

## Experiential Learning—Department of Political Science’s Field Trip to Indonesia

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### Introduction

In NUS, especially the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, there are many modes of learning, with lectures and discussion groups being the dominant joint approach. Adopting experiential learning as a mode of learning was novel, especially in the Department of Political Science. Unlike the traditional, didactic-oriented education aimed at providing information to the ‘student consumer’, the *raison d’etre* of the experiential educator is different as he facilitates experiences that will result in meaningful and hopefully long-lasting learning among students.

In this connection, the Department of Political Science, with the support of the Southeast Asian Programme and the University, inaugurated a field trip module (PS3256 “Contemporary Issues in

Indonesian Politics”) to Indonesia in Special Term, AY 2004/2005.

### Why experiential learning?

In a nutshell, experiential learning can be viewed as an education strategy that integrates classroom teaching with real world experiences. Through this process, a theory on how the integration of classroom information with knowledge garnered through various experiences can be developed. Higher level learning takes place as students are directly involved in their learning. However, experiential learning should not be seen as a substitute but rather, a complement to traditional education.

While experiential learning has been adopted through internship, service learning and outdoor learning elsewhere, it is still at a nascent stage in the

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### CDTL News / From the Faculties

Department of Political Science. Just as one learns more about a zoo by visiting it rather than reading about it in books, in the same way, contemporary issues in Indonesian politics are better understood by visiting the country rather than simply reading about it from books and the mass media.

The Indonesian field trip was expected to achieve the following goals:

- Support NUS's overseas academic programmes;
- Understand Indonesia's political system;
- Gain insight into the key contemporary political issues;
- Discern the differences between issues portrayed in the academic and mass media and the ground realities;
- Network with like-minded individuals and institutions.

### What did the field trip involve?

The various phases of the field trip are outlined in the following paragraphs.

*Preparatory phase:* this involved thinking how to go about achieving the specific goals, identifying the 'targets' (both people and sites) to visit and most difficult of all, contacting the people involved to arrange for meetings or visits to take place during the field trip. Rigorous preparation is the key to successful experiential learning.

*Pre-field trip phase:* once the numbers had been finalised, students were briefed on what to expect in Indonesia. They must be armed with basic knowledge of the country as well as key issues and discourses they could expect to hear when they meet their 'targets'.

*Field trip phase:* this was the most challenging phase as this was where the actual experiential journey took place. One should be prepared to expect the unexpected as there were only so much that could be planned and anticipated. Due to Indonesia's vastness, traffic conditions and various uncertainties (e.g. being confronted by a sudden demonstration) as well as the strong likelihood that a key resource person would fail to turn up for one reason or another, a lot



*Members of the study trip at the Keraton, the Sultan's Palace at Jogjakarta.*

of contingency planning was required. Students were also prepared to expect the worst but this expectation was only one aspect of the experiential learning journey.

The field trip involved meeting current and former high-ranking civilian and military officials, academics, key decision makers, businessmen and student leaders. Students also visited important historical, political and cultural sites in Jakarta (Indonesia's political and economic capital) and Jogjakarta (Indonesia's cultural and educational capital). Additionally, students were required to attend lectures and discussions, write short papers, prepare drafts for their essays as well as prepare for the final examinations. After each meeting or site visit, students were also asked to review and reflect on their encounters.

*Post-field trip phase:* upon completing the journey, students were asked to evaluate what they had learnt and experienced throughout the journey. Following the submission of essays, a revision of the module was held before the final examinations.

### Achievements and lessons learnt

As the module was the first of its kind in the department, students benefitted from the field trip in many ways:

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# Structure: A Tool in Active Learning



**Ms Chua Siew Beng**

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Active learning needs to involve students both experientially and cognitively through the constructive use of instructional activities. However, students may find these activities a source of dynamism but also uncertainties. For example, imposing ‘structure’ on such activities suggests that lecturers need to be in charge and in control. In this aspect, the idea of ‘structure’ does appear contradictory to active learning.

However, there is still a need for structure in active learning and I try to embed this structure unobtrusively into my classes. For HR2002 “Understanding Human Relations in the New Economy” (AY 2004/2005), I ‘structure’ an activity that requires students to conduct the lesson for one another. The lesson in question is the topic ‘learning imperative in the new workplace’. The hardest challenge to me as their lecturer is how to impart ‘learning’ to students who have been ‘learning’ all along for at least 15 years?

I decided to let students find out the answer for themselves through the following exercise:

- Students are first divided into groups of five to six members;
- Each group is given a set of five articles which describes different aspects of learning in organisations;
- Each group is given 40 minutes to prepare a 10-minute presentation to teach their classmates the topic assigned to them;

- Each group can work wherever they wish—outside the corridors, in the canteens, at the libraries and so on;
- Students are encouraged to use any resources they wish (e.g. Internet) to supplement their findings.

Everything appears confusing initially. Students gaped at the five articles which they have to share among themselves, wondering how they could possibly finish the readings. While some students take to the task immediately, others find it hard to adapt at first. But once they overcome their initial confusion, the task does not seem as difficult anymore.

As students take over the ‘teaching’ role, the lecturer now becomes a ‘resource’ person. Groups with questions will send representatives to check and clarify with him or her. Meanwhile, the lecturer has to be ready to provide resources required for the presentations. In a way, the lecturer’s role is now ‘subordinate’ to students’!

The real challenge of active learning is how to get students to align the materials they have prepared with the teaching and learning objectives of the lesson. The answer lies in the ‘structure’ (i.e. selection of articles, assignment of topics and order of presentations) that has been unobtrusively embedded within the activity. In this way, by completing the various activities, the results have already been ‘pre-planned’.

Students’ feedback for this activity has been very positive. They feel that they learn more this way and are

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# Assessing Graduate Research

**Associate Professor John Whalen-Bridge**  
 Department of English Language and Literature  
 Associate Director, CDTL



With the increased interest in graduate studies, it seems inevitable that calls for transparency in assessing these programmes and even in grading masters and doctoral dissertations have increased as well. Some faculty members may be armed with departmental guidelines for grading students' dissertations but sometimes such standards are more tacit than explicit. What follows is a very general sort of distinction that may be useful to faculty members and will hopefully be useful to students who need to understand what is expected of them.

Many students still think that the answers to research questions exist out there in the world and need to be found, when research at the university level really involves both discovery and creation. An assessor wants to know not so much that the student found the correct answer but rather that the research used existing information to create or creatively extend the set of viable approaches to a problem—hopefully a problem shared by more than just a few people in the world. Graduate research does not just summarise; it also creates.

Students still need to show the utmost respect for the information that already exists, meaning the creative solutions of previous researchers. The evidence and applications made available by previous researchers must therefore be well documented. Any reader of research dissertations and articles should be able to check the evidence presented for controversial claims (meaning those claims not agreed upon by everyone or almost everyone in a given field).

What is the difference between a masters and a doctoral thesis then? I take the masters thesis to be 'journeyman' work, meaning work that shows the

student's ability to work at a certain level but which is not yet 'ready for sale', as it were. As a guideline, a masters thesis ought to show a good familiarity with aspects of the problem that are defined by the student whereas a doctoral dissertation aspires a more complete knowledge understanding of the given problem. The idea of 'completeness' is very much a relative matter: one will never really 'complete' the answer to the best questions, but a strong performance will feel complete to a reasonable reader. One can say with confidence about an excellent doctoral dissertation, "This student set up the question well and looked at *all* the relevant evidence that was available." A masters thesis has a lower standard. One should be able to say with confidence, "The student looked at *enough* primary and secondary material to demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of the problems at hand."

To help students understand the difficult-to-describe tacit notions about the level of work expected of them, it may be useful to advise them to round up the last two years' theses from the department. Graduate training involves the internalisation of such standards, which should be compared to learning a language rather than memorising a particular set of rules. I like to tell students that they are learning to enter a particular sort of conversation, and they must learn, at least when first trying to enter, to abide by unspoken rules. No one posts a set of rules when having real conversations. Learning this etiquette takes time, and students will learn more efficiently if they can work out the differences between masters- and doctoral-level work. It helps to set aside a bit of time in graduate seminars to discuss such matters explicitly. ■

# My Teaching Philosophy



**Assistant Professor Zhou Shufeng**  
Department of Pharmacy

Teaching at NUS is interesting but challenging. In the past three years, I have been involved in teaching six different modules offered by the Department of Pharmacy for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Typically, these modules are conducted through classroom lectures, tutorials, group or individual projects, case studies, student presentations and learning outcome assessments that consist of continuous assessment and final examinations. In this short paper, I would like to share some thoughts on my teaching philosophy.

As a teacher, I seek to help students learn more effectively by challenging them with problems and equipping them with critical thinking skills. Specifically, my goals as a teacher are:

1. To teach students how to gather, analyse and appreciate scientific facts and the relevant theories, arguments, evidence and counter-evidence;
2. To equip students with the ability to analyse and think critically so that they can resolve problems they will face later in life.

For most undergraduates, the knowledge they obtain as part of their degree requirements is hardly enough for them to deal with the tasks they will face after they graduate. Therefore, it is important to help students develop the ability to analyse and think critically during their university years.

## My teaching strategies

To fulfill my teaching goals, I employ the following strategies:

### *“Teach less and learn more” approach*

It is important for teachers to motivate students to take their own initiative to learn. The ‘spoon-feeding’ approach is often criticised as an ineffective method. To encourage students to be responsible for their own learning, I always try to find avenues where I can teach less but still maintain a core knowledge base of essential concepts and theories that students need to know. This allows students to spend more time on research and reading of reference materials, doing projects and preparing oral presentations.

### *Inquiry- and evidence-based learning*

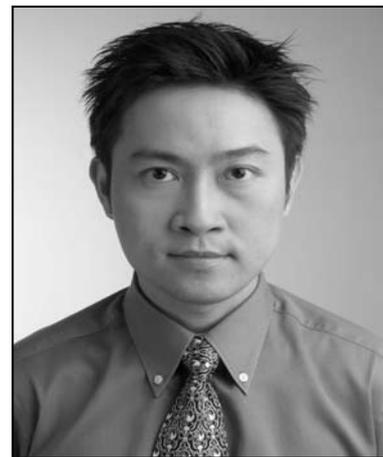
To encourage further learning, I often list a few key questions for students to work on and then briefly discuss the possible answers during the following class. These questions require students to unearth patterns, discover new facts and data and generate new concepts. Students, through working with these questions, become familiar with key concepts and learn the elemental tools of inquiry. Their answers are then collated, corrected, integrated and posted on IVLE’s student forum.

Because the study of science is evidence-based, students must be able to justify why they accept or reject a particular concept or theory based *only* on existing evidence. To show students how they can present their findings, I often present the existing evidence and possible justification when I explain complex and critical scientific facts and concepts. One other way to instill this rigour in students is to link abstract theories and concepts to the real world. When students find evidence to support the abstract theories learnt, these theories become more relevant

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# Captivating the Dragons: Teaching Learners from China

**Dr Winston Kwok Chee Chiu**  
Department of Finance and Accounting



This article provides guidelines and suggestions for instructing adult learners from China. My experience as generalised below involved learners in the Chinese master's degree programmes or short one- to two-week executive programmes. Such learners are potentially a lucrative source of revenue for NUS when we consider the size of the Chinese market and the speed at which this market yearns for new knowledge, especially Western concepts and ideas. In this article, I have organised the various myths about educating learners from China and their corresponding facts.

## **Myth: The preparation work is overwhelming.**

*Facts:* As the instructor is teaching topics in his/her area of expertise, it is often a simple matter of translating existing slides and notes. Furthermore, there are many graduate students from China who will be glad to assist in the translation work. I did not find the preparation work more demanding than teaching a new course in English. In fact, I undertook the task of translation myself. With modern pen-based Chinese writing software (e.g. Penpower Technology™) that recognises handwriting, it is easy to edit and translate what you have written into Microsoft Word documents or PowerPoint presentations.

## **Myth: The instructor must be extremely proficient in Chinese.**

*Facts:* A working knowledge will suffice in most cases. An instructor who can read the local Chinese newspapers with ease will be linguistically adequate for the job. Given that simplified Chinese is used in

both China and Singapore, the local instructor should not have any problems. However, as many Chinese books in Singapore are published or translated in Taiwan which use the more complicated traditional Chinese characters, an instructor who knows both versions will have an advantage. The class is usually very diverse, with Chinese learners from different regions speaking different Mandarin intonations and dialects. Therefore, learners are usually quite empathetic if the instructor does not speak perfect Mandarin.



Figure 1. Teaching a class of Chinese learners.

## **Myth: The instructor must be the most knowledgeable person on the topics.**

*Facts:* While the instructor should have up-to-date knowledge of the topics he is teaching, he should also be prepared to accept that his learners may have more practical experience. After all, these learners are usually experienced working executives who are aware of the intricacies of doing business in

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China. It is difficult for any instructor who has never worked in China to comprehend the subtleties of the system. Therefore, the instructor should strive to add value to learners' experience by bridging concepts with practice. Since the instructor's forte lies in theoretical models and frameworks, he/she should demonstrate how these ideas can be applied to or solve existing problems. For example, in BMC5507 "Accounting and Financial Management" (Semester 2, AY 2004/2005), teaching the management of bad debts in basic accounting to students in Western countries is easier as they are used to the concept of credit. However, this concept is not well understood in China. Throughout China's history, it is common for individuals to own large cash holdings at home or make cash transactions, thus making China known as a cash economy. Only in recent years has credit management become a major focus of the Chinese government and businesses. Therefore, the instructor who is accustomed to jumpstart a lecture on bad debts may need to take a step back and explain the notion of credit to a class of Chinese learners.

### **Myth: Chinese learners are passive and silent learners.**

*Facts:* Like most Asians, Chinese learners are shy to a certain extent. However, with the right instruction techniques, many Chinese learners are actually quite vocal and creative in their answers. In my class, I make use of real-life business case studies that describe real companies facing issues or problems. For example, to set up a discussion on how Western concepts can be applied in China, I used case studies that describe the experiences of North American companies operating in China. A good strategy is to first let learners read the case studies individually and then discuss what they have read in groups. Finally, asking learners to present their answers on transparencies in front of the class is a good way to get everyone in the class to participate.

In summary, it is not an immense task to teach Chinese learners as long as the instructor employs time-tested teaching technique with a good sense of cultural sensitivity. ■

### **Structure: A Tool in Active Learning**

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often surprised at their own 'achievements' despite the initial uncertainties they have at the beginning of the activity. These achievements included:

- Overcoming time constraints;
- Having to share five readings among a group of five to six members and coordinate the information gathered;
- Finding the time to access the Internet for more information and resources;
- Preparing a presentation to 'teach' the assigned topic systematically within the allocated time;
- Learning more;
- Enjoying the process.

Using this approach is not without difficulties. Firstly, it takes a longer time to prepare the lesson. It requires more planning to deliberately 'de-structure' a learning experience and then 're-structure' it in another way. Secondly, handing the 'teaching' role to students is very risky for, without proper planning for contingencies and use of facilitation techniques (e.g.

questioning, clarifying and probing), a lecturer may lose control of the whole session. Thirdly, students may not like the uncertainties associated with this approach. There are students who are reluctant to be committed to the method because they feel more comfortable if contents are delivered to them before they begin their discussions; they feel disoriented with the lack of knowledge and directions. Lastly, although one can overcome such apprehensions with more guidance, time constraint remains a hurdle.

Despite the challenges, the benefits of this approach outweigh the cons. Learning in this way helps students retain the information for a longer time and they tend to remember their achievements better than the difficulties faced. Indeed, when students perceive that they have 'control' over their own, and one another's learning experiences, they learn more. The simple act of passing 'control' over to students through embedding 'structure' in experiential activities can yield unexpected results. ■

# Annual Teaching Excellence Awards 2004/05

## Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Dr Chan Wai Meng, *Centre for Language Studies*  
 Ms Rita M. Niemann, *Centre for Language Studies*  
 Dr Lim Sun Sun, *Communications & New Media Programme*  
 A/P Rajeev Patke, *English Language & Literature*  
 Dr Sunita Abraham, *English Language & Literature*  
 A/P Philip Holden, *English Language & Literature*  
 Dr Susan Ang, *English Language & Literature*  
 Dr Bruce Lockhart, *History*  
 A/P Ian Gordon, *History*  
 Dr Simon Andrew Avenell, *Japanese Studies*  
 A/P Lim Teck Neo, Cecilia, *Philosophy*  
 Dr Kenneth Paul Tan, *Political Science*  
 Dr Narayanan Ganapathy, *Sociology*

## Faculty of Dentistry

A/P Foong Weng Chiong, Kelvin, *Preventive Dentistry*

## Faculty of Engineering

Prof Farooq Shamsuzzaman, *Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering*  
 A/P Rangaiah Gade Pandu, *Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering*  
 A/P Liew Jat Yuen, Richard, *Civil Engineering*  
 Dr Rajasekhar Balasubramanian, *Division of Environmental Science & Engineering*  
 A/P Tan Kay Chen, *Electrical & Computer Engineering*  
 A/P Poh Kim Leng, *Industrial & Systems Engineering*  
 Prof Goh Thong Ngee, *Industrial & Systems Engineering*  
 A/P Lee Kim Seng, *Mechanical Engineering*  
 Prof Poo Aun Neow, *Mechanical Engineering*

## Faculty of Law

A/P Eleanor Wong

## School of Computing

Dr Gary Tan, *Computer Science*  
 Dr Tan Keng Yan, Colin, *Computer Science*  
 Prof Mohan Kankanhalli, *Computer Science*  
 Ms Ng Boon Yuen, *Information Systems*

## University Scholars Programme

Dr Stephanie Karin Rupp  
 Dr Kenneth Paul Tan

## NUS Business School

A/P Ravi Chandran, *Business Policy*  
 A/P Pangarkar Nitin, *Business Policy*  
 Dr Chng Chee Kiong, *Finance & Accounting*  
 A/P Jochen Wirtz, *Marketing*  
 A/P Prem N Shamdasani, *Marketing*

## Faculty of Science

Prof Ip Yuen Kwong, Alex, *Biological Sciences*  
 Prof Goh Suat Hong, *Chemistry*  
 Prof Hor Tzi Sum, Andy, *Chemistry*  
 A/P Brett McInnes, *Mathematics*  
 A/P Victor Tan, *Mathematics*  
 Prof Koh Khee Meng, *Mathematics*  
 Prof Tan Eng Chye, *Mathematics*  
 A/P Goh Say Song, *Mathematics*  
 A/P Chan Lai Wah, *Pharmacy*  
 A/P Teo Ho Khoon, Edward, *Physics*  
 Dr Sow Chorng Haur, *Physics*  
 Dr Chiang Kok Leong, Andy, *Statistics & Applied Probability*

## School of Design and Environment

Dr Yen Ching-Chiu, *Architecture*  
 A/P Wong Nyuk Hien, *Building*  
 Prof Low Sui Pheng, *Building*  
 A/P Alice Christudason, *Real Estate*

## Centre for English Language Communication

Ms Lee Wai Ying

## Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine

A/P Charanjit Kaur, *Anatomy*  
 A/P Voon Chee Tet, Francis, *Anatomy*  
 A/P Khoo Hoon Eng, *Biochemistry*  
 A/P Chia Sin Eng, *Community, Occupational & Family Medicine*  
 A/P Paul Tambyah, *Medicine*  
 Dr Mahesh Choolani, *Obstetrics & Gynaecology*  
 Dr Goh Li Meng, Denise, *Paediatrics*  
 Dr Zubair Amin, *Paediatrics*  
 A/P Tan Chay Hoon, *Pharmacology*  
 Dr Shen Shali, *Physiology*

# Call for Papers

## for Quality in Higher Education

**TLHE** December 6–8, 2006  
2 0 0 6

CDTL will be organising its International Conference on Teaching and Learning on December 6–8, 2006. The Conference will examine the problems and challenges of assuring quality in higher education.

What is quality in higher education? Who are the stakeholders in education who participate in defining quality? How do we achieve and assure quality?

As institutions of higher education develop frameworks for assuring quality, educators will need to ascertain how their role in education will fit in within these frameworks. Existing quality assurance frameworks for Universities are problematic because they focus on processes rather than learning outcomes. It is imperative that we judge the quality of education in terms of the goals of education.

We invite papers from all stakeholders (students, administrators, industries, teachers, employers, alumni, government) on the problems/challenges of assuring quality in higher education.

The deadline for abstracts has been extended to **May 31, 2006**.

For suggested paper topics or more information, please visit the TLHE website at <http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/tlhe> or contact the Conference Secretariat, Ms Rita Roop Kaur, at [cdtrrk@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cdtrrk@nus.edu.sg). ■

### CDTL's Multimedia Initiatives

In keeping with the shift in NUS's educational value system where the goals of teaching are now focused on facilitating learning, nurturing critical, independent thinking and inculcating lifelong learning skills in students, there is an increasing need to develop quality learning content—materials that present content in an engaging and interactive manner, thus requiring significant student input and interaction. CDTL can assist faculty members to design innovative solutions by taking advantage of the potential of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) so as to enhance the quality of student learning experience.

For more information, please log on to

<http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/mmi/summary.htm>. ■

## Calling All Writers

CDTL invites articles on any teaching and learning topic for the following two newsletters:

- *CDTLink* (700 words maximum per article; photos & illustrations in hard/digital copy are welcomed)
- *CDTLBrief* (text-only newsletter; 1000 words maximum per article)

To submit articles for consideration or to obtain more information, please contact:

**Sharon Koh**

Email: [cdtsksp@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cdtsksp@nus.edu.sg)

Tel: (65)-6516 4692 • Fax: (65)-6777 0342 ■

# Teaching & Learning HIGHLIGHTS

## *NUS Business School*

### **Experiential Learning**

One of the courses taught at the NUS Business School was BSP1004 “Legal Environment for Business” (AY 2004/2005). Hitherto it was conducted seminar style and was well-received by students for its high level of interactivity. To encourage students to participate even more in class, the lecturer, Associate Professor Ravi Chandran, introduced a mock trial component. Students were divided into two teams: one team had a plaintiff, a plaintiff counsel and three witnesses while the other had a defendant, a defence counsel and three witnesses. The rest of the class acted as judges and were free to ask questions as the trial proceeded.

While the intention was to encourage greater participation, it was discovered (through the questions raised during class and from student feedback) that students actually got to understand legal principles and their nuances better by discussing a ‘real’ problem. The mock trial also helped students learn other practical matters not covered in textbooks (e.g. the difficulty of keeping up with a lie during a cross-examination session at trial).

The mock trial not only increased participation and learning, it also enabled students to have fun and excitement in class. Thereafter as a result, there was also an increased interest in the module. While this mode of experiential learning took place in the context of a business law module, experiential learning could apply in other contexts as well. After all, as has been said before, actively *doing* something is always better than passively *reading or learning* about something. ■

## *School of Design and Environment*

### **Teaching Development Seminar**

On 8 September 2005, the Departments of Building and Real Estate organised a teaching development seminar for faculty members to help them improve their teaching. Associate Professor Kulwant Singh, winner of NUS Outstanding Educator Award 2004, was invited to share his teaching tips and experience.

In the talk, he recommended that faculty members should set the right tone in the very first lecture. He also encouraged lecturers to teach outside of the textbooks to include current, contextual and challenging material for students. A/Prof Singh also urged that students should be viewed as partners, not as ‘enemies’ or even ‘customers’. On the one hand, perceiving students as ‘enemies’ implies a competitive relationship of which there can only be one winner. On the other hand, if faculty members treat students as customers who are always right, they may not learn effectively. By treating students as partners, students will be more involved and committed to the learning process and this partnership concept is a win-win situation in the end. For example, A/Prof Singh allows his students to influence the content they learn (e.g. allowing students to propose topics, select cases and projects for in-depth discussion).



*Figure 1. A/P Singh sharing his teaching tips and experience.*

The talk was not only insightful; it also provided many discussions among the faculty as it is only through constant discussions that teaching methods may be improved. ■

# Humour in the Classroom—A Dose of Laughter Won't Hurt

**Ma. Socorro C. Bacay**

Full-time Faculty Member/ College Registrar  
De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde  
Manilla, Philippines



A chance encounter in a crowded McDonald's afforded me the opportunity to rethink some old concepts I have about the role of humour in a classroom. While queuing at the restaurant, a group of students in front of me was talking about how they appreciate a good sense of humour in their teachers and it set me thinking. These comments do in fact support surveys that rank humour as one of the top five traits of an effective teacher (James, 2004). Yet, just 20 years ago, humour "had no place in the classroom nor on test materials" (Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004, p. 14).

I do not remember having attended any teacher's training on how to use humour either. Indeed, only a few researchers tackled the use of humour at the college/university level (White, 2001). In my classes, humour has been limited to the discussion of Freud's tendentious jokes (Burger, 2000) and the occasional cartoon strips to help explain an idea or as a starting point for discussion. However, as I review the current literature on this topic, I realise that humour and cartoons can be effective in the undergraduate classroom setting (Tomkovick, 2004).

## Is there learning in the laughing?

"If teachers want students to learn, then they should consider making learning more palatable, even enjoyable" (Torok, *et al.*, 2004, p. 14). This not only supports the use of humour in the classroom, but the authors also advise that humour be incorporated across all academic levels. This is particularly true for 'dread courses' (White, 2001) that students "avoid because of perceived difficulty, a previous negative

experience, or the students' lack of confidence" (White, 2001, p. 338).

Torok, *et al.* (2004) further provide the following reasons in support of humour in the classroom:

- Facilitates retention of novel information;
- Increases learning speed;
- Improves problem solving;
- Relieves stress;
- Reduces test anxiety;
- Increases perceptions of teacher credibility.

The prudent use of "content-related, non-hostile humor" (James, 2004, p. 93) has added benefits:

- More supportive learning environment;
- Enhanced students' attention and pleasure in learning;
- Improved thinking skills and test scores;
- Improved attitudes towards the subject matter.

According to the learner-centred psychological principles of the American Psychological Association, the "motivation to learn... is influenced by the individual's emotion states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking" (APA, 2006). If classroom humour is appropriately used, it has the potential to "humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking" (Torok, *et al.*, 2004, p. 19). Furthermore, "humour and positive thinking provide salve for the wounds, add joy to our

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lives, and help all involved to enjoy the passage of time. It also helps to open up our minds” (Tomkovick, 2004, p. 111).

### What about using humour in course tests?

If humour reduces tension and less tension makes students perform better, then the use of humour could very well work for students. For course tests, Berk (2000) recommends incongruous descriptors under the test title, jocular inserts in the instructions, humorous notes on the last page, or humour in the test items. Of course, the teacher needs to decide how much humour to include in the tests, especially for exams under time pressure.

However, Berk (2000) warns that “the few studies on the use of humor in testing yield insufficient and inconsistent results” (p. 155). Besides, it could be quite challenging to construct a test, humour notwithstanding, that would still ensure the test’s validity and reliability. I like Berk’s suggestion to use a distracter “so ridiculous and outrageous” (p. 154) in a multiple choice question that students will not choose it for the answer. Just in case someone does however, Berk recommends letting the students know beforehand about the humorous distracter, perhaps in the test instructions.

### What types of humour do students appreciate?

Most students appreciate funny stories, comments, jokes, professional humour, puns, cartoons and riddles while sarcasm, inappropriate jokes (e.g. sexist or ethnic) and aggressive or hostile humour generally do not work very well in classrooms.

### Where do I begin?

The willingness to make the atmosphere in the classroom sunny and moderately stress-free is a decision that the teacher makes, but it may take some time and a lot of practice to implement it effectively. Tomkovick (2004) suggests that to set the tone, one might like to play some music before the lecture, or use some self-deprecating humour during class.

The important thing is not to suddenly turn into the stand-up comedian but rather to appreciate a good laugh now and then without sounding phony. An open mind and a good, healthy sense of humour will go a long way.

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# Design Studio as a Platform for Exposure



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## Design Studio modules and assessment

Teaching Design Studio modules (AR3101 “Design 5” and AR3102 “Design 6”), is a unique and complex endeavour. Learning architectural design—an integral part to becoming a designer—necessarily encompasses both gaining the relevant knowledge and developing an awareness of one’s artistic character and abilities. In this respect, learning the required design skills is primarily a process of developing one’s potential where the educator is but a catalyst. As design deals with one’s creative ego, students are particularly sensitive when we<sup>1</sup>, as their tutors, evaluate their designs during the Crit sessions.

Although the assessment is based on established academic criteria, from students’ perspective, it remains a subjective exercise. Tutors give their comments in public but students often take these remarks personally. Even though these comments are objective, they can affect students’ motivation, self-esteem and progress if students take them negatively. Hence, most lecturers, to avoid hurting students’ feelings, tend to be more subtle. But this can sometimes result in imprecise observations.

As an architect, it is impossible to avoid critical comments. In this profession, not only are we judged by peers, investors, public and even time itself, we have to evaluate our own ideas throughout the entire design process. We need to teach students to accept these judgments constructively and turn the attendant stress and embarrassment into motivation for further progress.

## Beyond the expected

In AR3101 and AR3102, students work on varying projects either individually or in groups. Their

progress and outcomes are reviewed at the Interim and Final Crit sessions<sup>2</sup>. Through these sessions, we hope to help students:

- Take the critique constructively as another level of learning;
- Experience diverse situations where their designs would be on display and exposed to comparison and criticism (e.g. through a ‘pin up no talk’ [PUNT] Crit or video conference Crit);
- Acknowledge this experience as an inspiring rather than a stressful one.

Besides projects and review sessions, we have also extended the platform for students to gain more exposure in the following ways:

1. Student exchange with Hanyang University, Korea and sharing briefs with Tongji University, Shanghai, allow our students to compare various design approaches through daily communication in the studio and video-conferencing.
2. In the profession, architects face complex requirements, constraints and general public judgments. In order to prepare students for these encounters, they were encouraged to attend briefing sessions where actual design problems from both Singapore and abroad were presented and discussed. Students were then able to establish contacts with building specialists, CEOs, representatives from ministries, community centres, board members, interested parties and the general public. Students could learn a lot from invited guests who shared their expertise and experiences in these sessions.
3. Whenever possible, completed projects were put on exhibitions for the public. Students could interact with organisers as well as professionals and the

*continued next page...*

general public with regards to their projects, thus establishing bonds with both the profession and the local community.

Some of these projects include:

### 1. Interpretative Centre—Fort Tanjong Katong Archaeology Project.



Figure 1. Interaction with visitors at the Mountbatten Community Centre.

The initiative by the Mountbatten Constituency to conserve Fort Tanjong Katong was a great opportunity for students to boost their appreciation of local heritage and identity. Chosen schemes (from individual projects submitted in Semester 1, AY 2005/2006) were exhibited in Mountbatten Community Centre and students were awarded plaques.



Figure 2. NUS students awarded with plaques.

### 2. Baba House—Centre for Peranakan Heritage

Three group projects completed in Semester 1, AY 2005/2006 were exhibited at the first Peranakan Festival, *Raising the Phoenix*, at

Millenia Walk (18–26 November 2005) organised by the Peranakan Association of Singapore. Students' visions for this facility were dedicated to documenting and creating awareness of the rich Peranakan culture and this raised interest and acclamation.

### 3. \*SCAPE—Centre for the Youth



Figure 3. Opening of the exhibition at the National Youth Centre.

Group projects were produced in a week-long (9–14 January 2006) workshop competition on \*Scape—the creative space for youth. Four prizes were awarded and the overall winning concept will eventually be developed. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, graced the opening of the exhibition (21–27 January 2006) at the National Youth Centre.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, despite having to put more effort into these initiatives, student feedback revealed positive comments. Students acknowledged that by stepping beyond the academic environment, they actually gained valuable experience, made important connections and enriched their personal CVs.

## Endnotes

1. Dr Ruzica Bozovic-Stamenovic is the Year 3 Leader and Studio Master. Other Studio Masters involved in projects mentioned in this article are Dr Bay Joo Hwa, Philip, Dr Johannes Widodo, A/P Chan Yew Lih, Mr Fung John Chye, Mr Tan Chee Kiang, Dr Ong Boon Lay, Dr Wong Yunn Chii, A/P Tse Swee Ling Nee Yu, Mr Theodore Chan.
2. Interim crit sessions take place on Weeks 5 and 9, Technology interim crit on Week 6, Final Crit (with internal examiners) on Week 13 and with external examiners on Week 15. ■

## **My Teaching Philosophy**

*...continued from page 5*

and students will remember them better. Learning is not just the recollection of individual concepts and definitions; it should also involve hands-on exploration of the external world.

Ultimately, students want to do well in their examinations. To drive home the fact that students should not merely regurgitate concepts and theories during exams, I design exam questions that test students' abilities to construct, integrate and evaluate knowledge. I also conduct practice quizzes regularly throughout the semester so that students understand what is required of them during the actual examination.

### *Active and interactive learning*

I emphasise active learning in my classes by ensuring that there is frequent contact between my students and I. Students are encouraged to email their questions to me and an 'open office' session is also set up at the end of the semester for them to discuss any queries.

Furthermore, I have implemented a group project component in my classes to allow students to collaborate with one another. For example, in GEK1507/PR1301 "Complementary Medicine and Health", the class is divided into buzz groups to discuss specific questions and a representative from each group is invited to present its findings.

### **Problems arising from my teaching and potential solutions**

Of course, not everyone responds well to my teaching philosophy. The most typical complaints among students are that there is "too much to memorise", "too little time to do the project" and "too much independent thinking". Some other problems that are highlighted during student feedback sessions include the infrequent use of motivating learning and teaching approaches, a lack of better and more precise ways to assess learning outcomes and a lack of integration between teaching and research.

Through students' feedback, I understand that I have to improve my teaching by incorporating problem- and case-based study and other more innovative teaching approaches.

Special consideration should also be given to modules such as GEK1507/PR1301 "Complementary Medicine and Health" in which various approaches of contemporary medicine are introduced to students from diverse disciplines. As these students are not familiar with pharmaceutical or medical jargon, they are easily confused in lectures. To resolve this problem, I put together a 'mini-dictionary' which comprises detailed explanations for all key concepts and medical terms used in my classes and are couched in layman terms. Students' responses have been very positive towards this initiative.

### **Future plans**

After three years of teaching pharmacy students in NUS, I have learnt many things. One of the more important things I have learnt is that teaching is a lifelong journey of constant learning and discovery. I wish to share with you my plans for the future.

First, I would like to enhance the quality of interaction with my students and colleagues. As most of my students are from the department of pharmacy, I would like to interact more with students from other disciplines so as to better understand their learning needs. I think that establishing good relationships with students can help them improve their communication skills, establish their confidence and develop critical thinking and inquiry skills. As my colleagues are committed teachers with good teaching experience, I am able to continually learn new things from them. Having frequent discussions with colleagues help to clarify the uncertainties I face in teaching.

Second, I will incorporate more innovative teaching methods into my classes. To update myself on teaching skills, I actively attend CDTL's teaching seminars and workshops. During these sessions, the ideas and skills for good teaching imparted by the experienced staff are enlightening and will no doubt be welcomed by students.

A good educator must have commitment, responsibility and professionalism. I understand that there is always room for further enhancement and improvement in my teaching. I trust that with the accumulation of teaching experience at NUS, I will become an inspiring and committed teacher. ■

## Experiential Learning—Department of Political Science's Field Trip to Indonesia

...continued from page 2

- Exposure to a multiplicity of standpoints on key issues;



*Meeting with the Chairman of People's Consultative Assembly, Dr Nurhidayat Wahid, at the MPR Building, Indonesia.*

- Appreciation of Indonesia's political, economic and social complexities;
- Interaction with key personnel and institutions;
- Forged friendships and networks with staff and students;
- Insights into Indonesian culture, especially the dominance of Javanese worldview;
- Heightened awareness of Indonesia's geopolitical significance and its pivotal role in ASEAN, and what this means for Singapore;
- Opportunity to showcase NUS and its students.

While much had been achieved from the trip, there were still constraints to fulfillment of the goals:

- Language barriers prevented students from getting closer and understanding Indonesia in greater depth;
- Security and health concerns prevented the group from exploring other areas of Indonesia;
- Time constraints—one month was too short to understand a vast and complex country like Indonesia;
- Logistics was a perennial problem as distance and traffic situation limited the learning journey;
- Budgetary considerations also greatly hampered a deeper exploration of Indonesia as internal transport and accommodation costs were not cheap.

### **Future plans**

Despite the various challenges, the field trip to Indonesia was a tremendous success. Students developed a particular interest in the country as their 'third eye' was opened. Many have indicated a desire to undertake further studies



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on Indonesia. The friends, networks and linkages established have been expanded and consolidated. The module should be sustained and developed further.

If possible, more of such modules should be introduced, especially with reference to Malaysia and other geopolitically important neighbours as field trips are an extremely invaluable mode of experiential learning. ■