

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 8

Title: Recognising and Building a Culture of Teaching Excellence in NUS: A Conversation with Professor Wong Lim Soon

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In this episode, we are pleased to have Professor Wong Lim Soon, Kwan-Im-Thong-Hood-Cho-Temple Professor in the School of Computing (SoC) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Deputy Dean of the NUS Graduate School, talk about recognising and building a culture of teaching excellence in NUS.

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Soo Yuen Jien, Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

0 **Intro Music & Voiceover**

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1 **Welcome/ Intro (00:26):**

Soo Yuen Jien (SYJ): “Hello everyone, I am Soo Yuen Jien, Director of CDTL, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning. In this episode, we learn more about recognising and building a culture of teaching excellence in NUS. We are pleased to have Professor Wong Lim Soon to share more about this topic and how these initiatives can support colleagues in their teaching and learning. Prof Wong is the Kwan-Im-Thong-Hood-Cho-Temple Professor in the School of Computing (SoC) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Deputy Dean of the NUS Graduate School,

Hello Professor Wong, and thank you very much for joining us today.”

Wong Lim Soon (WLS): “Good morning, Yuen Jien. Thank you for having me here.”

2 **Question #1**

SYJ: “What are the initiatives currently in place which facilitate the recognising and building of a culture of teaching excellence in NUS?”

(01:16)

WLS: “I should stress that, in NUS, teaching excellence goes beyond merely getting good comments from students in our classrooms. Teaching excellence concerns impact on student learning in our own classrooms and beyond, and impact on teaching practices within our own departments

and beyond. It requires us, as educators, to think about what learning problems our students face, to take informed actions on these problems, and to carefully assess the outcome, and so on.

There are both top-down and bottom-up initiatives in NUS for teaching excellence.

The university-level initiatives include the Teaching Academy and the Annual Teaching Excellence Awards.

The Teaching Academy Fellows are among the most accomplished and inspiring educators in NUS. They bring fresh ideas and insights; they initiate and drive projects that promote excellence in teaching and learning; they influence NUS management to enhance the teaching environment in NUS.

The Annual Teaching Excellence Awards promote teaching excellence by giving recognition to NUS colleagues whose teaching has strong impact on student learning, and whose teaching practices has broad influence outside their own classrooms. The awards highlight role models for the rest of us to aspire to. Come to think of it, CDTL (of which you are the Director) is also an important initiative for teaching excellence.

There are also university-level policies aimed at recognising and building a culture of teaching excellence. A rather timely example is the recent clarification on the requirement for the promotion of Educator-Track colleagues from Associate Professor to Full Professor. This clarification highlights impact on student learning and teaching practices.

The university also welcomes bottom-up initiatives. An example of grassroots effort is the Career Advancement for FASS Educators, or CAFÉ, at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The CAFÉ is a committee of FASS colleagues and it organises activities for educator-track colleagues to help them with pedagogical development and to promote sharing of experiences pertinent to higher education.

Another bottom-up initiative is the School of Computing (SOC) Teaching Luncheon. At the end of each semester, colleagues in the School of Computing have a lunch-cum-talks to share teaching experiences, student learning problems, teaching practices, etc. with each other. It is really interesting and very well-attended.”

3 **Question #2**

SYJ: “Yes, it does sound like there is quite a lot of vibrant activity on the ground.

Are there any plans to enhance these current initiatives?”

(04:39)

WLS: “I cannot speak for what NUS is planning to do. But if I am to suggest just one simple thing to do, I will pick relooking the student feedback score.

Traditionally, NUS management and many colleagues equate Teaching Excellence purely with student feedback scores. This is too simple and narrow-minded. For example: A colleague catches a student cheating, therefore gives him zero mark, and the student consequently gives the colleague a very poor feedback (rating). As another example, a colleague gives students in his class an assignment that closely emulates what the students would face in a real job---for example, it may require students to go beyond what they have already learnt in their textbooks, figure out how to get extra information needed, and test out possible solutions on their own. For realism, he does not handhold the students. So, some students give him poor feedback ratings. In both examples, it is quite unlikely that the poor feedback ratings reflect the quality of the colleague’s teaching practice.

These scores do not guide colleagues to become deeply reflective educators who make a broad impact on student learning beyond their own classroom. Even worse, some misguided colleagues, in an effort to optimise student feedback scores, may choose to do something that might

be good for getting high scores but may not be as effective in terms of student learning. For example, a colleague may “spoon-feed” students too much, which makes students like him, but this may result in his students becoming less-independent learners.

I really would like to see a good re-think on what kind of student feedback to collect and not collect, and how management and colleagues should interpret and use student feedback.”

4 **Question #3**

SYJ: “Indeed, student feedback is just one indicator of the entire teaching practice, so we should look beyond it to get a bigger and fuller picture.

As Chairman of the University Promotion in Educator Track Committee (UPEC), could you share more about the following:

- What plans are there to help NUS colleagues more effectively promote teaching excellence within their practice?

(07:42)

WLS: “NUS colleagues have a major role in helping each other to become more impactful educators. This can be done in multiple ways. It may be as simple as chatting with another colleague and commenting to each other on choosing what to teach, what to emphasise, and how to deliver a lesson, to maximise what students are able to learn. It may be as major as persuading, coordinating, and leading colleagues to experiment with and adopt new approaches which might be more suited to the students we have.

The role of the University Promotion in Educator Track Committee, or UPEC, lies in overseeing and coordinating certain procedures when Educator-track colleagues apply for promotion to associate professor. So, in terms of promoting teaching excellence, to avoid conflict of interest,

UPEC's effort is limited in scope to clarifying colleagues' questions on the expectations and requirement of this promotion.

Actually, Heads of Department, HODs, and Deans have a bigger role and should invest more resources into developing teaching excellence. This is a two-way street. In one direction: If a HOD makes it a habit to ask colleagues what student learning issue they are addressing, how they are addressing it, whether the approach is successful, and how they know it is successful, this will probably have more impact on teaching excellence than anything else NUS does. In the other direction: If a HOD or Dean has a habit of or is open to suggestions on improving student learning from colleagues, consult more colleagues about such suggestions, and make investment in resources, this will engender a more proactive culture to continuously improve teaching practices and broaden beyond one's immediate classroom."

5 Question #4

SYJ: "That is definitely something I can attest to. I still recall fondly when you were the Head of Department for Computer Science, where your constant encouragement and interest in teaching practices helped us be more reflective in our classroom teaching.

Looking ahead, what do you hope to see in terms of recognising, building and sustaining a culture of teaching excellence at NUS?"

(10:30)

WLS: "I hope Heads of Departments and Deans will develop this habit of asking colleagues what student learning issue they want to address, what they plan to do to address it, how they come to decide on that plan, how they know they have or have not addressed it. I hope that Heads and Deans will invest resources and help colleagues to realise their plans for improving student learning. I really believe this is where there will be the biggest results and impact in terms of building and sustaining a culture of teaching excellence.

I also hope that we look beyond classroom academics into strengthening the character of our students, especially in terms of independence, resilience, fortitude, and courage to take on the world.”

Closing Remarks (11:24)

SYJ: “Thank you very much, Professor Wong for sharing your insights on these initiatives.”

7 Outro Voiceover

“Thank you for tuning in to the CDTL podcast.”

Outro Music
