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October 2011

National Teaching Excellence Awards

Once again we are very happy to see excellent Victoria teachers being recognised nationally for the quality of their work. For 2011 Professor Kevin Gould from the School of Biological Sciences has been awarded a Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching Award recognising the quality of his teaching over his career. Following is a brief extract from Kevin's portfolio discussing his teaching.

What plants can teach teachers about teaching about plants

Kevin Gould – School of Biological Sciences

It really is not too difficult to unleash the full potential of the plants in our garden. Supply the key incentives – sunlight for photosynthesis, water for transpiration, and a fertile soil to which the roots can anchor – and we're half way there; the plants will happily do the hard graft themselves.

You can't make a plant grow by pulling on it *Chinese proverb*

Nurture the plants, but challenge them too – many will bloom more prolifically after a brief drought or a cold snap. And keep an eye out for problems; remove the weeds, provide stakes for support, and, ensure that the roots can access all the minerals they need. We cannot force a plant to grow, but with the appropriate scaffolding, there is every probability it will flourish.

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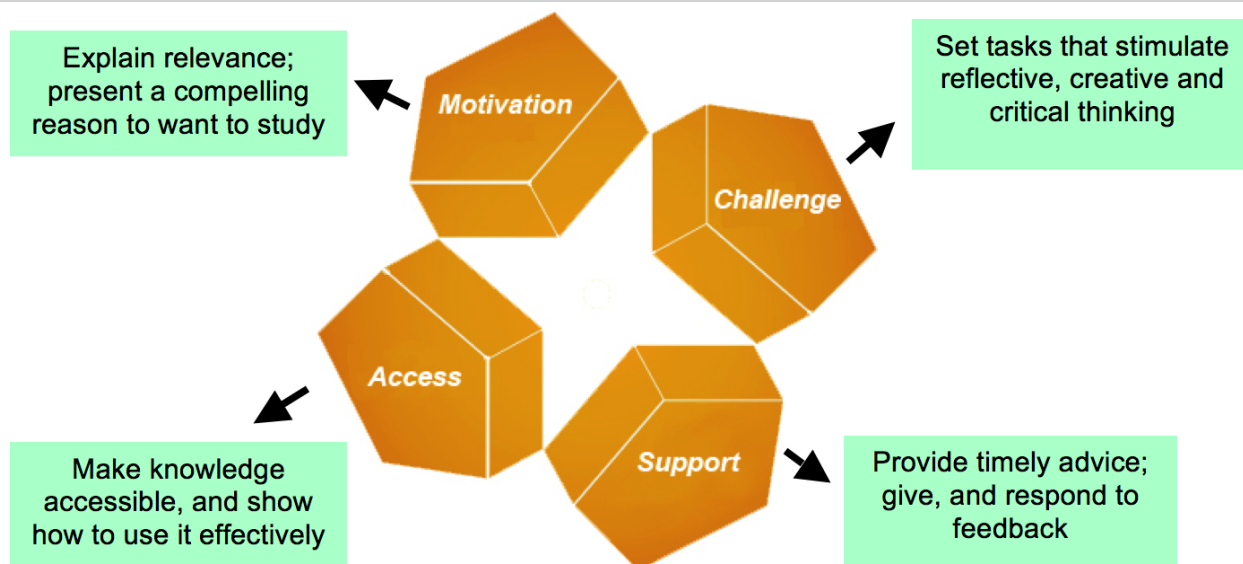
Plants, I think, can teach us a great deal about effective pedagogy. I work with the principle that every student has the potential to excel if they, like plants, are given the essential cornerstones: motivation, challenge, support, and access.

Comments and feedback on any article published in Spectrum are welcomed and should be directed to the editor: Stephen.Marshall@vuw.ac.nz

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National Teaching Excellence Awards (cont.)

**Motivation**

I believe that students' motivation for botany comes in part from the recognition of the relevance and importance of plant research to society. I use narrative and discussion as well as a little theatre to help convey this idea. My lectures are always energetic, often exhausting, and employ every tool I can think of to transmit the excitement of scientific discovery. Additionally, at every opportunity I tell students how much we don't yet know. This is vital, otherwise students could leave a lecture believing that there's no point in studying the subject further. And I show photographs of contemporary botanists – young, dynamic people – and highlight the interesting and important research questions they address.

Challenge

A widely held tenet among Science academics is that 100 level courses are for the accumulation of facts; that creative and critical thinking skills can only be developed in the advanced classes. I have never subscribed to that philosophy. Young people have an unbridled capacity to process and apply new information. With sufficient incentive and appropriate support, they can rise to almost any challenge.

In BIOL113 laboratory classes are run using an inquiry-based approach. Student groups are presented with a variety of authentic challenges requiring hypothesis-driven research. Some require role playing, with the teams to formulate their own hypothesis, and to design, execute, and analyse their own experiments using contemporary equipment to solve a genuine scientific problem. They discuss and debate their findings with other groups.

Support

As well as ensuring that I am available to answer questions and participate in online discussions, I have used clickers, both to gauge the effectiveness of my lectures, and for students to assess their own abilities. Clicker questions empower students to voice their opinions, which often leads to class discussions in which they engaged in critical and analytical thinking.

Access

Making knowledge accessible to students has led me to change some of my lectures to be more exercise driven than content focused. In the Design a Plant lecture, for example, students learn about the adaptive significance of plant form by using the information normally imparted during a

lecture to design a plant that would thrive in one of a series of suggested environments. The students then present OHTs showing their plants to the whole class and questions and ideas generally follow.

A teaching portfolio presents the opportunity to showcase one's successes. I think it's important, however, to acknowledge that not all my teaching innovations have proven quite as successful as Design a Plant. Indeed, a lecture can work brilliantly one year, yet seemingly fail to engage students to the same degree the following year. I draw strength from such experiences; they provide incentive for continual improvement, and they prevent complacency. I will always be a student myself when it comes to teaching effectively. The day I believe everything to be perfect will be the time to retire!



UTDC News

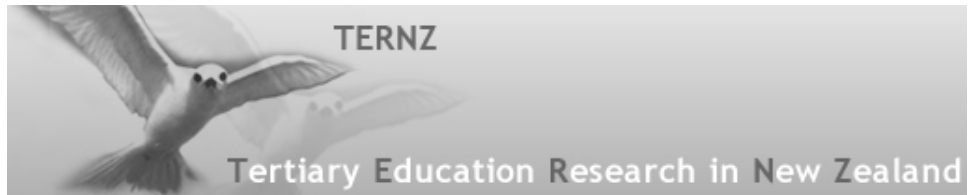
September sees the new Director of the UTDC Professor Barbara Dexter joining us from the University of Darby in the United Kingdom.

Anna Nguyen has joined us as our Administrator replacing Terese who has moved to Maori Studies.

Bernadette Knewstubb has joined the academic development team of the UTDC and there is a short introduction from her below.

Meegan Hall has returned from her period of Research and Study Leave well on her way to submitting her PhD thesis.

Irina Elgort has now gone on her RSL and will be away until February 2012. Irina will be spending a period of leave at the prestigious Learning Research and Development Centre at the University of Pittsburgh developing new collaborations. In Irina's absence all educational technology queries, including those relating to Blackboard should be directed to Stephen Marshall (through the ITS Helpdesk where possible).



23rd-25th November 2011

This year's TERNZ conference will be held at Victoria University of Wellington, Kelburn Campus.

Since 2002 TERNZ has provided a forum for enquiry into learning and teaching in the New Zealand tertiary sector. It aims to support and develop a community who share a common interest in research. At a time when universities and polytechnics are under considerable external pressure to change, it provides an opportunity to step back and examine the direction in which education is moving, and the means by which practitioners might influence that direction. A distinctive feature of the conference is the emphasis on creating time for discussion and space for reflection. We aim to continue a dialogue which transcends disciplinary boundaries, and to promote further exploration of a research approach to teaching and learning.

Visit <http://www.herdsa.org.nz/Ternz/2011/> to submit an abstract or register. Call for papers closes 30th September 2011. Registration is \$185 which includes conference attendance, welcome reception, conference dinner and morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea.

Please contact Amanda Gilbert (Amanda.Gilbert@vuw.ac.nz) for further information.

Introducing UTDC's Newest Academic: Bernadette Knewstubb

Hi, let me introduce myself, I'm the (almost) newest member of the UTDC, having returned to New Zealand after eight years working in Scotland (2003-2005) and Australia (2005-2011). I joined the UTDC in July this year as a lecturer in academic development, moving from La Trobe University in Melbourne, where I held a similar role, based in the Faculty of Law and Management. Before this I had a somewhat varied career, working as a teaching fellow in English Communication and later as a student learning advisor while supporting a research project looking at the longitudinal development of academic teaching in universities at Otago University. This was interspersed with teaching ESL in South Korea and English in a London high school.

For the past three years I have been working on a faculty project at La Trobe University to systematically map and redesign the teaching, learning and assessment of



graduate attributes in all core subjects to ensure staged development of these skills in undergraduate programmes. I've also designed Faculty and University-based peer observation, review and mentoring

programmes and worked on tutor-training and new staff development programmes in faculty and across the university.

I am interested in most aspects teaching and learning, but coming from a background in rhetoric and communication, I am fascinated by the way academics and students communicate (and miscommunicate) in their interpersonal interactions, and in curriculum communication and design. I am currently completing a doctorate on the communicative relationship between teaching and learning in multiple-lecturer classes.

Here at UTDC I will be working alongside the team supporting academics throughout the university, particularly new academics, but also helping my colleagues work with programme teams implementing the outcomes of the review of undergraduate education being led by the DVC Academic including aligning courses to the graduate attributes of the programme and the University.

Student Feedback: Completing the Loop

In 2010 the University promulgated the Student Feedback on Teaching and Courses Policy that included the requirement that students be provided with summaries of feedback from previous offerings of courses:

Annual summaries of responses to the core feedback questions for all courses evaluated in a School each year will be available to staff and students through the University portal with an appropriate general commentary from UTDC on the interpretation of such feedback. A summary for a particular course will be replaced when a new evaluation for that course has been carried out. (section 4.4. (f) (iii))

After receiving course feedback, course coordinators will provide to students who are enrolled in the course next time it is offered a brief statement that summarises general feedback points from the previous cohort that are considered by the course coordinator to be salient [and] comments on those points with an outline of any relevant changes that have been made to the course in the current offering.

(section 4.4. (h) (i & ii))

Ensuring that students feel their feedback is valued and acted upon is an important mechanism for improving retention and engagement. This change in how Victoria reports the use of feedback information is an important opportunity to help students actively engage with their courses and help improve the quality of their experience while at Victoria through their feedback.

The UTDC has created a system that students and staff can use to view the most recent summary of course feedback for an individual course. This summary is available online here: http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/feedback/feedback_display.php and will be made available to students through the MyVUW portal as well as through Blackboard. An example of such a summary is shown in Figure 1.

Faculty	Course Code	
	8	Number of responses
	8	Number enrolled
1.8	1.2	Q1: The way this course is organised has helped me to learn. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
1.5	1.2	Q2: Important course information - such as learning objectives, deadlines, assessments and grading criteria - was communicated clearly. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
1.7	1.3	Q3: Preparing for the assessments has helped me to learn. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
1.9	1.5	Q4: Comments and feedback I received during the course have helped me learn more effectively. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
2.9	2.8	Q5: The amount of work required in this course was: 1 = Far Too Much, 3 = About Right, 5 = Far Too Little
1.7	1.3	Q6: This course encouraged me to think critically. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
1.8	1.7	Q7: This course encouraged me to think creatively. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
2.0	2.2	Q8: This course has helped me to develop my communication skills. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
2.3	2.5	Q9: This course has stimulated my interest in learning more about this subject. 1 = A Great Deal, 5 = Not At All
1.6	1.1	Q10: I value highly what I have learned from this course. 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
1.8	1.3	Q11: Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as: 1 = Excellent, 5 = Very Poor

Figure 1: Example of a course feedback summary

Only course feedback collected since 2010 is available through this system (no data regarding individual teacher feedback is stored in this system) and users must provide both the subject and course codes for each course they are interested in. The feedback results are shown for standard questions only, not for any additional optional questions used in a given course. When the number of responses (< 10) or the proportion of responding students (< 20%) is low, a warning is displayed as the summary should be treated as only potentially indicative of the experience of students in the course, as the sample is insufficient. Student comments provided in writing are not stored by the UTDC and are not displayed.

So, we've provided this information – what does it mean for teachers at Victoria?

The policy makes clear the expectation that staff discuss previous student feedback with new classes and explain how that feedback has been used to influence their experience in the current offering. The easiest and most effective way this can be done is to show the students the previous feedback in an early lecture, perhaps towards the end of the first week or after reviewing the course outline. Another very effective

way of sharing the feedback with students is to post a content item on Blackboard with the following URL: http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/feedback/feedback_display.php?courseid=@X@course.id@X@ ideally with additional commentary from the course teaching team responding to the feedback. This URL will automatically insert your course information for you and display the last feedback (since 2010) for the course without the student having to enter any details.

To complement your comments placing the feedback into an appropriate context the UTDC is working with SLSS to create a brochure aimed at students that explains how their feedback is collected and reported, and how they

can interpret the results for themselves. This brochure will be available electronically here: <http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/feedback/>.

Student feedback is an important part of the quality improvement process and has a significant impact on the management of courses and staff. It is vital that students see this information being actively used to improve their courses if we are to continue to have their cooperation in its collection.

This reporting system is the first step in a process of implementing reporting systems arising out of the new policy. We are also intending to provide a variety of reports for course coordinators, schools and faculties that will summarise course feedback in a variety of ways and hopefully make this information more useful. We are exploring ways in which additional information from Student Records can be combined with student feedback to provide a rich longitudinal resource. It is important to note that any one set of responses is less valuable than the trend over time and the UTDC is working to provide staff with ways of viewing those trends for individual courses and schools.

