



REFLECTIONS ON
TEACHING
AT YALE-NUS COLLEGE

Yale
NUS
College



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FOREWORD

Allowing faculty to publicly reflect on their teaching makes their good efforts more visible and fosters our culture of teaching excellence at Yale-NUS College.

Since its opening, Yale-NUS College has developed and implemented hundreds of new courses for our nearly 1,000 undergraduate students. Our purpose is to teach students *how* to learn, so as to prepare them for a responsible life in the 21st Century. Our unique liberal arts College in Singapore is buttressed with four unique approaches: (1) there are 8 team-taught interdisciplinary Common Curriculum courses which all Freshmen and Sophomores must take; (2) students hail from nearly 80 countries making diversity and inclusion a key characteristic of our pedagogy and our curriculum development; (3) class enrollment is capped at 18 students, making space for deep discussions in the classroom; and (4) Experiential Learning is emphasised as a pedagogical priority across the college with support from CIPE's Learning Across Boundaries programmes. The experiential and international learning efforts are designed and led by Yale-NUS faculty. Further, faculty are able to take advantage of our unique geographical location in Singapore and Southeast Asia with field trips that explore transplanetary issues across the disciplines.

This collection of teaching reflections investigates some of the ways faculty from our three divisions - Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities - have developed their teaching practices and integrated their research into the students' learning experiences. The purpose is to spark new approaches amongst faculty peers and recognise those who are making efforts in this area already. As researchers we can always learn new ways to make our teaching relevant and impactful for student learning and success. The publication presents an opportunity to continue the lively discussions on quality teaching in our institution, in Singapore, and beyond.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is pleased to be able to share the practices of some fabulous Yale-NUS College faculty from across the disciplines with you. My hope is that you will read, collect ideas, amplify the efforts, apply them to your practices in new and exciting ways and continue to push the boundaries of student learning.

Nancy W. Gleason, PhD
Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning



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**NANCY W.
GLEASON, PhD**

Director, Centre for
Teaching and Learning



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MICHAEL MANIATES

**Professor, Environmental
Studies, Social Sciences
Division**

*Professor Michael Maniates works on systems of sustainable consumption and production, social innovations for a low-growth world, and the design and implementation of undergraduate programmes in environmental studies. He is at work on a Polity Press book *Can Living Green Make a Difference* and initiating a research project on higher education and social innovation for a post-growth world. Professor Maniates is Professor of Social Sciences and the founding Head of Studies of Environmental Studies at Yale-NUS College. He holds a BS in Conservation and Resource Studies and an MA and PhD in Energy and Resources, all from the University of California, Berkeley. He was previously Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor of Environmental Science and Political Science at Allegheny College (1993 – 2013), and Senior Visiting Professor of Environmental Studies at Oberlin College (2011 – 2013). He joined Yale-NUS College in its inaugural year (2013) to guide the development of its environmental-studies programme.*

Courses Taught: Seminar in Comparative Social Inquiry; Introduction to Environmental Studies; *Power the Planet: Energy Production, Consumption, and Technology on a Crowded Planet*; *The Theory and Practice of Environmental Policymaking*; *Global Environmental Governance*; *Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production*

Awakening learners in the classroom: teaching and learning with passion and meaning

Since my early days of teaching, the words of Nathan Pusey, former president of Harvard University, have sat on my desk, a framed reminder of what I struggle toward in my classroom practice. Pusey writes:

“The close observer soon discovers that the teacher’s task is not to implant facts but to place the subject to be learned in front of the learner and, through sympathy, emotion, imagination, and patience, to awaken in the learner the restless drive for answers and insights which enlarge the personal life and give it meaning.”

I offer courses on the underlying sources of environmental degradation, environmental policy-making and social change, global environmental governance, systems of sustainable consumption and production, and energy supply and use around the world. I also teach the Common Curriculum via my contributions to CSI. In service of Pusey’s call I hew to four rules in my day-to-day teaching:

1. **Passion is everything.**

I expect myself to be passionately interested in the material I cover in class at all times, with no exceptions. If I’m not immediately engaged by the material, I work hard to discover novel entry points that are both exciting for me and respectful of the material. Everything else in my teaching follows from this first rule. If I’m not deeply curious and excited, my students won’t be either. If I don’t care, why should they?

2. **“Show, don’t tell”**

This critical directive to aspiring writers is even more relevant to ambitious teachers. Whenever I hear

myself say in class something like “OK, now this is important,” or “now we come to the important part,” I know that I have gone off the rails. Telling students that something is important too easily reproduces a memorization-and-regurgitation culture in the classroom. It is the cheater’s way out. Showing how and why critical concepts or intellectual linchpins are important, and then stepping back and asking “so, what did you find to be most important about all of that?” will allow students to taste the importance of the material. That is where the magic of teaching unfolds.

3. **Relinquish control.**

I come into my class sessions with a plan, of course, but I never expect it to go according to plan. I don’t want it to – I crave those moments of serendipitous discovery and connection in the classroom that emerge when students and I deviate from whatever ‘to do’ list I have developed for the day’s lesson. My job as a liberal-arts professor is to curate an in-class experience that provides for these moments of deeply relevant insight that I could never script in a syllabus or in my office before class.

4. **Demand much, deliver much.**

There is an insidious rumor that ‘easy’ classes earn the highest evaluations. That is not true. The most appreciated modules are those that demand much from students, in terms of reading, and synthesis, but that deliver much as well – fresh insights, new ways of thinking about the personal and professional, moments of intellectual discovery, and tools for making sense of the world

around us. It is always easier to start too tough and too demanding in a course, slowly dialing it back after, than to move in the opposite direction. Regardless, we should always approach the class with a stance of sympathetic engagement with our charges.

I end with the best nugget of wisdom I have received about teaching. It comes from a now-passed mentor, who reminded me that truly effective teachers rarely have two bad class sessions in a row, and never three. Her words, like Pusey's, ground my classroom practice. They remind me daily that our job isn't to be perfect. It is to be honest and gentle – with our students and with ourselves – so that we can see, without recrimination, when we aren't being productive in the classroom, and with help from others work out a 'fix,' 'recalibration,' or 'course-correction' to right the ship. Every class is a dance; every semester is an evolving work in progress.

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Photo by Clin Lai '18

