

EDITORIAL

What's in a name?

Erle LIM Chuen Hian,¹ Johan GEERTSEMA,²

¹ Editor in Chief, AJSOTL
Senior Consultant, Department of Medicine, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine
National University of Singapore

² Deputy Editor, AJSOTL
Residential Fellow, Cinnamon College/University Scholars Programme, University Town
National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Assoc Prof Erle Lim, Editor in Chief, AJSOTL, c/o NUS Teaching Academy, Central Library Annexe, Level 7, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260.
Email: info@sotl.edu.sg

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What's in a name?

This is the first issue of *AJSoTL*, the *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. *AJSoTL* will remain a journal “to create and nurture a global network of academics and educators...to...discuss ongoing changes and future trends in tertiary education”. Our new name reflects our decision to focus on issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and this means an emphasis on research-informed teaching and on explicit pedagogical reflection, as well as documentation of the pedagogical processes that drive classroom activities and student learning outcomes. In short, we hope to improve the quality of teaching and learning, by encouraging fellow teachers to think about, and discuss, issues in a scholarly, i.e. SoTL, way. *AJSoTL* will facilitate the process by engaging SoTL practitioners to write articles that will both stimulate, and inspire, our teaching endeavours.

In this issue of *AJSoTL*, Susan W. L. Ang, the National University of Singapore's Outstanding Educator of 2014, discusses what it means to be a university. She begins by exploring John Henry Newman's “Idea of a University”. Newman thinks it is the business of a university to “make ... intellectual culture its direct scope, or to employ itself in the education of the intellect”. Ang asks whether the cultivation of the intellect should be the *raison d'être* of a university. After all, she points out, Newman's idealism is not shared by students, whose pursuit of a university education is rather more pragmatic – i.e. to enable them to earn a (decent) salary. She then highlights the plight of the academic, who has to juggle two roles: on the one hand, the more noble pursuit of intellect, reason and truth, and on the other, the ‘less’ noble (snobs might say ignoble) pursuit of lucre. Add to that the view held by Newman that the university exists for *teaching* rather than *research*, which goes against the commonly held belief that the modern-day research-intensive university should uphold research above all else. Ang posits that “a truer expression of the relation between each of these pairs: teaching and research, idealism and pragmatism, mind and morals, is that they are symbiotic, mutually-sustaining, rather than divergent or antagonistic”. To address those who favour teaching over research, or vice versa, Ang reminds us that the two areas are “not disjunct” – research often informs one's teaching, just as teaching and interaction with students can generate ideas for research. Ang further comments that “teaching, which requires us to clarify concepts, causal relationships, etc. for the students, can often result in a sharpening or clarifying of ideas for oneself”. She then takes us through a tour of university mottoes, drawing lessons from the various escutcheons, in order to question Newman's assertion that the proper focus of the university is to hone the intellect

rather than shape morals or character. Instead, it is Ang’s view that “when we train the mind, we also, at some level, train the character, and vice versa”. She concludes that the role of the university is thus to hone the intellect and shape the character/morals of our students/charges.

The second contribution to this volume of *AJSOTL* reports on a preliminary study into participation patterns in the case of an English language learning ‘iMOOC’, or ‘internal MOOC’ designed and offered by the National University of Singapore’s Centre for English Language Communication (CELC). Drawing on Kizilcec et al.’s notion of ‘learning trajectories’, Wu and Lee’s study seeks to trace individual participant’s levels of engagement in ‘Essentials of Clear Writing’ which was mounted on the Coursera platform. The course was open only to students and staff from the National University of Singapore, which is why Wu and Lee term it an ‘iMOOC’. The authors seek to understand identifiable patterns of engagement among participants as well as the extent to which this indicated the use of the four key learning principles of task-based MOOCs, namely autonomy, connectivity, diversity, and openness. They seek to do this in order to investigate the possibility of, in the future, making “strategic changes to the course that better appreciate learning behaviours and engagement strategies on the iMOOC as opposed to other kinds of MOOCs”.

In his article, Mok reports on a study of the impact of a communications skills class for business students (ES2002). Assessment of the efficacy of courses, with regard to the extent to which they achieve learning outcomes, is becoming ever more important, as is the ability of students to communicate effectively: a key 21st century skill. Mok therefore seeks to answer the question as to “the difference in knowledge, skills and attitudes between the overall control and experimental groups of students”, as well as what “the difference [might be] in knowledge, skills and attitudes of the same students in the experimental group, before and after ES2002”. He concludes that there were clear indications of positive changes in students’ communication skills, in particular with regard to oral communication and also writing.

Dujeepa Samarasekera et al. sceptically examine the phenomenon of catchily-named *based learnings*, i.e. problem-based, team-based and case-based, and on to the newer theme-based, simulation-based, research-based and narrative-based learnings, questioning whether the pressure put on educators to embrace “newer content delivery methods and to move away from traditional modalities” is justifiable. One advantage of these *based learnings* is a more student-centric approach, and departure from traditional one-way delivery of content from expert to learner, but they question if the hype and marketing strategies, i.e. “overstating the benefits and understating, or hiding, the limitations and challenges”, and

the convenience of *based learnings*, i.e. the “ready availability of a convenient ‘off the shelf’ content delivery method” underlies this popularity. Samarasekera et al. remind us that the internet-savvy Gen-Y generation differ from previous generations of students, and part of the appeal of the *based learnings* can be attributed to their ability to navigate the world wide web with facility. Despite the economic downturn, the authors remind us of the need to resource educational initiatives adequately, by ensuring the provision of “trained facilitators, classrooms and purpose-built learning spaces for students to do their independent learning and discussions”. Echoing Susan Ang’s article, Samarasekera et al remind us of the university’s role in shaping the minds of its students and preparing them for life, i.e. “apart from domain-specific skills and knowledge, self-directed and lifelong learning, leadership and team skills, communication and professionalism are some of the more important domain independent skills necessary for a successful graduate”.

In her short note, *Are you ready for “The Amazing Race”?*, Wong explains how, and why, she has developed tutorials that take place beyond the traditional classroom. These tutorials are innovative ways of “managing a diversity of learners” and of dealing with what she (rightly) terms “one of the greatest difficulties of teaching”, namely how to “relate theoretical concepts and ideas to existing practices or phenomena in reality”. Her article is particularly relevant, given that lessons often are conducted in a classroom setting remote from such real-world phenomena. Wong’s solution to these challenges has been to design tutorial activities based on the television game show, “The Amazing Race”, in real-world settings. Even though the format presents its own challenges, in particular, relating to limited time available and a limited number of appropriate locations, her experiment in teaching has nevertheless enthused, and engaged, a diversity of learners.

Finally, Chng Huang Hoon, in a review of Tinberg and Weisberger’s *Teaching, Learning, and the Holocaust: An Integrative Approach*, looks at their decade-long collaborative teaching about the Holocaust in an interdisciplinary seminar. The authors liken the course to embarking on a journey in teaching and learning. Chng, who has elsewhere reviewed the book with reference to the question of interdisciplinarity, examines it from the perspective of empathy in relation “to teaching and learning, and to the metaphors of the journey and the bystander that Tinberg and Weisberger introduced in their work”. She relates her own perspective of the journey as a child of survivors of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Chng realises that “[only] my admiration for the indomitable human spirit and the many stories of courage have sustained my interest in this traumatic historical moment”. It is telling that these educators, who are trying to create interesting and compelling interdisciplinary courses despite “starting

the journey without maps”, managed to work out ways to address the challenges in co-constructing a course that crosses disciplinary borders. They provide their students with the opportunity, not just to learn about the Holocaust, but also to develop a way of thinking about this difficult subject in an academically informed way. Perhaps most helpful of all, “one important takeaway from this book/collaborative effort is its attempt at resolving several binaries – binaries presented by the separate disciplines of history and literature; by the preferred pedagogical modes of lecture versus discussion; historical fact versus narrative fiction/testimony; objective critique versus trauma”.

Ang’s and Chng’s articles in this issue prompt us, perhaps, to reflect on the role we play as teachers, and what a university education is, or should be about for students. This, then, is an opportunity to stop and ask: what do we teach, how should we teach, and why?