

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 15

Title: A Conversation with Educator-in-Residence (EiR) for 2023 Professor Kathy TAKAYAMA

In this episode, we are pleased to speak with Professor Kathy TAKAYAMA, the Educator-in-Residence for 2023.

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

0 **Intro Music & Voiceover**

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1 **Welcome/ Intro (00:25):**

LEE Li Neng (LLN): “Hi, everyone. My name is Li Neng. I'm one of the Associate Directors of CDTL. Now, today, we are so pleased to have a very special episode featuring our Educator-in-Residence for 2023, Professor Kathy Takayama.

Now the Educator-in-Residence Programme, or EIRP, is part of CDTL's efforts to strengthen teaching and learning in higher education. This programme aims to connect the NUS community with distinguished university educators from around the world. And we are so honoured today to have Kathy visit us here at NUS as the Educator in Residence for 2023. So hello Kathy, thank you very much for joining us today!”

2 **Question #1**

LLN: “Now you gave a very interesting talk just now—for all the people who are listening to [this podcast]...[if] you have not heard the talk yet, please head over and listen to the talk first—you talked a bit about mentorship. And “mentorship” is a term that can mean many things to different people.

So maybe let's start out there a little bit more: tell us more about what you understand about mentorship and what you're referring to, and how that looks like in higher education.”

(01:33)

EiR 2023 Kathy TAKAYAMA (KT): “Thanks so much, and it's a pleasure and an honour to be here.

Um, as I mentioned in my talk, I think that we, you know, in the Academy and also in other constructs have thought about mentorship traditionally as a situation whereby we have an expert or oftentimes a more senior seasoned individual that is mentoring and guiding a disciple or someone that's more junior.

Historically in higher education, the research tells us that that is actually the least effective model of mentorship because for both perspectives—for the mentor, it places the burden of responsibility for everything, and they may or may not be an expert or have a particular style or tendency to fulfil all of the different needs of a mentee. Mentorship usually should be thought about in the course of a trajectory of one's career, and no mentor can provide everything. I, myself as a professor, was not going to be able to provide every aspect of my student's needs. From the student perspective, we shouldn't place the student in a situation whereby they feel that they have to create, be just like the mentor, because every individual should play to their strengths and bring out the best in who they are as individuals, their experiences and identities, and how a mentor should be able to bring that forth.

So I've been thinking a lot about mentorship in all of its different forms. Whether it's in research, in the ways in which we are creating classroom environments, also amongst faculty when, you know, we have junior faculty, we really want them to succeed in the academy.

And I've tried a few different examples, worked across different institutions, and the most successful construct of mentorship is if we think about mentorship as a **constellation** that is part of the ecosystem that I described in my talk. And so if there are networks of mentors in that healthy ecosystem, then we should avail our mentees to be able to build their mentoring networks. So mentoring can be a group of people that serve. Sometimes they might be mentors, sometimes they might be in the position of menteeship as well. But the strength of a constellation really creates a stronger fabric within that ecosystem.

And one of the most effective models is, in addition to creating multiple mentor structures and networks, is the **peer mentoring circle**, where we empower groups of individuals to be part of a circle whereby they are both mentors and mentees in community. They become very resourceful, they each bring their individual perspectives, experiences, backgrounds to particular challenges, solutions, but it really strengthens the community as well.

And we've been trying that, at OIST, at my current institution, Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology. We've had mentoring circles of students, faculty, administrative staff, researchers, and we find that those circles are so empowered and really take initiative above and beyond the time period of the actual mentoring circle programme because they do end up being lifelong colleagues and peers for each other as well.”

Question #2

LLN: “So what I'm hearing is that you articulated first that it was very important for us [to think] about mentoring as not just one mentor for a lifetime, but different mentors for different aspects, and we may be part of different mentoring kind of relationships over time. And the other very important thing is you talked about that peer mentoring circles as really working out very well, and this is opposed to traditional kind of mentoring models where there's a hierarchy between two people.

So maybe would you elaborate a little bit more based on your experiences, why is it that peer mentoring circles succeed so much more as compared to this traditional kind of mentoring relationship? Does this mean that hierarchy is an issue that we have to remove for a mentoring, like peer mentoring circle, to actually take place, or for effective mentoring to take place?”

(06:31)

TK: “I don't think the two are mutually exclusive, and you're right in that in a peer mentoring circle, the strength of it is that there isn't a hierarchy and it becomes a collaborative, brave space so people can feel vulnerable and be comfortable in that vulnerability, because they are constantly alternating roles between being able to provide some expertise and then sometimes being the recipient of those ideas. But they're doing this in a very collegial, collaborative format.

So I would say socially, cognitively, emotionally, professionally, it becomes a space of trust. On the other hand, there are some situations in mentoring structures where yes, there does have to be a hierarchy, I mean, namely the traditional PhD supervisor, where you are actually, you know, learning from the supervisor, particular reason, and that person has had this complete expertise and responsibility to acculturate you into the disciplinary profession. And so that structure is important.

However, I would say that we do have to be mindful of making sure that these power structures are there in support of, rather than in some unfortunate circumstances, if there's a vulnerability because of the power differential. So we do have that responsibility, be they circles or, you know, traditional supervisor-student, other instances, and mentorship doesn't have to come from the same discipline area. I have some lifelong mentors who have nothing to do with science, they're just great life mentors.

But I think that the paradigm shift that we need to be moving towards is the same one that happened to teaching and learning, you know, a few decades ago, where, as you know, traditionally teaching and learning was teacher-centred and we had the old formats of the ways in which classes were taught, and we've moved beyond that. We know—we have enough, we have so much evidence now—and the impact of that evidence in seeing what happens when you move toward a learner-centred pedagogy, and the ways in which institutions have changed their curricula in that way.

And I think that what we learned was that there is an evidence-based way to do this, and so mentoring has not followed as rapidly. We are still living in a mentor-centred universe. And so what does it mean when you move from mentor-centred to mentee-centred mentoring, where we think about the ways in which, what is the evidence of the impact of mentorship and all this different forms on the particular progress and goals of the mentee, but also the impact on the mentor?

It should be an ongoing learning dynamic, so the relationship should allow learning and growth for both.”

Question #3

LLN: “So I think what you have articulated here is really this new paradigm of mentorship, and how we compare its progress with teaching and learning, and how you see that where mentorship should head to, is for us to empirically understand which model actually works best to produce the better outcomes in the longer run.

And you talked about peer mentorship circles, especially at OIST. Do you have any examples or stories to share a little bit with us, so that people understand like how effective this has been or how transformative this has been at OIST?”

(10:39)

TK: “We started this last year as an experiment, um, because you know, our Centre had just gotten going. And one of the goals we had was to start breaking down some of the silos in the institution. Ironically I mean, OIST is a tiny university, but invariably we had silos. And humans tend to flock, right, to certain clusters and groups, and we find our comfort zones and we don't feel a need to venture out of them because everything works. And sometimes that actually could be a significant barrier to community.

And so we started the peer mentoring circles, just so that our different groups and stakeholders would be able to benefit from interacting with others in their similar positions or roles, to get ideas and also share challenges with one another, and be peer mentors. So we had peer mentors for students, for faculty, for postdoctoral researchers, and we also had peer mentoring circles for administrative staff. That was wonderful, because we had a keen interest amongst our administrative staff members at the institution. Because I think a lot of times, we in the academy neglect the fact that our institutional ecosystem very much depends upon everyone being able to be their full selves. We focus on students, we focus on faculty, but the whole place runs because we also have extraordinary administrative staff who are all contributing in their different ways. So our Centre wanted to legitimise the fact that our staff also have career trajectories, and they have a lot of wisdom and experience and insights to contribute, and they could benefit from first starting in a circle where you have different parts of the institution coming together to share.

So those staff mentoring circles really, for themselves, were a great revelation where they learned about what the different parts of the institution were doing, and they started to understand the connections between the different components of the institution. And a lot of them took initiative; they became leaders in the ways in which they wanted to be more proactive and contributing some of the observations that they had to support processes to make them better, and continue to support each other in the circle in that regard.

So based on what we learned, you know, we at the Centre...I'm very fortunate to work with a fabulous team of colleagues, and we are also very open to learning ourselves. So we decided to try something in addition to that, where one of our colleagues who is in the Provost's Office, who oversees a lot of the research administrative processes, very kindly offered to work with us to run a monthly seminar series.

And the unique thing about the seminar series is—I call it “Research 101”—it's a monthly seminar series that really talks about how research is done with the audience of administrative staff in mind. So it's not for students, it's not for faculty. And what that told us was that we have complete assumptions in the academy that, of course, everyone knows how research works, you know, we have peer review, we have grants, we have journal articles, and this is how faculty do research. And this is how the sausage gets made, so to speak, right?

And it turns out that well, this is a completely flawed, you know, assumption. Why should anyone else understand how this crazy world of research works? And so, the monthly seminar series was completely filled with our academic staff colleagues from

all across the institution who were amazed at, “Oh, so is this what professors are doing?” “Um, you know, we didn’t...so what, what you guys...peer review journal articles, so how does that work?” “I mean, you don’t have this like big, you know, overseeing group in some major office that just goes and does it?” And they were really blown away by the fact that the professional identity of academics depends upon contributing to the peer review process, be it grants and journals. So we thought, “Oh okay, so you know, we really owe it to our staff colleagues to help them feel that they are part, they really are part of this enterprise, and this is what their particular roles are contributing towards.

So I feel that when we create opportunities through peer mentoring and creating this collaborative community, then it starts to break down silos, not only across the different administrative offices, but also across the research-administration divide, you know, the research-teaching divide, because we tend to neatly silo things, but there should be porosity across these different organisations.”

(16:24)

LLN:”And I think what you just highlighted is really exciting for me and some of my colleagues here, to actually hear and learn from, because this whole idea of having silos is very pervasive, right, around simply because I think it boils down to we are just doing our jobs. And if my job is in the area of teaching, then I tend to focus on teaching and I interact with colleagues that focus on teaching, and we forget how much we are actually interdependent on one another, especially the divide between the administrative staff and the faculty. I see that happening somewhat and this helped. Helping different people to bridge and to tear down some of these silos can be very empowering from everybody, and this actually helps to include everybody as part of that process, right?”

Question #4

LLN: “So with that, maybe we can go into this whole idea of inclusivity, which you talked quite a little bit about, actually quite a lot about in your talk, right? And you talked about inclusive excellence at the start. And again, for all those listeners out there who want to know more about what Kathy talked about, again please go back to her talk; I think there, she puts it out more in detail.

But maybe at this moment in time, maybe you can just illustrate briefly what you mean by inclusive excellence, and then from there we can go on.”

(17:48)

KT: “Sure, thank you.

So in my talk, I talked about the fact that healthy...I describe our universities as ecosystems. And so we know that we want our ecosystems to be healthy, which means that if any one particular part of the ecosystem is unhealthy or is not taken care of, then the whole thing will eventually shut down. And so we might neglect some parts of our universities because we might just focus on things that we perceive to be the healthy, shiny or the reputation, you know, the gold star of the institution. And those are great; it's great to highlight them, to be known for them and I've been at many research universities and you know, we really want to make sure that we're continuing to be able to create conditions for the best of that to happen. But of course, the teaching is necessary as well, because we have a responsibility to cultivate the next generation of those that are going on to perpetuate this research excellence or other forms of careers.

But there are other aspects of the institution that may not necessarily be thriving, not because of intentional neglect, but we just take it for granted that things will continue. And unfortunately, I mean, our earth is suffering because, you know, we've neglected some parts, many parts of it. So inclusive excellence requires that in order for an organisation to be fully inclusive, and that means it's not just about diversity, there actually has to be a sense of agency and belonging and the feeling that everybody—with an emphasis on the everybody—has the potential to succeed and the expectation that we are doing everything we can for you to be able to contribute what you have and we value what you have to contribute, then there does have to be a condition of inclusion and equity, whereby people do have barriers removed. Barriers aren't put there intentionally; they are structural unintentional barriers that are there because that's just the way we've always done things.

And so I think a healthy ecosystem benefits from all of us being attentive to that and holding ourselves accountable.”

Question #5

LLN: “So I think that is a great segue to one of the questions that I've [had] in discussion with colleagues. I think many colleagues recognise that when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these are very important things that the university should strive towards.

Yet at the same time, one question that has come up as a concern is this: they feel that there's an inherent tension sometimes—with some of these initiatives—with meritocratic principles, and meritocracy remains one of the key principles in Singapore and [in] our founding of our nation.

And maybe now's a good time to ask about this: how do you think we can actually deal with this tension, right, between DEI initiatives and meritocracy as a principle to operate by?”

(21:32)

KT: “Yeah, great question. Thank you for that.

I don't think that they are in opposition, you know, that the promotion and value of DEI is not counter to meritocratic principles.

There is, in universities around the world, we are operating under the expectation and assumption that so long as students, or anybody, work really hard and achieve what we have believed them to be capable of achieving, then they should have the ability to continue to progress and succeed, and move on to their particular goals. And that's true about the ways in which we want to promote diversity, equity, inclusion.

The caveat to that, and a lot of the universities in the U. S. system—which I know best, but I'm aware of, you know, other issues that happen in other countries, and now I'm based in Japan—but I think sometimes we are unaware of the [structures]. They could be policies, they're just the ways in which organisations have been created historically in some countries, you know, several hundred years, younger in other cases. But they've been built on the assumption of either meritocracy or the fact that in the U. S.

people like to, you know, think that we have this constitution that has given everyone the inalienable right.

But what we overlook is that there is, it's not an intentional exclusion of certain populations from succeeding. But if the system has been designed such that some people are starting off at a disadvantage for whatever reason, and I made the analogy to, if you're running a race, you know, 500-meter dash. Everyone has equal opportunity to win that gold medal, they've all trained and they all, let's say have, you know, excellent running shoes, etc. But for whatever reason, let's say some people were starting 10 yards ahead of others, and we weren't realising that maybe there was something wrong in the track or something. And for some reason, the same cohort seemed to continue winning. That's the structure, that's the challenge we have; it's not an intentional exclusion.

And it is not about blaming anybody, or holding people accountable for being prejudiced. But we are unaware of the fact that the ways in which we have particular requirements or curricular expectations, or even faculty selection processes, have historically defaulted to ways that invariably have selected for those that will continue to succeed, and then they will perpetuate the next generation. That's the challenge that we're facing, and we have a great opportunity to revisit that to say, you know what, we're missing out on a lot of creativity here, and interdisciplinarity because of that.”

Question #6

LLN: “And I hear one of the very important things that you just mentioned, this is not about blame or identifying people who I blame or shaming, because that's another concern that some colleagues have when it comes to this area. It might have been a false association, but I think people think that with pushing more for DEI initiatives, it comes also with this unintended outcome whereby people can fall into a culture of blaming and shaming.

Maybe you'd like to share with us some of your thoughts on this because you said we should not go there, right? And where then do you think we should head towards to, as we head towards trying to build a more inclusive kind of environment for everyone?”

(26:14)

KT: “I think well, I will start by saying, you know that I'm a scientist, right? And I can't help myself but always ask these questions of, well, how is that so? And I think if you start with how, because we can't deny situations, the fact of what we know to be demographics or particular, you know, groups always being able to succeed and others, for some reason, are not able achieve or be rewarded with the fruits of their labour, of all of their hard work.

And similarly to, you know, the example I gave in my talk about the physics, the peculiar physics situation. I start with, well okay, so here's a concrete observation rather than saying well, someone's, you know, excluding them or blaming is, if we start with, how did that come to be? Then it allows us to take an inquiry-based approach to start looking for hardcore evidence and data, rather than just conjecture.

And then once we start to gather concrete data, reliable data and not just one or two anecdotes, then it allows us to start moving backwards from there to say, well, how did that situation come to be? Until we figure out well, what's preventing it, or what is the particular structure that could be removed, or what could we do that allows the mitigation of any disparities that exist? And I would say that that physics story is a classic example. No one was intentionally preventing these women from succeeding, but they had been subject to a lifetime of societal unconscious bias and subliminally, you know, it was affecting the ways in which they could perform to their best selves.

So I think that if we as institutions and societies take that approach, we actually benefit from it because we learn a lot, and then it unleashes a lot of potential that we were not

taking advantage of, and then it allows us to even create new opportunities for ourselves.”

Closing Remarks

LLN: “And I think that is really very helpful in terms of really reframing this approach as not just someone is at fault, but there is a problem where we all can come together to deal with so that we can all make a better future for every one of us that's here.

And with that, I thank you very much, Kathy, for sharing with us your perspectives on all the different topics that we dealt with today. So thank you very much for today.”

KT: “Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.”

Outro Voiceover

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