

LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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TEACHING  LEARNING CENTRE

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From the Editor

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'Learning Matters at Lingnan' are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.



Learning in the 21st Century

Half-consciously and almost imperceptibly, we are now on the threshold of the 21st century. We in the educational profession cannot help but ask ourselves searching questions about teaching and learning, and *learning in particular*, in the new century, wondering what lies in store for us and for our students in the immediate future and the ensuing years, ruminating about positive and less positive prospects for a “brave new world”.

The present state of affairs regarding learning in general and at the tertiary level in particular, leaves much to be desired, both in terms of teacher expectations and in terms of student responsibility.

The worst possible scenario appears to be the following. The learner still finds serious learning such a drudgery, a distasteful chore that must be taken up to fulfil certain obligations. At best, the motivation is *extrinsic*, with learning possibly leading to achieving certain ulterior goals that one has set oneself or one's parents or guardians have designed for safeguarding a respectable position in society and in life. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake or for truth, never crosses the learner's mind.

The average present-day learner is a lonely, solitary traveller who goes about the business of knowledge and skills acquisition fundamentally all by himself, which tends to be such a strenuous, unproductive, one-sided and shallow affair, naturally distasteful and dry, necessarily localized, over-specialised, uninformed, unbalanced and biased! Even if some teamwork or group effort should be involved, that would not be genuine teamwork, that would not be a social event, because the will to truly collaborate and share is not there.

That is why, up to this moment, so it seems, it is small wonder that a lot of school kids absolutely detest school and tend to shy away at the next opportunity. That is why so many people on graduating will say good-bye to learning and studies once and for all, firmly believing that they have equipped themselves with the basics for making a living that will last them for life.

But things are changing and changing fast! Certain innovative and revolutionary teaching and

learning approaches, strategies, methods have been claiming our attention for over a decade now. *Active learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, constructivism, task-oriented learning*, to name but a few, are making significant inroads now. We cannot ignore them. We have to appraise them and perhaps come to grips and come to terms with them soon enough in order to live up to our pedagogical obligations and duties.

And there are other global forces and trends that will *categorically change* the entire learning mode and learning scene in such a short time-span that leaves us gasping for readjustment academically and professionally. By all accounts, the two most influential forces that are shaping and will definitely continue to shape the educational scene in the months and years to come, will be *information technology (IT)* and *lifelong learning*.

IT has enabled and engendered a global, social (albeit basically in the “virtual” sense) learning community through the *Internet*. The very nature of knowledge itself has been undergoing revisions, from being a somewhat static, one-sided, regional, absolute element to becoming a relativistic, tentative, multifaceted, global, social event, with input and updating coming in every minute from anywhere and anyone in the *whole wide world*. Thanks to newsgroups and interest groups and other enthusiasts who have been creating specialist or specific-purpose web sites to benefit everybody *free-of-charge*, the learner is now favourably poised, if s/he so chooses, for taking up learning that promises to be much better-informed, supported by data flown in from the most unexpected quarters and scholars, and in multimedia formats! If for no other reason, this in itself will be motivating enough for the learner, spontaneously preparing the ground for a “deep approach” and for shouldering the responsibility for learning by the learner.

The changing conception of knowledge, of the need to constantly update and improve skills, coupled with the fact that no training can hope to see one through for even a time-span that has been hitherto deemed reasonable, all this makes *lifelong learning* a necessary social and academic undertaking in the new century. “.The typical student of the new millennium will be academically independent. self-motivated .better able to articulate academic subject matter. (and able to do) collaborative work, not only because .(these support) active learning, but also, because (they are required) for the workplace...The fusion between learning and work will be closer than ever before..”¹

The world will become a learning community as it turns into a “global village”² with *etudiantes sans frontieres*. Since the demands and expectations on our young men and women will be different, and the learning and working environments correspondingly changed to inter-relate “learn and work”, my optimism is that learning will cease to be a painful affair. Instead, it will become a joy, a self-motivated undertaking to probe and wander in a multifarious and multimedia world of “virtual” teamwork and partnership on a global scale, truly the first time in the history of the planet, pointing the way and setting the stage for a learned and talented world citizenry, a community of 21st century polymaths and iconoclasts that the world back in the 18th and 19th centuries could only produce a handful worldwide. Knowledge, increasingly less discernible from information, will count even more than money and power.

With only a couple of eye blinks before crossing the threshold into the new century, both student and teacher should get prepared for the changes and challenges that are already on our doorsteps. Things are never the same again!

Thomas YH Chan

¹ Marion G. Ben-Jacob, David S. Levin & Talia K. Ben-Jacob: *The Learning Environment of the 21st Century*, p.8, Educational Technology Review, Spring/Summer 2000, No. 13

² Vide Marshall McLuhan (1968): **War and Peace in the Global Village**