

EDITORIAL

## The evolution of university teaching in a changing world

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## The evolution of university teaching in a changing world

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne had the following requirement for the teacher and his teaching: “I do not want the teacher to be the only one to choose topics or to do all the talking: when the [pupil’s] turn comes let the teacher listen to his pupil talking. Socrates and then Archelaus used to make their pupils speak first; they spoke afterwards”. (Michel de Montaigne, *On Educating Children*)

This fourth issue of JNUSTA explores the role of the contemporary teacher in the learning of the student. What kind of teacher should the 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher be? What forms of teaching are the best ways of accomplishing learning? In an era where learning increasingly takes place in contexts where the teacher is physically absent, what are the forms of interface between the teacher and learner and how do these help learning? How is knowledge configured and understood in formal learning contexts where rapid technological change simultaneously shifts the knowledge base? The present volume seeks to address these questions.

Soveacha Ros, Thomas NB Pascual and Rethy K CHHEM focus on learning without the presence of an actual physical teacher. In their paper “Creating a virtual ‘global community of learners’ in radiation medicine through sound educational principles”, they explore the various ways in the Department of Nuclear Sciences and Applications Division of Human Health (NAHU) of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delivers distance learning to the various member states. Here, certain organisational qualities and education principles combine to produce the capacity for continuing adaptation and learning in a medical world in which technological change is rapid. NAHU has become a “learning organisation” where reflective practice is central to the continuing education of professional staff members.

Jeffrey Mok presents a study in which the teacher is physically present, but has an added virtual interface with the learner in the form of Facebook. Mok recounts his experience in helming a Business Communication course which adopts Facebook as one of its communication tools. He outlines in his paper, “Facebook and learning: students’ perspective on a course”, how students were divided into Facebook groups that corresponded to their face-to-face classes. A key question this paper asks is whether students’ perceive Facebook to be a means through which meaningful learning can take place. He found that students were overwhelmingly positive about their learning experience when using the Facebook component of their course. One student noted that: “I felt that I was in a group, and that I was involved”. As Mok notes, “Knowledge ...being delivered on a social platform makes learning a social activity [which is different from] a dry academic setting”. What is important here, as in the paper of Ros *et al.* is a sense of extended (virtual) community as one of the conditions for a good learning environment, one in which connections outside the traditional “classroom” matter.

The changes in the role of the teacher, from physically present to virtual, from communicating through speech to communicating digitally – leave us with a pressing question: how do we reconfigure our understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century teacher? Anna Kindler explores this question in her paper, “Academia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Towards a research and teaching-intensive university”. Writing about her home institution – the University of British Columbia – Kindler examines the ways in which it has tried to be not just research-intensive, but teaching-intensive. She outlines the various initiatives – including the development of a tenurable teaching track – to strengthen the educational core of her institution. Kindler regards combining the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth, the Office of Learning Technology, and the Carl Wieman Science Education Institute as an important step towards a university-wide promotion of evidence-based teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning. This is a move made by many universities that in the 1990s had separate centres for learning and teaching and centres for educational technology, and it speaks of a greater sense of integration between new technology and education, perhaps their inseparability.

Kindler’s experience traces a historical curve shared by many faculty members around the world. She began two decades ago as a university teacher with no teacher training, and has seen the regard for teaching change from something that was “the necessary price to pay for the privilege to be an academic at a university with world-class aspirations” to an activity that is more central and vital to the role of an academic.

Finally, the account of Lakshminarayanan et al on the recently set up NUS Teaching Academy focuses on a body of committed teachers who have come together to mull on how best to advance the learning, and fulfill the potential, of the students in their institution. Their article outlines the aims and initiatives of the NUS Teaching Academy. The goal of the Academy is to provide an independent voice on teaching and learning within the institution, and to incubate, experiment and scale-up new educational ideas for wider implementation and adaptation. The article highlights the various projects undertaken by the academy, and the various initiatives to promote outreach and discussion within the university community on the educational direction of the university.

Four hundred years after Montaigne explored the role of the teacher in bringing about learning in the student, the discussion and exploration continues, amid shifting platforms and technological change, on how best to understand and evolve this role.

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**Balancing teaching and research in research intensive environments**

Teaching and research are the primary intellectual activities of a university academic, and doing well in both of them is desirable and important. The (real or perceived) “tensions” between these two activities, particularly in research-intensive universities, may prompt the questions, “How does one strike a balance between teaching and research activities?” and “How does one excel in both teaching and research?”.

In this online discussion forum, we invite you to share your thoughts and experiences on this very important issue faced by academics. You could address one or more of the following questions.

- How do/did you approach the challenge of balancing teaching and research?
- How do you stay motivated to achieve this balance? Do you feel you have achieved it – or has one of the 2 roles won out?
- Has your teaching helped your research (or vice versa)? What factors play a role here?
- Has your institution addressed the teaching-research nexus through policies or strategies, and how successful have they been? (Please indicate if you feel that your institution is teaching- or research-intensive, or has achieved a good mix of both roles)

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