

Sustainable Learning, Leading and Living in the “T” Age

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Abstract: New strategies are needed for learning and teaching in the “T” age. The letter “T” not only refers to the Internet, which transcends geographical, physical, social and cultural boundaries in learning and teaching; it also signifies the impact of self-exploration, I-searching. There should be room for each student to create his/her own development path based on his/her needs, interests, capabilities and dreams. Let students search the Internet and share their findings, distinguish facts from truth, decide what is worth learning and assessing, and they will naturally develop a sense of belonging and satisfaction. They are not just following or receiving instructions from the teachers – they are co-piloting. Through sharing and collaborating, students develop social and emotional skills, self-confidence and awareness of personal and cultural differences – global competencies, as we call them. Together they shape their course of study. They own it, therefore they care about it. They will volunteer to be pioneers. Learning, leading and living will be satisfying and sustainable if students can personalize the knowledge and skills they acquire in the same way they compile songs in a playlist. Let them take the wheel, surf the net, and drive their lives.

Keywords:

Self-exploration, Internet, Co-piloting, Global competencies, Sustainable learning

Introduction

Learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin. Learning/teaching is about self-exploration. University is the time for students to discover who they are, what they enjoy doing, what they are good at, and what they want to be. It is a journey of self-exploration, which does not end upon graduation. It may be in learning, researching, mooting or volunteering that students find their true selves.

I believe that sustainable learning, leading and living can be achieved by an invitational approach – inviting students to search and share, acknowledging and rewarding their contributions, and creating opportunities for further exploration after graduation.

I put the emphasis on self-exploration because upon reflection on our university’s Outcomes-Based Approach to Student Learning (OBASL), Problem-Based Learning

(PBL) and other student-centred learning strategies, I find that individual initiative, personal judgment and responsibility are not highlighted as they ought to be. Learning Outcomes and PBL problems are selected for and assigned to students, who are treated as a homogeneous group with no regard to individual talents and interests. For digital natives, information is accessible at their fingertips, personalised entertainment is the norm, and online surfing is an integral part of their daily life. We need i-strategies for learning and living in the I-age – “I” stands for the Internet, and for Individualism. To make learning satisfying, sustainable and impactful, I adopt a 3-i strategy as follows:

1. To embrace and celebrate individuality, I *invite* students to explore
2. To nurture global citizenship, I *interconnect* them with the world
3. To cultivate a sense of community, I *inform* them of enhancement initiatives

We have been talking about “life-long learning” and “global citizenship” but there is very little conscious or explicit effort to cultivate the most crucial attributes of a global citizen or life-learner, namely, the *willingness* to contribute to the common good, the *willingness* to serve and give back to society, the *willingness* to cooperate and collaborate, as well as the *willingness* to spot and solve problems as opposed to the ability to do so. It is not a matter of what I *can* do, but what I *care* about. Individual initiative, attitude and values are to be encouraged, not assessed. The word “assess” is defined in the Cambridge University Dictionary as follows:

“To judge or decide the amount, value, quality, or importance of something.”

We *assess* knowledge and skills. We *inspire* students to care about the human condition, *instill* personal responsibility and motivation, and *invite* them to serve and give back to society. Hence an invitational approach is called for.

Inviting students

Students are invited to “search and share”, i.e. to conduct online searches for the latest cases, examples or discussions in respect of the subject, and to share their findings. For arts, mathematics, and humanities such as law, students can easily find innumerable examples in everyday life; for more technical disciplines, academic journals or professional discussions could be the subject matter of the search. Online searching is part of our daily life. If we could build online searching into our curriculum, students could learn anywhere, anytime. In exercising their judgment and making the selection, they will be able to distinguish facts from truths. Most importantly, they will develop a sense of ownership, responsibility and satisfaction.

The keyword is “invite”, that means students are encouraged, not compelled, to do searches on their own. Invitation is an effective way to generate individual initiative, but it is effective only if students’ efforts are individually acknowledged and rewarded. I have experimented with three different ways to do so:

1. Acknowledging contributions in class – I invite students to “search and share” with me. I ask every contributing student for his or her name so that I can acknowledge their contributions and thank them individually in front of the whole class. Being acknowledged, they know that they are on the right track, i.e. they receive instantaneous positive feedback from the teacher. This helps in building their confidence, prompting their curiosity, and making them more willing to contribute. It is a virtuous circle.

2. Bonus for research – The “search and share” method is also effective in inducing individual initiative in terms of research, provided that the contributing students are given the acknowledgment and reward they deserve. I invite each student to (i) do an online search for the most recent court decisions on a specified topic, (ii) choose a case he or she would recommend for inclusion in our discussion, and (iii) write a one-page commentary for discussion in tutorial. The best submission in each tutorial group will be awarded a bonus. Students are motivated not only to take learning into their hands, but also to turn their written submissions into journal publications. There is evidence in the SETL that students are inspired to conduct research on their own.

3. Co-teaching – A more advanced “search and share” model may be used for upper-level courses taught in seminar format. For my Intellectual Property course, I invite students to take an even more active role in learning and teaching, let them decide on the scope and methods of learning and assessment, and give them instantaneous feedback and reward for their contributions. Those who seize the opportunity are in fact co-designing and co-teaching the course. I invite students to look around for potential intellectual property issues in everyday life. Students who choose to share their search findings in class are acknowledged and thanked; bonus is awarded and recorded at the end of each seminar to ensure immediacy and transparency. There is 100% alignment between the learning and assessment. We use only real cases and real-life examples in classroom discussion, in the optional assignment, and in the final examination, and students are informed in advance. Real-life examples are conducive to active and life-long learning because students can easily spot them on their own and are inclined to follow up simply out of personal interest. The optional assignment and final examination also draw on intellectual property issues in everyday life so that students can relate to them on a personal level. It is an in-hall open-book exam with a choice of questions, all based on real recent

court cases, decided or pending, and potential cases of infringement in everyday life. Students are informed at the outset, in class and in course material, that only real cases and incidents will appear in the assignment and final exam, and are explicitly encouraged to do their own search and research in advance. Every year, about half of the class will choose to “search and share” in class, and half of the class will opt for the assignment. The two batches are not mutually exclusive, i.e. some may choose to do both. Everyone has to take the final exam, in which a substantial number of the students are able to cite and comment on the relevant news reports and law reports, and are able to discuss the legal issues with reference to the facts and their own personal experience and observations.

Interconnecting students/alumni

While the first “i” stimulates personal growth and individual initiative, the second “i” nurtures interpersonal connections and teamwork. Students who are willing and eager to contribute to the common good would have to collaborate with each other and to connect with the world. They are budding entrepreneurs. They need room to bloom.

The Hong Kong Education Bureau has promoted “life planning education and career guidance for secondary schools” [1], but still many university students have no idea what they want to do, career or life wise. Even law students do not necessarily want to be lawyers or know whether they should be solicitors or barristers. Mooting and internship opportunities can be eye-opening, door-opening, and sometimes even life-changing. As the HKU team coach for the Oxford International Intellectual Property Moot, I have seen many students finding their career paths after taking part in the moot. I have also included diversified internships as an integral part of my Intellectual Property course. These internships turn out to be valuable opportunities for the interns to know more about the firm and vice versa, learn more about intellectual property practice, and get a sense of their interest and career inclinations. Students appreciate the opportunities to learn from and interconnect with experts in the field.

We tend to regard current students and alumni as two distinct groups, being taken care of by different colleagues, different units. If we believe in the philosophy of “life-long learning”, which I do, there is no break in the learning process. That is why I embrace Internet searching and sharing as a means to achieve borderless learning. That is also why I invite students in my Intellectual Property class, who are final-year students, to continue to learn, share and serve *after they graduate* through a “Copyright Ambassadors” scheme. It is an important moment when students turn into graduates

and start seeking their first role within the industry. An opportunity for sustainable and life-long learning and service, the scheme helps them develop a sense of mission and concern for others.

Informing students

As Associate Dean overseeing Learning and Teaching, I take students' and teachers' feedback seriously, and have seen huge gaps between students' and teachers' expectations. From my observation and discussion with colleagues and students, I find that the problem lies in the fact that well-intended initiatives or remedial actions are not made sufficiently clear to students. That is why informing students of enhancement measures is as important as carrying them out.

When I remind colleagues of the need to clarify goals and standards and provide timely feedback, I share those reminders with the Chairman of the Law Association, a student body, for further dissemination to students. Student representatives are invited to join all our Faculty Teaching and Learning Quality Committee meetings. It is important to keep the feedback loop active. It is only when students are informed of the actions taken that they will appreciate the efforts made and develop a sense of community.

I have made extra effort in class and in course material to inform students of the types and timing of feedback in advance because I have seen a gap in the survey "Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning", which is administered *before* the final exam. If students are not sufficiently informed in advance of the feedback they are going to receive *after* the final exam, they are not in a position to give accurate replies to specific survey questions on "assessment standards" and "timely feedback". Keeping students informed will help manage expectations, generate a sense of belonging, enhance the quality of learning and teaching, and make the learning experience more satisfying. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to take student surveys seriously, and to design and revise the learning, assessment and feedback methods with these important data in mind. To me, such design/revision is an ongoing process, and feedback and clarification should be given constantly rather than at the end of the course. I keep checking students' progress and clarify their expectations as soon as difficulties are detected. It is only when students are involved and informed in every step of the learning process that learning will become satisfying and sustainable.

[1]https://careerguidance.edb.hkedcity.net/edb/export/sites/default/lifeplanning/.pdf/about-careers-guidance/CLP-Guide_E_r3.pdf