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Instances of Good Practice in Teaching and Learning Noted in Programme Reviews 2005 & 2006

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The purpose of this paper is to document good practices in teaching and learning that were highlighted in the ten programme reviews conducted in 2005 and 2006. The good practices are briefly described so that other programmes can consider the possible relevance and applicability of these practices to the context of their own programmes. In many cases the identified practice is present in more than one programme; therefore, in the interest of fairness, descriptions have been kept anonymous.

Only those practices noted in the self-reflection documents or in programme review meetings are recorded. It is the intention that this paper provides descriptions of teaching and learning *practices* rather than merely *ideas*.

The practices are organized under:
- Programme culture
- Student support
- Content and aims
- Learning activities
- Assessment
- Feedback for evaluation

Programme culture

Cohesive team spirit in programme planning has been achieved in several programmes. It is noteworthy that good working relationships have been fostered between teachers in programmes, where the teachers have a high diversity in their backgrounds, and also where the background and training of the teaching staff is more uniform. Strategies for achieving coherent and cohesive teams include:
- *strong leadership* by the Department Chairman or Programme Director. This is essential to the fostering of a team spirit. Further, strong and energetic leadership is needed if innovation and outreach are to be successful. Innovation and change involve risk-taking and the support of those in leadership positions is essential to success;
- the existence of *reward structures*, such as internal teaching awards which are appropriately celebrated;
- dedicated programme planning and review *meetings with all staff present* (not just a core group); and
- a consistent and varied programme of academic seminars, visitors and events (in short, a strong *scholarly environment*).

Several programmes have ***active curriculum committees***. Such committees ensure attention to the fine-grained tuning of a programme. In particular, the elimination of unnecessary duplication or overlap between courses can be achieved. Attentive curriculum committees

can also monitor whether the designs of component courses are likely to support the development of appropriate graduate capabilities. Examination of overall assessment strategies and patterns are important in this regard.

Interdisciplinary programmes have some real challenges due to the present CUHK funding model and registration procedures. However, very helpful synergistic relationships have developed when the component departments are all committed to the aims of the programme they are collaborating on. When the partnership is unbalanced, and one department just provides a service for another, overcoming logistic and curriculum challenges appears to be more difficult. Interdisciplinary programmes that have mechanisms to constantly revisit programme aims seem to be more successful. Such mechanisms include detailed formal annual review meetings and regular, less formal, review meetings.

Programmes which are *adaptable to changing circumstances* appear to support student learning more successfully. Regular attention to aspects such as the following is needed:
- *global shifts* in the discipline arena and in likely employment opportunities for graduates;
- influence of *new media and technology* on the nature of professions where graduates might work; and
- opportunities for the use of new media and technology in designing more appropriate learning environments for students.

Student support

The role of the *admissions coordinator* is important. A highly experienced staff member is essential. The role includes more than paying attention to appropriate entry standards. Effective admissions coordinators pay attention to the overall student mix and note shifting trends in students' interests in the discipline.

Many programmes have *staff mentors*. In these schemes, each student is assigned to a full-time academic teacher who has regular meetings with that student. These meetings are particularly important in students' first year of study. The role of many staff mentors is pastoral as well as academic in nature, and students have a pivotal place to seek advice. Staff mentors can assist students in formulating a clear 'roadmap' for their studies.

The role of *postgraduate Teaching Assistants* (TAs) is vital in many programmes. TAs provide additional teaching to students, both in formal tutorials and laboratory classes, and also in informal consultations. In addition, because many TAs are close in age to undergraduate students, they can provide *peer mentoring* about a range of academic and personal issues as well.

In successful programmes, students always comment on the *approachability of the academic staff*. The willingness of the teaching staff to interact with students outside class time and answer their queries in a timely fashion is very supportive of student learning.

Content and aims

Clear ***identification and articulation of various aspects of the programme*** are needed. For example, some programmes clearly allocate each course to one or more groupings, such as focus on fundamental disciplinary concepts, support for professional capabilities, or building more general global perspectives.

Paying explicit attention to the ***linkages between areas*** of the curriculum is also essential. What seems like an excellent curriculum 'smorgasbord' to the teaching staff may appear as a set of fragmented offerings to students unless they are assisted to see the linkages. These linkages need to appear in the *programme and course documentation*, and also be reinforced at regular intervals by individual teachers and through events such as open staff-student meetings.

The existence of a programme ***advisory board*** has been found to be valuable. Regular input from professional and community representatives can provide new ideas and perspectives.

In professional programmes, an appropriate balance between ***theory and professional training*** needs to be maintained. The strategies noted above have been useful in this regard.

Effective programmes provide a variety of opportunities for students to develop ***a range of capabilities*** that they will need after graduation. Strategies for the support of communication skills, and for the ability to work in the profession and community are noted in the following section on 'Learning activities'.

Learning activities

The use of relevant ***material and cases with a Hong Kong or China base*** has enhanced several programmes. As this usually cannot be readily obtained from a commercial publisher, programme time and resources need to be allocated to the collection and customization of these local relevant learning materials.

The area of ***communication skills*** is a key one. Some strategies adopted in CUHK programmes include: specific language and communication skills courses; summer language courses; use of support structures such as the Independent Learning Centre and the Writing Across the Curriculum project; and explicit consideration of how communication skills should be formally assessed.

There are a number of strategies that programmes have adopted to support students' ***ability to work in the profession and community***. These include:
- bridging courses to the profession in the final year of the programme;
- cooperative electives with businesses;
- field visits (community and industry);
- international exchange programmes for a semester or year;
- international exchange visits over summer;
- involvement in school and community projects;
- opportunities to work as research assistants in the department;
- summer internships;

- summer courses; and
- use of part-time teachers from the profession or community.

It is clear that the arrangement of learning activities of this nature involves considerable time and this needs to be allowed for in the programme's overall budget.

Some programmes are able to broaden students' curriculum choice by *offering single courses from other CUHK programmes or from other universities*. While these arrangements can be administratively challenging, they have provided cost-effective options in several cases.

Diagnostic testing can be valuable. It has been used in language courses. It might also apply to a variety of skills courses. Diagnostic testing can provide information to tailor courses to students' needs and, in some cases, can provide students with exemption. Specific diagnostic testing is more precise than relying on school grades.

Multimedia software has been useful for skills training. As the range of educational technology increases, this may be a useful area for programmes to explore.

There is variability in the success of *group projects* as a learning activity. Where they are successful, there are some common factors. Appropriate group size, clarity of task, adequate ongoing support and the use of some form of moderation (by teachers or through peer assessment) are common success factors.

Informal and formal *peer tutoring* exists in many programmes. In some cases upper year students act as peer tutors for first year students. Provided that teachers provide training and support for the peer tutors, this is a valuable learning activity.

Assessment

Students learn from assessment best when they have opportunities to enact the feedback they have received. In programmes where students submit *drafts* or where *resubmission of work* after feedback is allowed, learning outcomes are enhanced.

Peer assessment is used effectively in several programmes. Peer assessment is used in several ways:
- by individual students on other individual students' work;
- by a group of students on the work of other groups; and
- by individuals within a group on the contributions of their peers.

Authentic assessment is used in several professional programmes. In this form of assessment the focus is on operating as a practicing professional. Assessment is thus in a work setting or in a very good simulation thereof.

In successful programmes there is a *planned variety of assessment* strategies, and different assessment strategies are used in different types of courses. The assessment plans for each course are examined and matched to programme aims and course objectives (or desired learning outcomes). The level of scrutiny can vary but the principle is that assessment is a *programme-level responsibility* and not just the concern of the course teacher(s).

Feedback for evaluation

Evaluation is a continuous matter in successful programmes. In one programme, *early formative course evaluation* is conducted after one month through the use of a survey. This allows timely fine-tuning and supports continuous improvement.

Successful *staff-student consultative committees* are those that meet frequently (more than once a semester), which are open to all staff and students, and where there is clear evidence of following up on complaints and suggestions.

Informal feedback is also valuable. As stated earlier, having approachable staff, including the Department Chairman or Programme Director, is a strong indicator of a healthy programme. An appropriate balance between informal and formal feedback mechanisms is the optimal arrangement.

Teaching and learning are complex, multi-dimensional activities. It is therefore essential that successful programmes use a *multi-dimensional evaluation strategy*. A balanced perspective is obtained by examining multiple data sets, including course evaluation data; staff-student consultative reports; student engagement survey data; and reports from (and in some cases surveys of) recent graduates.

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