

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 10

Title: A Conversation with 2022 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA) Recipient Mr Donn Koh

In this episode, we are pleased to speak with Mr Donn Koh, recipient of the 2022 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA).

This episode is chaired by Dr Lee Li Neng, Associate Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

1 **Welcome/ Intro (00:07):**

Lee Li Neng (LLN): “Hi, everyone. My name is Li Neng, and I am one of the Associate Directors here at CDTL. And welcome to this episode of [Teaching Connections] podcasts. And we are so pleased today to have Mr. Donn Koh, who is the recipient of the 2022 Outstanding Educator Award. Now he's here today to share with us more of his perspectives on teaching and learning, especially in the area of fostering a culture of reflection and authentic dialogue in the classroom, so that we can see authentic learning take place.

Right, so here we are. Welcome Donn, thank you so much for joining us today. And one thing, just a shameless plug for those who have not—while listening to this—have yet to hear Donn's address at the OEA Public Lecture, please go. I think it will be made available soon. So please go and listen to his address, it is a wonderful address.”

2 **Question #1**

LLN: “Right? So first of all, we're going to start off with the easy questions for today.

So first of all, I see that part of you as an educator, you focus a lot on authentic learning, right? Authentic learning as one of the aims of what you want to do in terms of education. So how did you land upon authentic learning? Why authentic learning? What was it that you experienced as an educator, that kind of, you know, got you to focus on authentic learning as an outcome for your students?”

(01:43)

Donn Koh (DK): “I think it happened really quite naturally. You know, being also educated in NUS in the past. And I think in those days, our course, industrial design was really in its nascent stage, right? And being nascent, I think there were certainly a lot of gaps that we had to plug, and I think that was really good for us. So it made it made me really curious and much more sensitive to what things I might be missing when I went to industry.

So after I graduated, and I went to different places to work, I started to realise that, hey, a lot of these things are so important to say, a designer in the School that we teach, we teach designers, right? So that's so important. And basically, I had to self-teach myself a lot just by observing a lot of the colleagues around.

Now, when I subsequently got the chance to come back to teach several years later, naturally you know, those are the gaps that I wanted to plug because I could see where the gaps were in our classrooms. And I could see what I had benefited from after that. So that contrast made me focus a lot more on teaching those things.

I wasn't, you know, I never knew what this term was—authentic learning—for maybe more than, half of my career. But the things I did were just that, right? And then I also kind of liked—because it seemed to work well—liked to structure the class with a dose of reality. It was really only after quite some years, maybe frankly, even just only in the recent years where other educator-mentors, like for example, [Cheah] Kok Ming, who I mentioned quite a bit [during my OEA Lecture] pointed me to, “Hey, you're doing authentic learning. So, go study on that a little bit more, and then see where you situate your, your practice.” And maybe I can just develop further from there. So that's how it came about.”

03:50

LLN: “I see. So basically, you mentioned something about that you went to industry, you came back, and it's also your experience prior here, that helped you see what are the gaps, right? So, maybe elaborate a little bit more, what are some of these gaps that you saw and you felt that it was important to plug it in?”

(04:09)

DK: “Wow. I mean, we're literally having to unpack, you know, all the curriculum things of yesteryear!”

LLN: “Maybe one or two submissions, to give us an idea, you know of like, how things have changed and improved for the better at NUS?”

(04:26)

DK: “I think, one thing is how a product or proposition is assessed or valued, right, in the real world, as opposed to say in a School where we say, let's measure—does this concept make sense?—some values that we hold to. I think in the real world, it gets a lot more complicated and interesting actually. So that an appreciation of the “complicatedness” of the value judgment at hand becomes something that I wanted to share with the students.

Firstly, it's not so much that the assessment criteria becomes more complex. It's not just that, right? It is more of like, you don't even know what the assessment criteria is! In the real world, it shifts so much. So it keeps shifting and depends on what occurs in the context. Like, when I was teaching say, one of the Kickstarter classes a couple of years ago, COVID-19 suddenly came in, right? And then you have to respond to a product that students have to launch in COVID-19, right? What do you do with that, because the market conditions have changed. This is not going to be the same if it was a curriculum that was fixed, right? But because we have our students bring things to the real world, you have to respond to the real world. If not, it's not going to work anymore.

So for example, like that. I think the course has matured a lot. And we also have a great team of very varied experts, and many of them are practitioners. So I think increasingly, such perspectives are covered.”

LLN: “So I mean, this is this is very interesting for me, right? In terms of trying to create an authentic learning experience for students. And I see this very much applicable for, especially when there's a particular profession you are training for, like you go to industrial design, you're training it to be a designer, right? You go to engineering, you're trained to be engineer. But then we have also courses like, for example, in Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, whereby we are training people who are for like a general degree, right? And to what degree do you feel like this authentic learning can still be applicable to some of these courses that we are teaching?”

(06:45)

DK: “Wow, such a good question! I've not thought about it, you know, these things. But I do think there is definitely a room and in fact, maybe really important that we do not see these courses as something as a “no profession” type of course, I don't think they are that, you know.”

In fact, I think an arts degree, for example, prepares one with a really interesting way to see the world, with very broad mindsets. In fact, maybe even broader, if I may say than a technical or science degree, right? I think in such types of arts education, if that's what you're referring to, right? Then contemplation about the state of things in the world and how our perspectives could be, is a very real thing that people would experience wherever they work and if they think hard enough about life, So I suppose yeah, you know, maybe in a way, the way that education is already done for these types of subjects, are really quite “real-world”, because they are dialoguing the issues, right? So I don't see it as not possible to do authentic learning. In fact, maybe it just could be further amplified if it was very intentionally made like, debate this case in life, right, and then see what comes or maybe engage even people's viewpoints, different segments of the community, for example.”

LLN: “As an educator from FASS, that's such a great thing to hear right, that people value the education here in the arts, because sometimes people do feel like you know, exactly what kind of professionals do we go? And this is one of the questions that I get the most, as incoming students ask, what kind of jobs can we get subsequently in the future? And I do think that authentic learning will help prepare these students also for how workplace can be, especially the complexities.

Question #2

LLN: “Now with that, I'm going to shift gears a little bit. In your OEA address, you actually gave quite a good coverage about what you did to actually create this authentic dialogue that you can have, that helps you to assess whether students are actually learning, and whether they're adopting this mindset, where they are better prepared for how the complexities of the real world is going to be like, right?

And so I don't think we need to repeat that because we don't have time. So for those who are interested to know exactly what he does, you probably want to go back to his address again in the video. But maybe you can just highlight a few things, and let our listeners know roughly what is it that you do to actually create some of this really effective, authentic dialogue?”

(09:49)

DK: "I think the main thing that we can try to engineer more in our classroom is conversations. Yeah, so that's the underlying thing, you know? And what I do, in trying to amplify that, I try to bring it beyond the classroom time itself. Because sometimes we can have a really good debate. But then you know, in between week-on-week kind of lessons, actually the students' thought development is going on, right? It doesn't just happen during that four-hour class every week. So I think my classes try to have this type of engagement, like you know, video surveys in between [lessons] send them video messages, [to] keep things constantly connected, is one of the things that I do.

Now to build that and to allow that to happen, you have to create a culture and environment for the almost ritual-like practices, so that students can get into this habit, which is not something they experience very often. So it needs some time to habitualise that. At the same time, maybe more essential, is that they see these channels of conversations as safe places to really talk about how they think, where are they confused. They cannot feel like, in these conversations with us, we're assessing them, you know, and let's say they're not performing well, they're going get marked down. I think they absolutely cannot feel that because once that happens, then the whole conversation becomes performative tasks, and you lose the authenticity of the discussion.

So essentially, there are so many ways to do it. I do in a particular way; sometimes it gets heavy. And of course, I'm still looking for other lighter ways to do so that it is less intense for everyone.

LLN: "So I mean, you just mentioned something that's on the back of many people's minds, which is basically, that I can imagine right, it can be really heavy, right? But at the same time in your talk, you talked about that it is possible that this approach can be scaled.

So in terms of creating conversations, I can see like for example, there's one of me, and then there's that many students. So in your approach about scaling, you mentioned this briefly in your [OEA] address, but would you mind elaborating on this: how do you foresee this kind of dialogue can be scaled, especially massively when you have a large class that you have to teach?"

(12:16)

DK: “Li Neng, you sound like you're doing this all the time! How do I say this? You're obviously aware of the challenges, and maybe also the potential ways to build it.

Now, I tried to do it this way. I model some unscalable behaviour. Meaning that, if we have a good question coming in from some students, or maybe some moment where they were just particularly authentic and vulnerable with the things that they share. I catch these things and I go crazy on it, I double down on it, I give like, a crazy unscalable reply, you know, like in the class of say, 2000 [students], for example, sometimes I mean, that sometimes occurs even in like, say, the design thinking module that we run now. And then you have a good question coming in. I would literally dive in and make a full-on video just for that one student, right?. And then basically show, firstly to demonstrate that their conversations matter, right? And that they will be seen and heard, [that this] is not this distant type of module or engagement that we have on social media, which is all distant right? So I tried to have it unscalable and model that. And of course, that is not doable with like, 2000 students, you will just die [laughter].

But once you set that culture and you can reinforce it somewhat, my preferred plan is, if that kind of openness and discussions goes *between* the students, right? Now you have 1000 students, and if they are talking to each other and they feel safe enough to exchange thoughts, then they can teach each other much more than one teacher can ever teach. Especially if you think about this simultaneously, like 1000 conversations going on.

Even if some teachers might find that like, oh you know, maybe the conversations may not be that accurate or perfect, with regards to what should be taught. But then 1000 conversations going on imperfectly is definitely beats my one conversation with you that is perfect. So I think that that's the part whereby we can really tap into—the social learning dynamics part of these things—to scale this type of authentic conversations.”

Question #3

LLN: “So I mean, you’ve highlighted something that’s very interesting, whereby you just choose wisely, pick on something, and use it as a very powerful example about the kind of culture and the norms that you want to set, right? And you do that well. And at the same time, you highlighted the importance of how, in order to scale, you need to create this culture of safety and authenticity, I think in psychology we call this “psychological safety”, as an environment.

So in terms of this, I can also see that, once you start to scale, and in a small class, I think we can get a good sense of whether we are we have achieved that or not. Once things go to scale, and especially when things go online, sometimes it’s a bit harder for us to tell whether we have achieved this well, right? What are some things that you think we should put in place to manage this? Because I can also see that if conversations don’t [occur], people don’t feel safe, then you have issues whereby people don’t talk, and then it kind of go down the negative spiral. Because I see this as both a positive spiral and a negative spiral, potentially. How did you think we can mitigate some of these negative spirals?”

(15:55)

DK: “I feel, Li Neng, that you know these [challenges] inside out!

It’s tough; I haven’t done this successfully in a big class, just because I don’t really teach big classes, right? But in the Design Thinking module, which I’m only a small part of, I tried to do a bit of these things, import some of these things in, and we can see some of the effects. To be very frank, I haven’t grappled with how do I deal with the class dynamics. Thankfully in the Design Thinking module, they are really good teaching assistants and instructors, who have been also trained, in the skillsets of facilitation. So they’re not just trained teachers, they’re trained facilitators. So in fact, I think we were very fortunate that we chanced upon this workshop, which we then equip these 12 instructors (or maybe even more than that). And the workshop precisely covers, you know, how do you build psychological safety; how do you help people dialogue with each other; how to moderate group discussions. I think these are skillsets that can be learned, right?

Now, that can be done in the classrooms of like, 20 [students] with one facilitator, pretty well. Now, if we are going to try to moderate that on a large

scale, say one person to like a lecture theatre of 800 people, I think the dynamics changes a lot. And what you can do really changes that.

Some things that I've tried that seem to work that could scale is, you can't really have like, 800 people all talking at the same time without knowing what is going on; this can be a little bit tough. So you could do other means, like digital means, where you have online whiteboards that do not just become a place where you do a poll, but maybe some way that they can express their opinion.

One trick that I recently did was to get people to move their heads, their [profile] photos on Miro, in two different places on [the] board to just represent their viewpoints. So [in] some way they could express without feeling too shy about it without talking, and they can state their viewpoints. And actually the interesting part is this, if you put everybody's photo, somehow if there's a way to do that, I mean, in a 50-person class, you could do it. And then everybody's moving their head to the right places to say what their viewpoints is; if you don't participate, it's even more weird! Because you are [literally] left there.

So in a way, we are using safety to bring them to a safe conversation that sense, right? So sometimes it's a way of sequencing the events. Now the fact that they have moved themselves into certain places, and expressed a certain viewpoint, this gives us the perfect excuse to just pick on some of them to say, "why don't you share a bit on this?" Because they have really stated some things and you know, I'm not picking on you randomly, I'm interested to hear what your position is and what you say.

So to be very frank, as an educator, say, in NUS for this amount of time, I realised that actually our students like to be asked to talk. They do, right? They really do, and they have a lot things to say. They just don't like to feel like they said they wanted to talk. So sometimes that just helps them; you give them a good excuse, then they also feel you're not picking on them. And then they say things and then that just gets the pump moving, right? Once there's enough of this [prompts], once there's enough people talking, and the conversation is moving on, then actually it's safer to talk than to not talk. So then those who are less constantly talking will feel a bit like, you know. I mean, this is your field, right? I'm completely, you know, not the expert here. This is your field and you probably can engineer this much better than I can do."

Question #4

LLN: “But you have you have given such little tips and tricks, right? I think in the end, a lot of teaching is really about small events, doing small things well, and putting them together in a sequence that make it work. Sometimes it's no big thing but small things, right? And I see how you give a lot of thought and design to scaffolding some of these things, so that small things work to create a big impact.

And you have other things like I know, you mentioned this, you talk about having a Telegram [account] and then you reply to them, and you do VideoAsk. One thing I want to ask: I can see the value of just remaining constantly in touch, in connection with the students. At the same time, I can also imagine it can be potentially quite draining at times, right?

So what are some healthy boundaries that you put in, to how maintaining and encouraging connection, but at the same time having it in a healthy manner? What are some healthy boundaries that you think should be put in place, to make sure that, you know, educators don't like completely [become] too connected and burn out, for lack of better term to actually describe this?”

(21:05)

DK: “This question, I think, really depends on one's beliefs in this area, and even encroaches on the question of: What is your belief about work-life balance and segregation?”

LLN: “Yes.”

DK: “So I do think that everyone or many people have very different views on this. If you can let work encroach into your life, almost very flexibly but not really have it encroach into your life, right? I mean, I'm saying the same thing, right, but actually it's different; because if you can let it encroach and it works well for you and your students, but it doesn't affect your relationships and your connection at home, right, it doesn't affect your sanity, just because maybe your personality type is more “Batman” or you know, like at night [you] can be [stay] awake, then I think that works for you. And you shouldn't, I don't think you should feel the need to subscribe to a certain type of way of working that others deem as the right way, right?”

Likewise, I think if we are more inclined to say, have constant engagement, then the reverse happens also. We probably should be mindful of colleagues who maybe cannot have that, right? And not see that, as you know, sub-par, right? At the same time, I think if we are like, more crazy and can do this a lot, then maybe being able to watch out for yourself and not burn out yourself is also something to be careful about. Because I think, it can be very enjoyable, and you might really like it, and I think you can burn out from your passion also.

So yeah. For me, I think things are quite manageable. I think there's some general understanding in the way I operate with students is like, okay, let's have permission to just message each other anytime that we want to, right, and also the permission to not reply until we can, right? This is like, but of course there will be another group of friends who might say, hey, but your message disturbs me because it beeps. So yeah, I think the verdict is still out on that, because I we have all kinds of friends and colleagues who prefer different ways. I think we can just approach this with some level of respect for each other, and I think that's fine."

LLN: "And Donn, actually you highlighted this point which I think it's so important, you know, especially like, just that one line—we can assist each other at any time but we will only reply when we can.

And I think this common understanding helps set healthy boundaries, because there are expectations sometimes I think in social media, the always "on" kind of connection sometimes creates an expectation that when I send something to you, I expect like an instant reply, and I think this kind of expectations that I can foresee some people having a pressure feeling that you know, if my lecture message, just "Do I need to reply immediately?", that can create some anxiety for the students. On the other side, of course, obviously also for the educator, they may feel like, "If students message me, am I compelled to reply immediately? And if I don't reply, you know, am I a bad teacher? You know, how would they view me?"

And I think what you just highlighted is something that's really very important."

(24:40)

DK: "Li Neng, the thing is it's interesting, because there are a few teachers who asked me this yesterday [after my OEA lecture], yeah, about like, "Oh, if I give

them my Telegram and stuff, am I just gonna...yeah, you know? So I think it really depends on the individual, right?

You see, right, the classroom safety and the safety for conversations, and the freedom to talk openly, requires that there's some modes of engagement established beforehand, right? In fact, it's actually not like, "Oh, let's be free and talk all the time". It's like, okay, what do we understand that, if I reply you [or] I don't reply you, what does that mean? You don't take [it] personally, you know. [If] I message you at 3am, it doesn't mean that it's urgent; it might just mean, I'm changing diapers at this time and I thought of your project, and I'm just going to send to you something; you don't have to reply now. That's why I think, at the end of the day, establishing firstly the modes of engagement and then the relationship with the student, if the relationship is clear, then these misunderstandings can be minimised, right? You don't have to make things into rules too much."

LLN: "Yeah, so I think it really, really helps. And maybe also [to] teach people in terms of privacy settings and how to mute groups, that may be something useful or practical tips, for some people who are intending to explore this [approach] a little bit more.

Question #5

LLN: "Maybe another thing, when I was listening to your talk, you also talked about the value of assessing growth, instead of just looking at the actual output, right?

Now, one issue which I think some colleagues brought up in the Q&A [during the OEA lecture] as well, is this issue of *perceived fairness* of this approach, right, from the students. Because being Singaporean students, we are were so used to having our final outcomes being the most important thing, right? In our educational journey, it is the O' Levels that matter, for example, right? How you perform on that major examination is the key thing. Whether you have shown great improvement, how much effort you have put in, how you've gone about studying and how much you understand, is not as important as whether you perform the well on the task. And many of these students have performed well enough, that's why they are here in NUS in the first place.

And with that in mind, this is the context that I know that many students come with, this is the assumption that they came. So how did you manage to change students' minds on this matter? Because I can foresee that when you were trying to say I value this growth journey a little bit more and changing it a little bit more, rather than just the end output, did you face any resistance from the students?

(27:26)

DK: "I suspect that in our course, we have it a little easier, just because our final outcomes are also very subjectively assessed in the first place, right? I mean, in [a] design course, to ask you to value judge, you know, whether a solution is really good or not, truthfully any product in the world, you put it to a different user, different person with different technological inclinations, by openness or viewpoint of the world, they will evaluate that differently, right? So for us, it's already fundamentally subjective. Now, yeah, of course we're not like a mathematical course, where you can just measure and see if the answer is right or wrong. But that's the thing, maybe the higher levels of mathematics may also be subjective, I'm not very sure, right? Okay, I don't know.

But I think we can take some reference from how we mitigate acceptance of subjectivity in say, final project assessments. What helps sometimes is to break down what is subjective into certain types of characteristics, right, and like a rubric, and say, like, "Does this meet, say, the user's mean, problem?" "Well, are there competing alternatives that are, you know, actually cheaper?" For example, these are ways to help make that subjective assessment of the final outcome be perceived as more fair, right?

Likewise, I think we can also break down what is the interpretation of growth. If there are some ways to kind of put in some markers. In fact, actually in the earlier days, I did try some of these things. Like, maybe growth is measured by how many times you change your idea, right? Not so much how good your final idea is, but how many iterations were there in your project? Could you quantify it? Now that was one attempt to get a more, you know, rubric-like way to measure growth. But of course, it was a bit robotic and mechanical, you know, because once you see a human being grow and change and grapple with things, it's not so simplistic, right, as putting down into a list of checkboxes. We can use those to help us; but I usually ask for the students trust that the course in the first place is already impressionistic, and grading by a holistic type of

assessment, which I believe to be more accurate, right, even though it is less analytical.

Now, why I'm confident of that is because even though I practice holistic grading, I do mark internally, without revealing it first, by an analytical rubric before I adjust it based on what I assess by growth, so that I'm kept a little bit balanced with my viewpoint; I'm not swung too much just by how "happy" class was.

So yeah, I think there are some of these things that can be put in place. But I think at the same time, we have to build our students to accept that the world measures things very subjectively, and usually very holistically. Even if you're in school, you can get a very clear kind of marking. But almost every situation out there in the real world is the opposite. And for me, if we believe in authentic learning, then I think even assessment should try to creep towards what was occurring the real world."

LLN: "And I think you just highlighted something that's very important, right? For me, I'm listening and thinking, you know, this whole thing of like, making assessments or the final outcome a bit more subjective, it's such a valuable thing for students to learn. Because one of the key things I realised for students, especially when dealing with them, I see the change from Year One to Year Four, is this comfortableness with uncertainty."

DK: "Yep."

LLN: "And [in] Year One, I constantly get students telling me when I tell them all, "There are three, four possible answers to this." You asked me this one question, is there are three, four [possible answers]. And then one of the things that they will look at me and they'll ask, "Okay and in the exam, which one should I put down is the right one?"

Question #6

LLN: "This comfortableness, this need for certainty is very strong, especially when they're younger, [or] at least when they first come in. I was just wondering, in your view, right, this is also for me, I see [it as] a more systemic thing, not just me at university [and] higher education, but something that they have control

as a whole. Do you think our education system, in terms of assessment, should also shift more towards this more subjective, more uncertainty, introducing [the] kind of assessments that we have been looking at?”

(32:17)

DK: “I think we have to be careful that it doesn't shift there for convenience, right? One of the reasons we could shift to subjective, holistic, impressionistic grading, because it is easy. At the end of the day, I see whether I like you or not, and just give you a certain grade, right? But that's not the heart of educating, right? The point here is, the real world is subjective.

So how do we help you navigate subjectivity, right? Of course, in the first place, we must want to grade accurately within how we interpret it. But it's not about having students say that, “Hey, whatever grade, it doesn't matter.” It's about saying that, “Okay, now that you know that the world is subjective; now that you know that your teacher has some biases, you know that you're marked by these three teachers, right? How do you forecast how to frame your project, and what you say as assumptions or criteria, so that you'll be marked in the most objective manner, for your kind of context?” So that skill, I think, is frequently missing, right? Yet it is almost the basics in the real world, where we have to define our playing field. You can't win everything, so you have to define the field.

So what I'm trying to do here [is], “You will be good for this thing, but very bad for something else”. So our students, sometimes maybe you say, in the earlier years, might come up with this feeling that there's always one correct answer, right, that addresses everything. Realistically, that's definitely not the case.”

LLN: “I mean, you've highlighted some things that are of such importance in terms of [the] objectivity aspect of it, and we not cannot just move towards it so that it reduces our workload as educators, right, make marking easier on our life, even though it is. But I think this is where subjective marking can be both very easy, but also very difficult if you want to do it well.”.

DK: “Yes.”

Question #7

LLN: "I see that happening. Right, with that, we're going to shift into last few questions that I have.

One of the things [that] listening to you talk, in terms of creating this kind of like difficult subjective[-oriented] assessments that require a lot of work, having constant dialogue with students. All these things seem to be a lot of work that goes in. Now, considering that you are, from what I understand, you're also a founder of a firm right now [and] you're running that design firm, you are teaching, and you are father. How do you do so many things at the same time? The first question of course on top of mine [mind] is basically, do you do sleep at all?"

(34:53)

DK: "I didn't yesterday [laughter], I don't know.

I think, to say that I manage it well, I don't think so, right? Frankly, the balls are dropped at different times. I think we just have to be careful not to drop the important ball or the glass ball, right? Yeah, that's one of the kind of intricate dance we have to do, right?

Now, at the same time, I think we can press on all fronts, but what our fundamental values, I think, has to be clear. Because when the situation calls for it, are you able to kind of step away from work, and not just get sucked in by it, right? Are you able to kind of let go, and maybe not perfect something?

But you see, having too rigid a kind of say, ratio of me spending hours for this and that, just limits the flexibility that life really requires, right? Yeah, there's one way to see the balance of work as like, "Okay, nine to five, I work; after, you know, six to 10 I play", or something like that.

Another way is to see in terms of seasons, right? Like, "Okay, these three months really have to work very hard, but after let's play for another three months", right? That can be a cyclical thing.

It can also be a season in terms of, say, our age, right? I will tell students, you know, when you are [aged] 28 [or] 27, you just go to work. I mean, this advice is not for everybody else, people will disagree with me, I'll just say, just work!

And learn as fast as you can, you know? That gives you your work-life balance later. Because if you are basically building up your capacity now, when you can have the room to do it, you will have the chance to be much more efficient later on, and you can leverage on that to teach others, to have more time when you need it. So, to me—and this is going to ruffle a lot of feathers—but I will say that the whole life balance thing, [which] is the dominant narrative now, is a farce. It hampers a lot, you know? I mean, I haven't seen any good designers, just in my field, right, who didn't put in the really best in the first few years, right? And after that, I see that they have a better life; it'd be more balanced, right? So I think it requires some of this type of struggle.”

LLN: “No, I think you answered it well. I mean, is this is wisdom, right?. Now, we're not just looking at your teaching per se, but this is wisdom in terms of how you see life in general, how that affects and this whole idea that, you know, there are seasons, right, and sometimes it doesn't always look the same across time.”

DK: “So I was about to say, I really have to mention that, in my case, it is really doable just because my wife is really super dedicated, right? We have four children. And I've mentioned it before, when CDTL makes me do my dossier [laughter] and I go into that cave, she's like, taking care of everybody else, right, for extended periods of time.

And so, seeing it as seasons, I just have to try to balance it well. Or rather, you know, sometimes this thing is a hurdle we have to cross for period of time. And then after that, things would be abit better. Then hopefully, frankly, I will try to tell myself, don't get used to that, right? Don't get used to that whole, you know, your “backside” is covered at home by someone else, right? Don't get used to that, and forget that actually you need to shift the balance again.

Maybe one last tip in relation to this is that really, I think the way I work can sometimes make colleagues or friends say, “No, that's crazy. You're burning yourself out!” And maybe on some level, they might feel pressured to do the same, and after that they realise that, no they don't want it and they think I'm crazy, right?

But honestly, what I choose to put together, they are synergistic. They are not fighting each other. In fact, sometimes timewise they might be fighting with each other, but teaching and practice, you know, and maybe even having kids, right,

they are synergistic, because you understand people better, you experiment better then you go and work better, and vice versa, right? So they help each other. My DID head, I think has a way to say this quite nicely. Christian [A/P Dr. Christian Gilles Boucharenc], I think once last time he was saying this, maybe it's French, so he has a certain way to put it really elegantly. He says that *the aspects that that I deal with are mutually nourishing*. It's kind of interesting, right, and helps me a little bit to understand.”

LLN: “I mean, this is great. I listen to you like this quality of defining and doing different things that feed to each other. And I think [as] I listened to you, the picture I have in my mind is this idea of dynamic balance. It’s like trying to balance yourself on a ball; you’re actually having a lot of effort making small movements along the way, you’re not actually standing still to have that balance. But to in order to create a balance, sometimes you need to react and change according to the situation we’re in, and just create a good balance that you have.”

DK: “Right now actually, frankly I don't think I have a good balance [laughter]. So it's one of those things that [I'm] still adjusting.”

LLN: “But by constantly adjusting, I think it's part and parcel of how we are growing as a person. And it's very humbling to hear that you are also making efforts to do this.

Question #8

And that actually was the last question I had, which we have answered somewhat, so maybe I'll ask a little bit more, so that you can highlight that a little bit more, that family seems to be very very important to you, because I see that you made special efforts to set up a Zoom session so that your wife could be part of the OEA address that you were doing right on that day. To me, that really signifies how important it is that you were involving your family in this. Now, would you like to explain a little bit or elaborate a little bit, how much of it has contributed to you being an excellent educator?”

(41:19)

DK: “Well, I think my wife teaches me a lot of things, right? And I think even, you know, in the recent things that we talked about more, there is this discovery of how we are somewhat opposites, right? And I think, in a marriage, even after

10 years, I mean, this is the 10th year, right? I think there are still mysteries that you are uncovering about each other, and you know, miss, things like, “Oh, why are we having frequent or repeated conflicts, even after 10 years, on a certain issue?” And that conflict may not be a negative thing, because it helps us to understand the parts of us that we don't understand about ourselves even, like, for example, my most recent learning, right, is that I'm really an idiot when it comes to understanding the emotional side of human beings! I think, in a certain way, I've conditioned myself to suppress emotions, especially negative ones, right? And maybe just the way I have experienced life, right, that helps to make me see it as a waste of time, or something that should be suppressed, right?

So that realisation made me really sad, you know, to realise that maybe I've lived all these years, and I kind of like didn't understand this aspect of life. But my wife knows this intuitively, right? Just from the way she is. And maybe her upbringing. So that gives me a new lens to see human beings, right, and new lens to see students as not just “press” people for you know, making good results or good outcomes. So family, I think, maybe just in general living life, and maybe being open to what is going on, taking it in and seeing what you can get from it will help all of us understand better, how to deal with human beings and how to deal with human beings will of course impact how we teach.”

LLN: “All right. So thank you so much, Donn for spending time today, sharing with us. This is a very personal journey that you've shared with us and also your strategies that you have taken to actually do this. So thank you so much for sharing this, and we hope to continue to have more conversations with you on this.”

DK: “Thanks, Li Neng. You were fantastic!”
