep this up and I look forward to receiving your contribution.



Elite, But not Elitist

"The day I was told I was going to Lingnan," some students have told me, "was the saddest day of my life. I sat down and cried." But they always add: "But now I am very happy here."

These two heartfelt admissions represent, for me, the challenge and the destiny of Lingnan.

The realities of admission to tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, the JUPAS system with its dependence on examination scores, consign a great number of entering students quite gratuitously to a despondence at the outset of their university career which is hardly conducive to motivated learning.

As a teacher, I appreciate the importance of examinations as a diagnostic tool, but I am not very impressed with entrance examinations as "predictors" of academic success. In the United States, the Educational Testing Service at Princeton, New Jersey (not affiliated with Princeton University) offers examinations that claim to be reliable predictors of academic success, but if anyone were to ask with any statistical rigor what the percentage of reliability ETS exams have (SAT's, GMAT's, LSAT's), answers tend not to be forthcoming. (This despite the fact that the ETS has been in business for over sixty years and would have a database in the hundreds of millions.) I wonder if the results of the HKCEE tests have also been analysed for their "predictive" power: if so, the results are not widely disseminated. For this and other reasons, I am skeptical of the HKCEE tests. If the recently publicized sample of an exam question — which even the Secretary of Education in Hong Kong, Joseph Wong, found difficult — is an index of the quality of the HKCEE exams, then I am even more dubious about their validity as predictors. What success on these exams shows is, if anything: (1) the ability to take examinations; (2) good study habits; (3) a familiarity with the mentality of the HKCEE.

While these are not negligible skills, they are not, by themselves, commensurate with success in a globalized workplace. What would be, then, better predictors of success? In my judgment, after more than 30 years teaching, I would say: courage, resourcefulness, balance, and persistence. These virtues are not always reflected in high examination scores. They can be tested by life experience, and they can be intuitively detected, but they are not likely to show up in answers to examination questions.

At Lingnan, we have what I call "pre-failed" students, students who have already tasted disappointment and disillusionment in their young lives. They will not be brittle as those students who have never known failure, like upright trees that will fall with the first typhoon. Of course, not all "pre-failed" students will inevitably succeed: those who are consistently lazy, who are faint-hearted, and who are dishonest with themselves will continually fail in big as well as in small ways. They are not so much "pre-failed" students as "perennial failures": they invent new ways of letting themselves down.

What distresses me is when I hear faculty colleagues remark that there isn't much one can do with Lingnan students: "garbage in, garbage out" is their way of characterizing the futility of teaching at Lingnan. I find this attitude shocking, because it not only insults students, it also denigrates the instructors who teach them. If "garbage in, garbage out" is a correct characterization of the teaching process, then the machine that does the processing is also garbage. A teacher who feels that way should not be at Lingnan; perhaps that teacher shouldn't be teaching at all.

The accession of Lingnan into a university is a cause for celebration, reflecting credit on all concerned — students, teachers, administrators, alumni. But I sometimes regret the passing of "Lingnan College" because I rather liked its initials: "L. C." For me, "L. C." could stand for "Last Chance". To the students who slack off in their studies here, I could say, "You are at L. C. This is your 'Last Chance' for success. Make the most of it."

Lingnan has the rare opportunity of becoming an elite institution without being elitist. Our numbers will always be small, restricted by UGC fiat. We can afford to be selective; indeed, we are forced to be selective. However, I would rue the day when we admit *only* students who score at the top of the HKCEE examinations, as I would equally regret our *never* being able to attract anyone who achieved top marks on the exams. We want to attract an elite — not of examination-takers — but an elite of character, of persistence, and of resourcefulness. I would rather teach a student with mediocre HKCEE scores who is considerate, courageous, committed, visionary, and daring than a student with top HKCEE scores who is predictable, plodding, and status-conscious.

There are institutions which are what I call "pass-through pantheons" — elites enter and elites exit. The institution counts for very little except to certify the pedigree of the elite. That is not Lingnan's destiny: we are not a "pass-through pantheon": we are something much less august and down to earth. We are a teaching institution. Teachers here should have a nobler ambition than merely hobnobbing with the great and near-great, trading on other people's distinction. Lingnan teachers should be in the business of nothing less than changing lives.

To those interested in applying to Lingnan, we should say: "If you are interested in a designer-label degree, look elsewhere. But if you are earnest about learning, if you're willing to adapt, to exercise your imagination, to persist and persevere, and to think with heart and soul, as well as with the mind, then we may have a place for you."

Eugene Chen

Eoyang

Chair Professor of English
Director of General Education Designate