

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Staff Awards

Congratulations to ...

Long Service Awards – 10 years

Mr. Chan Kok Hoe
Mdm Fatimah bte Ahmad

Long Service Awards – 15 years

Mdm Sagi Kaur a/p Amar Singh

Long Service Awards – 20 years

Associate Professor Abeysinghe Tilak

Long Service Awards – 25 years

Associate Professor Chin Theng Heng, Anthony

Faculty Excellence Teacher Award 2009

Associate Professor Chia Ngee Choon
Dr. Wong Wei Kang

Some Random and Non-Random Thoughts on Teaching from Dr. Wong Wei Kang

Are there any secrets to good teaching? Well, there are some tools and techniques. But they are freely available to anybody who bothers to simply google.¹ But secrets? There is probably none. Instead, conscientious and continuous efforts are needed. But before we go any further, as economists who are well trained in the distinction between positive and normative analyses, we should be quick to ask: what do you mean by good teaching? What is the definition of a good teacher? These are very important questions. But admittedly reasonable people can disagree with any particular definition that I propose. So tentatively let me propose a personal definition that can vary across individuals, depending on their temperaments and experiences.

In academia, basically everybody has a PhD degree. Well, it takes a long time to complete a PhD degree for most people. So having spent more years studying than others, one thing that we do not lack is experience with many different teachers. If we live in a normal world (as a first approximation), then we would have encountered some good ones, and some not so good ones, with roughly equal frequencies.

When I started teaching, I have followed some very simple principles: to emulate the teachers whom I admire, to avoid the practices of the teachers whom I dread, and to cultivate economic intuitions and the economist's way of thinking. So

my answer to the definition of a good teacher is: think about the best teachers you have had, and think about why you think of them as the best, then adopt them as your personal prescribed ideals of a good teacher.

Personally, my best professors are clear, systematic, come to class prepared, interesting, passionate and knowledgeable about what they are teaching, always motivated by the relevance of their work to the real world, always try to relate the mathematics in the economic models to economic intuitions, have a unique personal style and are inspiring. So I try to emulate these qualities in my own teaching.

Of course, teaching techniques matter. Of course, innovative teaching methods or technology matter. But they are secondary and can be learnt very easily and quickly. After all, I do not believe that we think of some teachers as the best because they have good techniques. Furthermore, techniques and methods are not teaching itself. Different techniques and methods are appropriate for different circumstances. As a graduate student, I once overheard a conversation between a fellow student with his professor. The student lamented about not using a more "sophisticated" technique in his paper. And the professor went, "Oh, but why should you worry about not using a more sophisticated method? It is not about how sophisticated the technique is. The question you should ask is whether the technique you are using is the most appropriate for your purpose!" This is a question I have never ceased to ask myself since in my own teaching and research. Am I using a technology or teaching a technique that is more difficult than needed to illustrate an economic idea just to appear more "sophisticated"? Should I design my modules on the assumption that perhaps ten to fifteen percent of the undergraduates will eventually go to graduate school (and so may need the more sophisticated mathematical techniques) or on the assumption that eighty-five to ninety percent of them will not go to graduate school (and do not need or appreciate the mathematical sophistication)?

Of course, modern economics is mathematical. A unique problem we often face in the teaching of economics is a mismatch between the mathematical skills our discipline requires of the students and the actual mathematical skills our students possess. A math student cannot complain about the math he encounters in his modules. After all, if you enrol yourself in the math department, you should know what you are getting yourself into. But this is not true for an economics student. Recently, I saw an economics student complaining about the math in every economics module before every examination on Facebook. So after the last examination, I, of course, congratulated her for being exonerated from the torture because she finally graduated. So jokingly I asked her

¹ For example, the following website contains all the teaching tools and techniques that I have ever known and you can learn them all within one day and so I will not elaborate on them here: <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/compendium/>

why a rational, utility-maximizing individual like her would choose to major in a discipline that is so heavy in math while she apparently loathed it. If she is telling the truth, then that would seem to contradict the theory of revealed preferences. Someone answered for her before she could reply (so this may not be an unusual situation). She said: "We love economics but hate the math. The problem is information asymmetry." You see, the problem for economics is that many students do not know what they are getting themselves into because there is a drastic ascent in the mathematics and statistics used in A-levels and introductory modules to more advanced modules. Hence, mismatch results if the students use adaptive expectations to forecast how economics is like at more advanced levels.²

As modern economics is mathematical, use math we must. Nevertheless, because modern economics is mathematical and as more math is introduced in more advanced modules, I feel that we have a special responsibility to be careful. We have a special responsibility to relate the math to economic intuitions and to make them relevant. After all, we are supposed to be teaching economics. After all, most students are drawn to economics because they want to learn economics to understand the economic world better. So I feel that math should only be the means, not the ends. One thing I am very wary of is a situation where the students spend the whole semester struggling to learn the techniques of problem-solving, but never get to the point to appreciate the economic intuitions and the economic problems behind these techniques. Am I simply teaching some cute math or real economic insights that help us understand the economic world better?

In 1963, George Stigler had this to say about elementary economic education: "The watered-down encyclopaedia which constitutes the present course in beginning college economics does not teach the student how to think on economic questions. The brief exposure to each of a vast array of techniques and problems leaves with the student no basic economic logic with which to analyze the economic questions he will face as citizen. The student will memorize a few facts, diagrams and policy recommendations, and ten years later will be as untutored in economics as the day he entered the class." Although George Stigler wrote this close to half a century ago and the amount of time that has passed certainly meets Keynes's definition of long run, it still serves as a timely reminder to all of us.

As a final thought, aside from training students to be economists and educating them to be good citizens who can participate meaningfully in the discussion of economic policies, can a social science education like an economics education have a higher purpose? For example, as economists, we often teach our students that incentives matter and people respond to incentives to maximize their utility. This is one of the key elements of the economist's way of thinking. But if we have really taught this principle successfully to our students, then it should probably also change how they relate to others.

George Akerlof expressed this most eloquently in his 2003 commencement address at UC Berkeley:

"I am a social scientist. As a social scientist, I see the University then as changing who you are. I see the University as not just changing your views toward science, like physics or biology, or astronomy, or chemistry. I see it also as changing your attitude toward other people.

Every one of the social sciences teaches us that we can understand the motives of other people. People may be very different from us. Their motives may be very different from ours. Their means of expressing those motives may be strange indeed. Our knowledge about other people's problems makes their motives comprehensible to us. That means that we can see other people and their motives in our terms.

The uneducated too often believe that a conflict of interest occurs because other people are evil. The educated believe that conflicts of interest naturally occur. Moreover, these conflicts occur especially because other people are basically so very much like ourselves. So the University teaches us to see other people's views. We have mercy for them."

Brief Bio:

Wei Kang is a near-rational economist who did his undergraduate degree in economics at NUS (1991-1995) and his PhD degree in Economics at the University of California, Berkeley (1996-2001). He does empirical research on the channels of cross-country income convergence and on topics in Behavioural Economics.

² It is hard to imagine how rational expectations could lead to systematic errors in the students' expectations, generations after generations. Somehow they seem to be doing sub-optimal search for information regarding a discipline they will spend three to four years studying in the university.