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From the Editor:

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This edition was contributed by Mr Chris Morgan from Australia who recently joined TLC as Senior Educational Development Adviser. Chris will be around for five months until early October this year. During his time with us, Chris will host seminars, workshops and take part in teaching development projects for us to take advantage of his expertise and extensive experience in education development. As this 'Learning Matters' is going to be the last one for this academic year, may I wish you all a very happy summer holiday.



Do you help or hinder learning?

Does everything revolve around you in the classroom? If so, it may well be because you feel your students and your colleagues expect you to be the focus of attention when you take a class. After all you may have charisma and great presentation skills. You may be enthusiastic about your subject area and you undoubtedly have expertise and experience to pass on to the students who have far less knowledge than you. In fact, students completing their CTEs may praise you for your high degree of control over what and how they learn. Furthermore, your own most memorable times as a student probably are of classes you attended dominated by highly charismatic and passionate lecturers.

Unfortunately, if your approach is to fill the classroom with the sound of your own voice because you are the in-house repository of knowledge then you are probably hindering rather than facilitating student learning. It was John Dewey who said "one might as well say he has sold when no one has bought as to say he has taught when no one has learned". That, to me, defines the primary role of a good teacher. The good teacher does not focus so much on the quality of his or her own delivery; instead the focus is on how well the students are learning.

And how do students learn best? The evidence is overwhelming that knowledge is not so much given and received as it is constructed by people individually and collectively (see, for instance, Bruffee, 1993). It is shaped and altered by the different environments in which it is constructed. Learning has a social aspect. For learning to be more meaningful and memorable then students need to be able to make connections of knowledge with their understanding of the world. For this to occur they should be given opportunities to discuss, critique and relate the material to their own lives.

Good university teachers resist the urge to speak too much and frequently step aside to allow their students to construct their own knowledge and understanding. They give their students the space they need to sharpen their conversational and deliberative skills. They will understand that if the conversation moves too quickly then some students will find it difficult to contribute their thoughts. They do not comment on every idea presented. None of this means that they abandon their responsibility to teach, rather they

have developed their understanding of what is needed to teach well. They are able to curb any compulsion to say all they would like to say in the interests of promoting engagement and participation. They guide the process of conversation and foster critical commentary.

Brookfield and Preskill (1999) point out that teachers as discussion leaders must remain highly alert and active, constantly looking for ways to encourage students to contribute and to help them make comments that respond to their classmates' observations. This is a high order teaching skill and there is nothing passive about this role. For teachers to succeed in having students engage in such dialogue then they must be active listeners and participants. They will constantly look for new connections, new understandings, and new constructions of the familiar and the obscure.



Teachers have to weigh and balance when to make a contribution and when they should remain silent. They have to understand that their intervention can effectively steal the spotlight away from a student who has worked through some difficult ideas. Of course, this can be taken too far with the university teacher saying too little and being on the sidelines for every discussion. It will not be motivating for students if they have constantly to second-guess their lecturer's intellectual position or if they do not have the basis for understanding new ideas.

Can university teachers get the balance just right? Probably not. Diversity within the student group means we are unlikely to achieve that circumstance where everyone in the group feels we have spoken neither too much nor too little, nor else been too dominant or too reserved. Whatever the 'best fit' position is will depend on the particular set of circumstances and composition of the group. Seeking to move closer to, rather than away from, the most effective balance is the challenge for the good teacher whose focus is on students developing their own understanding of the subject matter. After all, the yardstick of the good teacher should not be any superficial measures associated with their performance skills. While we value and applaud such skills, it is unfair to make judgements on the worth of a teacher on input measures such as these. Instead, teachers should be evaluated by appropriate outcomes measures associated with how well they assist their students to grow and develop.

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References:

Brookfield, S & Preskill, S 1999 *Discussion as a way of teaching: tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Bruffee, K 1993 *Collaborative learning: higher education, independence, and the authority of knowledge*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

This issue and the back issues of 'Learning Matters at Lingnan' can be retrieved from the following URL – <http://www.ln.edu.hk/tlc/level2/td.htm>.