

EDITOR'S CORNER

The Joy of Classroom Teaching

There must have been hundreds and thousands of articles written about the joy of classroom teaching in academia, but I would like to write one because it is MY unique experience in my long career as a professor of microbiology and food science. I hope my story will inspire others to excel in classroom teaching at all levels.

I was appointed an Assistant Professor of Microbiology at age 26 at the Pennsylvania State University in the Department of Microbiology in 1969. Like many research-oriented Ph.D. scientists I had no training in classroom teaching at all. My experiences teaching involved giving some talks to students in laboratory classes as a graduate assistant in food science at Iowa State University. Now, I was a young professor facing the challenge of teaching several important courses in microbiology at one of the leading land grant universities in the nation. Dr. Robert Stone was my Department Head who hired me and he was very nice in inviting me to give a lecture in Immunology in a Microbiology course the first week when I arrived at Happy Valley--State College, PA the home of the Nittany Lions--a power-house of American football with Joe Paterno as the coach. In those days Penn State regularly won 10 to 12 games a year.

I was quite nervous about the assignment and practiced the lecture many times before I stepped into the lecture hall. There were many students in the room. Some of them were not much younger than I was. I gave my first classroom lecture with flying colors and at the end of the lecture, as a polite Chinese, I bowed to thank the students. I received a spontaneous ovation and enthusiastic hand claps from the students. I was truly surprised and honored. To this day, I still feel a chill in remembering that moment of my life. Incidentally, it has NEVER happened again! I have had a lot of hand claps for my lectures as a professional in national and international meetings in the past 30 years, but none from students in a regular classroom lecture. How I cherish that moment of glory as a young professor.

Teaching classes in the '60s and early 70's was quite different from teaching classes in 2004. In those days the only tools were a blackboard and chalk. It was actually not that bad because students had to learn to listen, read and write. Nowadays, with power-point presentations, videos, movies, high tech equipment, and printed materials, students have lost the art of listening and writing frantically as the professor draws pictures on the board and writes unreadable letters at lightning speed. I am a pianist and use both hands effectively--ambidextrous was my thing. I used to draw an amoeba with my left hand and label the parts with my right hand. Students could hardly keep up with my speed. As legend has it, in Fung's classes if you sneeze you will miss three pages of notes. To this day former

students, many of whom are professors, department heads, deans, and famous scientists, still tell stories of the crazy professor Fung at Penn State who wrote with both hands, equally bad. Those were glorious days of down to earth classroom teaching.

At Penn State in those days classes were long--75 min per lecture. I used to lecture from 5 x 7 inch white cards containing my lecture information. After every 25 white cards I would insert a yellow card in which I would have a joke to wake the students up. One of the best ones was as follows: A Mother Yeast took a Daughter Yeast (a bud, in mycology) to Penn State Campus and a student asked the Mother Yeast "Why are you taking your daughter to the university?" The Mother Yeast said "To make Bud Wiser" (Get it?). The students regularly rated my jokes and most of them were "C-". Some of the classes were very large with more than 300 students. The administrators were very smart. They designed a blackboard which had an ultraviolet light shining on the board and the professor would use a chalk that would fluoresce upon writing on the board so that students sitting in the back could see the words. It was a great idea except many professors somehow were having less and less hair as the semester progressed--it must be genetics. I had a tie that fluoresced under UV light so I told my students that the only bright thing about their professor was his tie!!

Well, I moved to Kansas State University in 1978. The classes were smaller and were only 50 min. Teaching has been such a breeze. I still teach many courses even though I have a large research program--I might add that at the Spring 2004 graduation ceremony I completed my 90th graduate student as a major professor (60 M. S. and 30 Ph.D. students). I still have about 10 graduate students in my laboratory. So, with some luck I will hit 100 graduate students in the next couple of years.

I make a count of the number of students I have taught in the classrooms, locally, nationally and internationally since 1969 and have come to the conclusion that I have taught more than 17,000 students through the years. Of course, I remember every one of them!!

I still love to teach even today. I get really excited when I stand in front of my class and tell them the facts of science and the joy of life. In more than 30 years of classroom teaching I have never canceled one class and have never missed one class due to sickness. If I knew I was not going to be in a particular lecture I always arranged to have the class covered. For this dedication I won the Waksman Outstanding Educator Award presented by the Society for Industrial Microbiology. I am indeed honored.

One day when I give my last classroom lecture I secretly hope that my students will spontaneously give me an ovation and clap for me as I hang up my cap and gown and my test tubes as a dedicated professor to my beloved students.

DANIEL Y. C. FUNG