CELEBRATING THE JOY OF TEACHING

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I am excited to be writing this article on celebrating teaching, because all too often it feels like research is celebrated more than teaching at the university. This is perhaps because research has obvious measurable rewards such as being granted research funding or producing a paper. Teaching produces its own rewards but these are far less obvious and can be different for every teacher. When I wrote my teaching portfolio I opened with the quote of "we teach to change the world" (Brookfield, 1995), and while this seems cliched, it is so very true. The rewards in teaching for me are the interactions with students and seeing that moment when there is a spark as ideas click and make sense. It is the connections with students I want to focus on in this piece because for me that is why I teach.

As a tutor my teaching classes are different to the typical delivery of information that you find in a lecture. I teach predominantly in the laboratory with a class size of 30-40 students all working in smaller groups. Small group teaching allows for conversations, letting me move between groups and talk to students far more than in lectures or even some tutorials. A typical interaction might start with a student asking a question based directly on what they are learning but it can evolve and lead us down different paths. And it is these discussions that I enjoy because they fulfil two roles that I enjoy: conveying information and building social relationships.

When a student asks a question sometimes all they need is a simple answer. However, often the question lends itself to exploring their knowledge. By chatting with either the individual student or the group there is the chance to teach new information, clarify existing ideas, and identify and correct misconceptions. Because there is a two-way dialogue I can ask questions and work with students to get to the correct answer, often giving hints to allow them to get to the answer by themselves as they pull their existing knowledge together. I always love these types of exchanges because students are so proud of themselves when they realise they knew the answer or were able to solve the problem through applying existing ideas.

The other moments I love are when talking around an idea or explaining a concept helps a student to finally 'get it'. One of the comments I frequently get from students is that I have the ability to take a confusing concept and explain it in language they understand. This is because I will often take a difficult concept and explain it using very plain language and then build upon it, introducing the more scientific explanations until I've explained the concept a number of times but in different ways with each successive explanation becoming more complex. In addition I like to use different teaching modes such as videos and animations to show ideas. One of the most surprisingly effective tools is using the students themselves. For example one particularly difficult process I teach involves the movement of molecules, I move the students from one place to another, linking them with each other while asking other students what they think is going to happen so it seems that as a team we recreate the process. Feedback from the students has been extremely positive on this style of teaching, possibly because in reality it is not something they can physically see happening and imagining it in their head is hard. The reward is in hearing the excited phrase of "I finally get it".

It is during all these chats that I also get to know my students giving me the chance to build relationships. Within the first couple of weeks of semester I have usually learned the names of most of my students (around 180). I never realised this was a big deal until I had a student explain to me that it made her feel important that I had taken the time to learn her name. To me it was the natural thing to do, I was going to be working with these students for a semester or the entire year and the best way to develop a relationship was to start by learning their name. Teaching at the first year level I view my role as a tutor to have a pastoral aspect, the majority of students are away from home for the first time and their lives outside the classroom can have major impacts. During their first class

I start by explaining I have an open door policy and encouraging students to come and see me for any reason. One student wrote a letter in support of my teaching excellence award nomination explaining how I had helped her cope with university:

> *First year was very hard for me, moving away from home to a big university where I did not know anyone and I did not know how university worked. Many of my teachers were quite intimidating and made me feel very overwhelmed by everything I had to do…Brydget came in to the lab happy and bubbly, encouraging us to come to her if we have any questions at all, even if they were not biology related… although this seemed like a small gesture to her it meant so much to me and I felt that I had someone I could talk to. I felt like I belonged somewhere.*

Even after I finish teaching the students at first year I continue to maintain relationships with many students. My office's proximity to the teaching laboratories means many students drop by for a chat prior to their classes. I encourage this and it is reinforced by comments from students that I always make them feel welcome and that they can come to me for help. Too often students need help but they just aren't sure who to ask, I am able to direct them to appropriate sources all because they feel comfortable enough to just drop by my office and ask.

These social aspects I view as a major job role, because in a university it is easy to feel lost. I came to Waikato as a student in the second year of my degree and didn't know anyone. It was an isolating experience but I was an older student with some life experience behind me that helped me to adapt quickly. For many of the fresh from school students they are arriving to a large campus from a small high school, they have no friends and they can easily feel like numbers. If I can make the transition easier then I am succeeding in my job.

Throughout my studies as a student I moved through different disciplines, never quite finding the right fit. It wasn't until I was doing my graduate studies and assisted in some teaching that I was able to say 'I could do this for a job'. Being able to combine my passion for science and my love of people, conveying information and developing relationships meant that teaching was the perfect fit for me. I have found it to be the most rewarding career; it is with pride that I am clapping at graduation seeing students that I taught crossing the stage having earned their degrees.