

Teaching Connections Podcast

Episode 14

Title: A Conversation with 2023 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA) Recipient Assoc Prof Lee Kooi Cheng

In this episode, we are pleased to speak with Assoc Prof Lee Kooi Cheng, recipient of the 2023 Outstanding Educator Award (OEA).

This episode is chaired by Assoc Prof Soo Yuen Jien, Director of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL).

0 **Intro Music & Voiceover**

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

Soo Yuen Jien (SYJ): “Hello everyone, I am Yuen Jien, Director of CDTL. In this episode, we are so pleased to have Assoc Professor Lee Kooi Cheng, recipient of the 2023 Outstanding Educator Award, share more about her perspectives on relationships in teaching and learning. In particular, we learn about why relationships matter in teaching and learning, what such relationships look like, and how they can be sustained.

Hello Kooi Cheng—thank you very much for joining us today.”

Lee Kooi Cheng (KC): “Hi, Yuen Jien, thank you for having me here today!”

2 **Question #1**

SYJ: “Tell us more about relationships in teaching and learning. Why do they matter?”

(01:06)

KC: “Maybe I’ll start by sharing a little bit of my own experience. So you know, Yuen Jien, every start of the semester, before I go to each first lesson of every class, I kind of feel a bit nervous. I don’t know whether you feel that or other colleagues feel the same way. Sometimes, I don’t sleep well the night before, and this is despite having been in this profession [and] having been a teacher for many years. So whenever I share this experience with others, especially those who are not in the teaching profession, they’ll always ask me this, “but you’ve been a teacher for so long, you’ve been doing this for so many years; why do you still feel nervous?”

So my response and reaction to this is, it is akin to meeting someone who is important, and my students are people who are important to me. And so I want to make that good first connection, good first impression with my students. So I just wonder if you have that same kind of response or reaction.”

SYJ: “I’m very glad you mentioned that. I thought I was the only one who still feel this after almost twenty years of teaching. So, you’ve probably put a reason, right, to the nervousness. [However], what I learnt also is [something] someone shared with me, ‘you think about the nervousness as excitement!’ So, although it’s the same kind of feeling, but you will feel better because you actually feel excited to meet the students for the first time, so I think it works, right?”

KC: “Yes, that’s true.”

SYJ: “So maybe let me carry [this question] a bit further. What are some reasons that motivates you to examine this further?”

(02:46)

KC: “So besides [the classroom], you know sometimes we teach [the] same course, or the same courses, for a few semesters. It may be the same course, the learning outcomes may be similar, but I think the way that we approach conveying the content may be different with different groups of students. And so, that set me thinking a little bit more about relationships in teaching and learning.

In my other context, where I’m in residential life and student life, I think that’s also another rich space, and that’s a rich space for out-of-classroom learning. And that also set me thinking about relationships and teaching and learning. [And] in these spaces, there’s a lot of learning that goes on, even though it’s out of classroom. So if I could then refer to Prof Peter Felten and Prof Leo Lambert’s 2020 book—*Relationship-rich Education: How Human Relations Drive Success in College*—I think they frame this very well.

Question #2

SYJ: “So maybe you can share with us some strategies that you have used to nurture and sustain relationships in teaching and learning, maybe in both the formal classroom context and the residential contexts”

(04:08)

KC: “There are two practices that I do:

First of all is I try to **create opportunities and spaces for my student(s) to learn**. It’s **learning** and also, if I could use the word, **falling**. Not failing, but falling. I think it’s important for the students to feel safe, to feel comfortable, not to do so well, and learning from that kind of experience, pick it up again, and try again. So number one is that I try to create those kind of spaces as well as opportunities and in the midst of it, I think there is also a rapport-building, there is also trust that is being built between students and me as a faculty member.

The second thing I try to practice is also to try to help my students to connect **the dots, so that learning is meaningful and learning is relevant**. And this connection takes them beyond NUS, beyond their undergraduate studies into the workplace.

SYJ: “So your first point about the safe environment resonates with me a lot, right? We always value success too much, I feel, at times. And students are afraid of failing or even trying. So I guess this kind of ‘productive failures’, right, is something very important for them to learn further.”

Question #3

SYJ: “So maybe you can share with us some key takeaways for educators to successfully develop and sustain relationships in teaching and learning?”

(05:47)

KC: “For relationships in teaching and learning to be effective, I believe that we ourselves must first be convinced of the value of such relationships; and that teaching and learning is not just a knowledge and intellectual enterprise, but it is also a social and emotional networking of individuals and minds. And here, I thought that I would like to quote Professor Randy Bass who says that, and I quote

“Human connection is the basis upon which learning takes place. Relationships are essential because there is no learning without relationships.”

So for this to happen, there has got to be commitment by all stakeholders, or for all parties to be open to dialogues, to conversations, and to make necessary adjustments so that together, the intended (learning) outcomes are attained. And this requires effort, this requires energy as well as time.

I also think that being there, being authentic, and being able to empathise are important.”

SYJ: “So Kooi Cheng, I think as a testament of your relationship cultivation, your effort in maintaining and sustaining relationships, I think your [OEA] Public Lecture is one of the few that I see [a] very strong support group turning up to actually support you for the occasion. So I guess that is another testament of your effort and success in that regard.”

Question #4

SYJ: “So one last question. Can you tell us about the ways in which you are continuing to enhance your practice? It could be but not limited to developing and sustaining relationships in teaching and learning.”

(07:33)

KC: “There are a few areas that I think I’ve not quite explored, or I’ve not been doing really well; and these are the areas that I would like to learn a little bit more.

First, I would like to learn from colleagues who continue to share their knowledge beyond their classrooms, and these maybe through various platforms. At the OEA [Public Lecture], I made reference to [Prof Chng Huang Hoon’s](#) as well as [Prof Eric Chan’s](#) LinkedIn posts, but I am sure there are many other of our colleagues out there who are doing this very very well, and I want to be able to learn from them.

Second, I also mentioned that I think it’s important for us to know our boundaries, and to set certain boundaries and more importantly, to practice self-care. I think we ourselves must be in a good headspace to sustain very good relationships in teaching and learning.

And third, and maybe related to the first point I made earlier, much has been talked about artificial intelligence (AI), generative AI tools, their potentials, possibilities and perhaps some say, disruptions these tools may bring. I want to understand more about how human-to-human relationships in teaching and learning can be sustained amidst all these rapid technological advances.

So these are the things that moving forward, I hope to be able to do or explore.”

SYJ: “I think your second point about setting boundaries and learning about self-care is very important for teachers, because being a teacher, it means that you need to learn to be empathetic, right? But then that sometimes blurs the boundaries of where you actually need to draw the line, so that I think is a good point.

Then, about ChatGPT and generative AI, I actually feel that your point about sustaining relationships between the teacher and the students, and between students and students, and so forth, that I think might be the best defense against [the thinking] that all the teachers' roles are now being replaced by generative AI."

Closing Remarks

SYJ: "Thank you very much, Kooi Cheng for sharing your perspectives on relationships in teaching and learning with us."

KC: "Thank you, Yuen Jien."

Outro Voiceover

"Thank you for tuning in to the CDTL podcast."

Reference

Lambert, L. M., & Felten, P. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human relations drive success in college*. John Hopkins University Press.