

# LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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From the Editor:

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*This edition was contributed by Professor Eugene Eoyang, who wrote this as a sequel to the previous article on "Cantonese or English as the medium instruction for Lingnan?". We are always grateful for contributions from respondents outside the Teaching and Learning Centre. Their contributions will add to the variety of topics and perspectives to provide food for thought for all of us about teaching and learning on this campus.*



## “Complaisant” $\frac{3}{4}$ not “complacent”

The word "complaisant" means: "disposed to please; obliging; politely agreeable". While the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers virtually the same definition for "complacent" ("pleasing, pleasant; disposed or showing a disposition to please, obliging in manner; complaisant"), modern American usage defines "complacent" as — pejoratively — "contented to a fault, self-satisfied and unconcerned" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., 2000). Hong Kong students are, for the most part, both complaisant and complacent.

Let me illustrate with a student's complaint about me. On a teaching evaluation form, s/he wrote that I did not allow the students to speak in class. This puzzled me, since two out of the three weekly hours were devoted to student presentations or to tutorials led by students. Still, I thought, there must be some basis for this accusation: students are not gratuitously untruthful or defamatory. Then it occurred to me. At the outset, I had forbidden the use of Cantonese in the classroom, since what I was teaching was English language and literature. I also prohibited any whispering in class since I considered that kind of behavior rude and inconsiderate to the rest of the class and disrespectful of the instructor. These two prohibitions (which I still consider reasonable) earned me the reputation of being an autocrat in the classroom. (This proves once again why student evaluations of teaching must always be contextualised by the instructor and/or peer reviewer).

I am pleased to learn from Maureen Tam's report ("Cantonese or English as the Medium of Instruction at Lingnan", *Learning Matters at Lingnan*, 19/2000) that more than 50% of Lingnan students prefer "English supplemented with Cantonese as the medium of instruction". A smaller percentage preferred "Cantonese in general but switchable to English when there are non-Cantonese speaking students in the class" (12.6%), and an even smaller proportion of the respondents preferred "Cantonese for all courses" (9.0%). Encouraging as these figures are, they still reflect in part the same bias as my anti-tyrannical student. There is in both instances a cultural insularity that borders on complacency: i.e., reflecting a smug self-satisfaction. The student respondents who preferred "Cantonese in general but switchable to English when there are non-Cantonese speaking students in the class" and who preferred "Cantonese for all courses" assume without warrant that all students must be Cantonese, for what would a non-Cantonese speaker (not only most Western students, but also a substantial portion of Mandarin speakers) get out of a course taught in

"Cantonese in general but switchable to English" or a course taught exclusively in Cantonese? These presumptions reflect an insularity of thought, a complacent attitude that oversimplifies the complexities of the real world. Too many students want the easy way out. The impulse to stretch oneself, to pursue a goal because it is

difficult rather than because it is easy, is an antidote to terminal complacency, which is a psychological "sickness unto death."

There are many causes for complacency in Hong Kong, but no justifications. True, it has been blessed with a vibrant, dynamic, diverse society, epitomising the blessings of traditional values and the benefits of high-tech free enterprise. It has enjoyed prosperity more often than it has experienced privation (though the gap between the haves and havenots — disturbingly — continues to widen). But this complacency can erode motivation: many young people in Hong Kong think that they can enjoy the good life with but a smattering of Putonghua and a bit of Hong Kong English. I have yet to encounter many young people who are dying to leave Hong Kong. On the mainland, by contrast, most young people are eager to learn English as a way of escaping the oppressions at home. Their love of their native culture does not stifle their curiosity about the rest of the world, nor their desire to pursue their education, and even their careers, in the West. It is easy to understand the complacency of the young people in Hong Kong, because for most of their lives, they have witnessed uninterrupted prosperity. The downturn in the Asian economy in 1998-1999, however, has made some students aware of the fact that prosperity in Hong Kong is not inevitable. They realize that individually and collectively, they stand to lose out if the level of their proficiency in English is not comparable to that of their compatriots in the PRC, Taiwan, or Singapore.

There is, indeed, no room for complacency in the modern age: one should never be satisfied, because there is always more to learn, new challenges to overcome, fascinating things to learn. None of us ever comes close to realising his or her full potential — no matter what we have achieved. To be complacent is to ignore what there is still to accomplish. The complacency I see in Hong Kong often stems from an unwarranted lack of self-esteem, which rationalises one's own faintheartedness. I see too many young people with tired old cynicisms: almost everyone wants to make money, and to make "easy" money, if at all possible. What they don't realise is that making money without effort and without imagination and without challenge (like winning the Mark Six lottery) is a waste of their talents and abilities. The most precious wealth, one which we squander in our search for "easy money", is our potential — our ability to learn, to discover, to develop, to create. Only when we have constructed a meaningful life for ourselves can we be seen to be truly happy — whether we have money or not. Only those who enjoy what they do, who respect the quality of their own work, who cherish every chance to improve, who relish the prospect of new challenges and new opportunities can be said to live a fulfilled life.

To be complaisant is a charming trait, and being obliging and pleasant will always be appreciated. But complacency is the pitfall of ephemeral success and unearned felicity. Let us, by all means, be complaisant. But let us also avoid complacency like the plague.

*Eugene Eoyang*



**Merry Christmas & Happy New Year**