

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 12

Title: A Conversation with 2022 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA) Recipient Assoc Prof Heng Cheng Suang

This episode features a conversation with Assoc Prof Heng Cheng Suang, recipient of the 2022 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA), where he talks about the strategies he incorporates in his practice to enhance the relatability and receptivity of his course content to ensure they have stronger resonance with his students..

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Aaron Danner, Deputy Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

0 **Intro Music & Voiceover**

“You are listening to the Teaching Connections podcast, brought to you by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, CDTL, National University of Singapore. Teaching Connections is an online teaching and learning space that aims to advance discussions and share effective practices and ideas related to higher education.”

In this episode, we are pleased to speak with Assoc Prof Heng Cheng Suang, recipient of the 2022 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA).

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Aaron Danner, Deputy Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

1 **Welcome/ Intro (00:20):**

Hello Cheng Suang, and thank you very much for joining us today.”

Heng Cheng Suang (HCS): “Hello Aaron, hello to everyone who is listening in. A very good day to you.”

2 **Question #1**

AD: “In your OEA Public Lecture, you talked about the importance of ‘completing the educational narrative with our story’. Could you tell us more about that?”

(01:46)

HCS: “Indeed, my OEA Public Lecture was entitled ‘What’s Y(our) story? Achieving Resonance, Realism, and Results’. Visually, your and our are written as one word...that is, y(our). Well, there are two levels of understanding what I meant by ‘completing the educational narrative with your story, our story’.

First, at the higher level (kind of philosophical), I humbly feel that I am but only one jigsaw piece amidst the entire NUS educational landscape. Its success is shaped by more than an individual. Instead, all of us—educators and learners—are critical towards this contribution. Noteworthy, while we educators impart

knowledge to the students, we at the same time learn much from them during the interactions, as well as questions and answers. It is an intricately intertwined two-way process. In addition, when fellow NUS colleagues fork out their precious time to listen to our OEA talk, [attend] faculty teaching luncheon seminars, or even [listen to] this podcast, I am also mindful that my story has components that may transcend all disciplines, but also components that may be unique in experience. Hence, it serves as an important reminder that every single [one] of our colleagues have something valuable to share and learn from, i.e., their own stories that are just as worthy of being listened to, learned from, and shared with all. Hence, completing the educational narrative is not only about my story, but also your story; putting [it] all together, to be our story.

Second, at the module level, I try to explain that the educational narrative is more comprehensive, complex and cyclical than what a 20-minute OEA public talk can deliver. Hence, my first slide informs of (i) Stage 1. The DESIGN of a module; (ii) Stage 2. The CONDUCT of the module; Stage 3. The ASSESSMENT of the topics taught; and importantly (iv) Stage 4. The REFLECTIONS. Every stage counts and is critical, every step and detail can make or break the module. Hence, we have to dedicate much thought to the entire process and view it holistically.

This ties in nicely with my concluding slide, on The REFLECTIONS. Three steps. One, we assess whether the outcome ‘squares’ with our pedagogical approach i.e., agreeing on its effectiveness. Two, we seek learning analytics to ‘triangulate’ our data, i.e., the evidence all pointing towards an enhanced performance. Three, are there any question that still ‘circles’ or lingers in the head, i.e., puzzles and findings that perplex us. With the right reflection, we can responsibly recalibrate and refine our approaches. Note my final clause in the OEA Public Lecture...’we continue to improve’....”

Question #2

AD: “Could you share with us some of the strategies that you use to achieve that desired learning objective, which you phrased as ‘enhancing the relatability and receptivity of the [course] content so as to better resonate with students’?”

(04:33)

HCS: “My strategies are all guided by one simple principle: we were all young once. We were all students once, [so] put yourself in their shoes. See [things] from their perspectives as to what will resonate, what will engage and captivate, what will excite and thrill, and you will be on the right track.

Some professors may claim there is a generation gap, whereas some may not. Regardless, we have to make a very conscientious effort to be cognizant about what matters to our students nowadays, from entertainment to environmental issues, from pop culture to politics, from current affairs (be it locally or internationally) to charitable causes.

As presented during the OEA Public Lecture, it will consume much time and effort to source for all the possible examples and analogies. And out of these massive [number of] possibilities, I then deliberate and decide which examples are the few to be finally selected and presented to the class.

I have always wondered. Even though we all tend to agree that the attention span of people are shortened nowadays, how can one survive *Top Gun Maverick*, a 130-minute movie, (but NOT a 2 hour-lecture), or binge watch *The Mandalorian*, [which comprises] two seasons [and] 16 episodes, (but NOT a 13-week semester)? Well, the answer lies in engaging them and [course topics] resonating with them.

After the set of examples have been meticulously chosen, they can then be shared smartly in class and lecture via various innovative and engaging pedagogical approaches, so as to enhance the relatability and receptivity of students. For example, my class has embarked on role play (whereby the students literally experience different characters so as to better relate). We have

also embarked on mock debates (whereby the students actually argue for either the proposition or opposition so as to better understand and relate). There are plentiful possibilities. And I am sure our fellow NUS colleagues do know of other creative and fun approaches.“

Question #3

AD: “As a follow-up to the previous question, how do you know that this learning objective of achieving resonance has been fulfilled in your students’ learning?”

(07:05)

HCS: “There is the immediate response and there is the longer lasting impact.

First, the immediate response which we can witness in class and [during] consultations. When I provide the examples and the analogies during lectures and tutorials, you can observe from the students’ [expressions], when they suddenly smile, when their eyes sparkle, when they nod in agreement, and other [indications from their] body language. These immediate feedback and tell-tale signs all hint at a well-given example and analogy that they can resonate with. During my compulsory consultations with all the students, I also seek the opportunity to ask them directly what are the examples and analogies that they like, and those that they don’t (so that I continue to improve for the next semester).

Second, the longer lasting impact. From the quality of the assignments, their projects and final assessments, one can also tell. When their assignments and projects and answers to the final assessments get better, demonstrate critical thinking and creativity, I know I have achieved my objective. Likewise, when their assignments and projects have real-life implications and impact, or are injected with social causes and responsibility, I know once again they have acquired what I seek to impart.

Recall the poem I created and recited for my OEA Public Lecture at the end?

“Teaching is both a science and an art,
 Imbued with lots of soul and heart.
More than knowledge we hope to impart;
 Character-building another important part.”

Yes, I hope that my students not only enhance their knowledge, but also remember to contribute actively back to society.

Apart from their university days, we can know the effectiveness of the results many years later too. As we know, sometimes, after many years, we do chance upon our former students at the shopping mall, in a restaurant, outside a theatre, etc. or we might just receive a pleasant surprise email in our inbox. In our conversations, or in the email message, they sometimes do share with us how useful and thankful they are about the class because what they have been taught [did] come in handy and is so applicable in their current work. Even better still, they sometimes can vividly recall the exact example or amazing analogy that was given in class. I am in awe. Wow.

In essence, the resonance has stayed within them, probably for life. They registered and remembered, and could easily recollect and retrieve the topics and theories when needed.”

Question #4

AD: “Before we end, have you (as an educator) ever been asked a tough or interesting question, say by your students or friends?”

(10:19)

HCS: “Of course I have. Well, some friends have asked, “Are you worried if your students are ‘smarter’ than you?”

Guess what? My answer is...on the contrary, we should be elated and exhilarated, ecstatic and euphoric! Let me explain. If you recall the old martial arts movies and Kungfu TV shows we watched when we were young, the master will only impart 90% of his skills to his disciples. Why? In fear of them defeating him in the future. So imagine, 90% becomes 81%, 81% becomes 72.9%, it keeps diminishing. If every next generation only knows a subset of what the previous generation knows, the world will actually regress rather than progress. So, we should actually challenge our students to be better than us!

In addition, our willingness to admit that even as professors with PhDs, it is impossible for us to know everything. BUT, we are always eager and

enthusiastic to learn more. Hopefully, our insatiable desire and passionate pursuit of knowledge might be infectious, and motivate our students to be just as undaunted and undeterred in their quest for wisdom.

I will be most delighted if one of my students eventually [wins] the Turing Award (i.e., the equivalent of Nobel Prize in Computing). Indeed, these values, beliefs, goals do resonate with [the] School of Computing—because technology is so fast-changing and forever surpassing the past!”

Closing Remarks

AD: “Thank you very much, Cheng Suang for sharing your teaching and learning journey with us.”

HCS: “Thank you everyone.”

Outro Voiceover

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