

Spurring active learning

FROM PAGE 29

So, what is innovative teaching at university and what shape does it come in?

Associate Professor Dr Fauziah Abdul Rahim, dean of Universiti Utara Malaysia's School of Education and Modern Languages, said essentially teaching at any level needs the same basic ingredient — it has to be learner- and learning-centred, it needs to be meaningful.

It also requires designing tasks and activities that engage learners to become involved in the thinking and learning process as well as learn in a collaborative way and, above all, have lots of fun. In her view, this is the essence of designing for learning to take place at university. Innovation depends on the creativity of the teacher, taking into consideration the needs and learner diversity.

"So the flipped classroom where learners can do tasks inside and outside of class via technology and the use of various learning tools can assist teachers to provide engaging learning experiences," she added.

The National Academic Awards award winner for Teaching (Applied Arts and Social Science Category) noted that current and future generations of university students cannot be separated from technology and have a shorter attention span perhaps due to the fact that they love to share their experiences, work in a flexible way and thrive on challenges.

"To get them onboard in class, teachers at the university need to be equipped with the know-how of integrating technology and interactive learning in class."

Challenges for faculty members at tertiary level occur when they are required to be involved in research and publication, and the emphasis on these activities can sometimes be overwhelming for academicians when designing innovative and meaningful teaching at the tertiary level that sometimes results in the traditional lecture becoming inevitable.

"Universities should place greater emphasis on the importance of ensuring that academicians become motivated to make innovative teaching central to their teaching and learning processes."

On innovative teaching in the fields of applied literature and social science for example, Fauziah uses learner-centred strategies that require students to take ownership of their learning when solving problems in various ways.

This is especially critical as her students are from the education programmes, who ultimately, she hopes, will become innovative teachers in their respective contexts when they graduate.

"While ensuring that the learning outcomes of the courses are achieved, there is also an effort made to prepare students to face the obstacles and challenges in the real world contexts of teaching.

"This is done through activities such as solving case studies which enable students to put theory into practice in a meaningful way. That way it helps students to prepare themselves before they set foot in the real world.

"I am humbled and pleased when former students tell me that the tasks that they performed at university and knowledge as well as skills they acquired when attending class are relevant to them as teachers. The feedback motivates me to do more even if it is not easy. After all mediating learning is never easy."



Life Skills Facilitators at Taylor's University pose with Dr Maszlee Malik and Janaronson Nagarajah (left) after being named the winner for the Face-to-Face Immersive Learning Experience category at AKRI 2018.



Our enthusiasm and passion for learning should be infectious.

WAN ZUHAINIS SAAD
UPM microbiology lecturer

On teaching strategies in teaching pure science subjects, UPM microbiology lecturer Associate Professor Dr Wan Zuhainis Saad said it is all about curiosity, exploration and relationship.

"We need to deliver content in a manner that will spike students' curiosity, pique interest and allow them to see things differently. I practise BYOD (Bring Your Own Device). Students come in with their own gadgets, smartphones, laptops or iPads. They come prepared because they know they need to participate in activities prepared for them by me or their classmates. I don't have to worry about attendance because they won't miss my classes. It is an active learning environment," she said, adding that active learning promotes innovation and creativity.

"I have activities for each lecture, lots of formative assessment, interaction, participation, engagement and group work. Students have the freedom to contribute ideas and suggestions, interact and be engaged. In the words of Einstein, I don't teach my students, I just attempt to create the environment in which they can learn."

Wan Zuhainis practises blended learning using flipped classroom with Web 2.0 tools. The learning materials are prepared earlier with interactive video quizzes using EdPuzzle. The tasks are distributed among the groups of students who will prepare the learning materials for a particular topic for the whole class.

"You'll be amazed at what they can do. I use Project Oriented Based Learning. A project designed for students encompasses the content for a semester. We discuss progress and problems, and share ideas. Usually there are big events such as Mini Showcase of Microbial Ecology where students form the organising committee and Virtual Microbes, a virtual peer-learning project to learn about microbes with students from eight universities, including Lafayette College in the United States. It not only teaches others, students also learn best by doing and experiential learning," she said.

"As a 21st century educator and a learning designer, we have to be ready to learn, unlearn and relearn. Learning takes place in many different circumstances and contexts, and it is a process that never ends. Our enthusiasm and passion for learning should be infectious."

LEARNING LIFE SKILLS

Taylor's University Face-to-Face Immersive Learning Experience project, which won an award in the category at AKRI 2018 last month, goes back to 2014 when the university launched the Shine

Award programme to enable students to develop their life skills aptitude, which will see them improve their lifelong life skills and emotional well-being capabilities.

It is the implementation of two subjects — Life Skills for Success and Well-Being and Millennials in Malaysia: Team Dynamics and Relationship Management — targeted at helping students focus on developing themselves to be emotionally intelligent and be able to interact with others.

Janaronson Nagarajah, who is associate director of Integrated Teaching and Lifelong Learning Center at Taylor's, said: "This innovative approach to education was the brainchild of the deputy vice-chancellor and chief academic officer, Professor Dr Pradeep Nair, who saw the merit in introducing this after industry leaders shared how they assess emotional intelligence when hiring graduates."

A specialised team, called Life Skills Coaches/Facilitators who come from various backgrounds, was appointed to look into this aspect of learning. Life Skills Facilitators, which include certified coaches, clinical psychologists, humanitarians and corporate trainers, deliver life skills modules to all first-year students, providing them the chance to enter a journey of self-discovery, learning foundational life skills, emotional intelligence and tools that help with emotional well-being.

"While this was first introduced as an option, the programme garnered positive response from students which led to the establishment of a more comprehensive framework introduced as part of the Taylor's Curriculum Framework launched last year.

"It's a new approach to learning and all students in the diploma and degree programmes are enrolled in these two modules in their first year, regardless of their course of study."

After completing the two modules at the end of the semester, students have the opportunity to go through a self-discovery process and know how to thrive in a team setting, give neutral responses and behave in a team.

"This is important because research has indicated that the workforce of the future will work across different teams, in different sectors and span cultures."

The initiative has garnered positive response, with close to 90 per cent of students sharing that they found the two modules helpful and provided them the platform to safely develop emotional well-being in a positive manner. "Our team has been approached by an industry partner who recognises the impact of this initiative and wants a custom-made 10-week module for its scholars."

As educators, Janaronson added, it is necessary to be innovative as it will allow instructors/lecturers to remain relevant to the needs of students.

"The Life Skills modules provide a platform for its facilitators to constantly enhance the way



Fauziah Abdul Rahim



Faridah Mohamad



Dr Ismail Mohd Saiboon



