

# LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

For internal circulation only



06/99

20 May 99

**From the Editor:**

*Learning Matters at Lingnan are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. To keep the dialogue going, I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the College. It would be something of a very welcome breakthrough if we have someone from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre providing copy for us to consider in the future.*

## Reviewing the Sectional Approach: *An Abridged Report*

Recently, the Teaching and Learning Centre has completed a review of the Sectional Approach (SA) in Lingnan, and has prepared a detailed report for the Academic Quality Assurance Committee (AQAC) to discuss and consider. Thinking that teaching approaches and learning issues should relate to almost everyone in this College, this edition provides an abridged report on some of the major findings regarding the Sectional Approach for colleagues to ponder over.

### Major Findings:

From the qualitative comments collected via the questionnaires and the interviews, the following strengths and weaknesses of SA were identified by both staff and students:

### Strengths

- More interaction and greater student participation*
  - Because of its smaller class size than normal lectures, SA was found effective in
    - Promoting more interaction between teacher and students, and among students
    - Promoting greater student participation in class
    - Reducing absenteeism as the teacher will know every student in the section.
- Flexibility*
  - Greater flexibility to use a variety of teaching/learning activities, and to shift from one to another within the block of time allocated.
  - The separation between lectures and tutorial discussion is not distinct so that adjustments can be made to accommodate changes in pace, content coverage, learning difficulties of students, etc.
  - Better transition and coordination between lecture and tutorial
- Better teacher-student rapport*
  - Teacher can focus on a smaller number of students, hence, more attention to students and more student-centred in teaching.
  - Improved communication between students and teacher helps to build rapport and a closer relationship.
- Improved teaching and learning*
  - Easier to detect students' problems in understanding concepts and to monitor their progress
  - Less one-way communication as in lectures and less remedial teaching as in tutorials
  - Better integration of teaching materials as just one teacher is involved in both lectures and tutorials
  - Good for teaching concepts and for foundation courses or those courses that require a delivery of a substantial amount of content.

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### Weaknesses

1. *Repetition*
  - Teachers need to repeat the same teaching to students in different sections. In this regard, lectures are conceived to be more cost effective and efficient as one lecture can be given to more than 200 students at one time.
2. *Class size not conducive to in-depth discussions*
  - The section size of 30-40 is still considered too big for effective discussions to take place.
  - Student participation and interaction in sections is less in both intensity and depth as compared to tutorials of a smaller size (15-20 students).
3. *More preparation*
  - Teachers using SA need to do more preparatory work to best use the allocated 2-3 hours' slot of teaching (as lectures and tutorials are combined).
  - Teaching load may look less on paper, therefore is not reflecting the real work involved.
4. *Not suitable for lab and workshop type of courses*
  - SA was considered not suitable for courses that require substantive hands-on practice such as lab classes for computer courses and intensive translation or writing courses.
  - Comments from the Arts Faculty indicated that SA does not suit their teaching and learning context as most of their classes need to be small to make sure that every student will have intensive guidance from the teacher (e.g. in creative writing courses, translation workshops, etc.).
  - Similar feedback was received from the School of General Education. Staff found the conventional LT approach more appropriate for their courses when tutorials are used to conduct debates and in-depth discussions on issues that should not be told but should be discussed and challenged.
  - SA was found less effective for advanced level courses when the focus is less on delivery of content and teaching of concepts. Instead, intellectual discourse should characterize this level of courses which tutorials are found more conducive to a higher level of interaction.
  - Some students in particular pointed out that SA does not suit university level education. They considered that it would be very much like a continuation of secondary school education if SA is used in Lingnan.
5. *Need more coordination while encouraging flexibility*
  - One principal characteristic of SA is flexibility. SA in its strictest sense would mean complete flexibility for the teacher to decide on the content to be covered, assessment questions and format, and textbooks to be used.
  - Inevitably, too much flexibility will bring forth inconsistencies and lack of uniform standards across sections. Therefore, better coordination is needed among teachers and the role and input from the Course Coordinator should become more significant.
  - For a complete flexible system to work, it requires trust and confidence among colleagues, and plenty of 'good' teachers who are capable of causing effective learning in students. Students are particularly aware of the risk involved in having the same teacher for the course throughout the whole term. To put it in students' words, "*We will be stuck with the same poor teacher for the whole term under SA, when both lectures and tutorials are conducted by the same teacher.*"
6. *Physical Constraints*
  - Currently, most of the teaching facilities were planned and designed for traditional lecture and tutorial purposes. For SA to be implemented on a wider scale, there is a need to renovate existing teaching venues to provide more classrooms for seating 30-40 people with flexible furniture conducive to effective discussions and group work.

The full report to AQAC contains some implications and suggestions for teaching and learning derived from the review of SA in Lingnan. Interested colleagues can contact the TLC for a copy of the full report.

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