This conversation emerged from the Faculty’s renewed emphasis developing, supporting and enhancing university teaching and learning. Facilitated by Amani Ahmed, Projects Coordinator in the CALEG, the conversation illustrates the ways in which three academics – Patty Kamvounias, Rosina Mladenovic and Frank Stilwell have successfully turned their interest and passion for teaching, into teaching and learning research and scholarly outcomes.

Amani: You all did really well in the Scholarship Index, particularly for 2002. This was based on your qualifications in higher education, teaching awards, that year publication really seminars about university teaching. I thought we could chat about your experiences in doing those different things, and how you fit that in with everything else.

Qualifications in higher education – ‘I hadn’t been taught how to teach’

Rosina: I wanted teaching qualifications as I hadn’t been taught how to teach. I had discipline specific knowledge of accounting but I didn’t have knowledge of teaching and learning practices, theories and frameworks. I really began my Masters of Higher Education (MHEd) at UNSW to become a better teacher. However, while completing my studies, I saw a wealth of research opportunities for exploring and improving accounting education and I realised the synergy between becoming a great teacher and being able to share insights and innovations through publishing. I became so passionate about teaching and learning that I completed a PhD in the area.

Frank: I did a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education at the University of NSW. Teaching is one of the things that we’re here to do and I try to take a professional approach to my teaching, just as with everything else. I needed to know something more than just what you pick up by being thrown into a classroom. I also found it interesting from the point of view of being a student in a new discipline and that made me more aware of perhaps how our own students feel when they’re first being exposed to our disciplines. It’s not easy.

The other thing I found really helpful with the course was that it wasn’t about just techniques – it’s about a theoretical understanding of teaching and learning, so that in the end, I had a framework of thought within which to reflect on what to do to support my students.

Rosina: The most helpful aspect of completing the MHEd was that the instructors modelled and practised what they taught. I actually saw my teachers model ‘good practice’ by the way they conducted the sessions and I experienced what it was that I could bring to a classroom. The teachers emphasised that my learning would be driven by what it was I was looking for, so I needed to clarify my learning goals, the outcomes I wanted to achieve and how can we work together to learn and from each other. The course was very much based on theories and principles that I could put in place in my classroom and that was what was expected in the assignments. In fact, one of my first publications in accounting education arose from one of my assignments.

Frank: I did the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education here at the University of Sydney. This was a bit unusual as I was in my mid fifties and most were in earlier stages of their academic careers. I was motivated by the wish to combine reflection on my own experience with more formal study of the teaching and learning process. I found it very interesting, and so after I finished I decided to do a further year of study with the Faculty of Education and Social Work. It was a diploma course that included studying the psychology of learning, including learning styles and evidence of what makes for effective learning. The classes were full of high school teachers who were an odd one out – however Christine Crowe from the Faculty of Arts was doing the course too and she was a kind soul, which helped my motivation. I did consider going on to a Masters but felt I’d done enough – I was never planning to become a specialist in educational theory. For me it has to be linked to the ‘buzz’ of the classroom and the lecture theatre.

The impact of this study on my teaching was that it caused me to engage in a bit more experimenta- tion. One of the projects I did for the Grad Cert was about how to focus students on evaluating their own progress and others’ progress. I experimented with setting 3rd year undergraduate students to rank their progress early in semes- ter on a 1-10 scale and identify what it would take to improve that ranking – what would help them improve their learning. It was a small shift away from teacher-centred to student-centred learning. Instead of me telling them, the students came up the issues for themselves – although they mostly said ‘do more reading!’ We then did the same exercise later on in semester. The experiment reflected my interest in solutions focused brief therapy, a practice used in one-to- one counselling to get the person seeking help to focus on immediate goals. The scaling process is a tech- nique used to help a client take action to improve their situation by identi- fying the steps for themselves. I like to borrow ideas from other fields to create a more active student-centred learning environment.

Research – ‘Students are really interested in my research on teaching and learning’

Rosina: Over the years I’ve found that students are really interested in my research on teaching and learning, so I guess I’ve been using research-led teaching for a long time. I really like the idea of students having access to the research I do and exploring the research I do. Students seem to enjoy that I do research that supports their learning and they find it helpful that I do it in an informed way. I do as a researcher into my teach- ing. For example, I always thought that students’ negative perceptions of accounting really hinder their learning. As students come in with certain perceptions of what accounting is, they ‘learn’ in certain ways. If you think accounting is all about ‘number crunching’ then you don’t spend time on the theories, framework and the underlying concepts, because that’s not part of what you think accounting is. You don’t criti- cally evaluate it. So, over the years in week one of semester I have introduced some of my research on perceptions of accounting. I would start by asking the current students to answer their perceptions. I experimented with setting 3rd year undergraduate students to rank their progress early in semester on a 1-10 scale and identify what it would take to improve that ranking — what would help them improve their learning. It was a small shift away from teacher-centred to student-centred learning. Instead of me telling them, the students came up the issues for themselves — although they mostly said ‘do more reading!’ We then did the same exercise later on in semester. The experiment reflected my interest in solutions focused brief therapy, a practice used in one-to-one counselling to get the person seeking help to focus on immediate goals. The scaling process is a technique used to help a client take action to improve their situation by identifying the steps for themselves. I like to borrow ideas from other fields to create a more active student-centred learning environment.

Frank: Not many of my own pub- lications are about teaching, but I just got a paper accepted into the Australasian Journal of Economics Education. It’s about how the teach- ing of political economy contrasts with teaching economics, in terms of pedagogy and content. My argu- ment is that the changing curriculum (from orthodox economics to politi- cal economy) goes hand in hand with change in pedagogy. Political econo- my is more student-centred, particu- larly in the way it allows students to link their studies with their personal observations of the outside world. It’s a pedagogy that less textbook driven and more linked to personal experi- ence and observation. The problem with orthodox economics is that it has a very top-down content that is quite imperative to the diver- sity of people’s actual experience. It also conveys a certain politics that emphasises individual choice rather than collective concerns. My teach- ing aims to open student thinking to a broader view that takes in human needs and social progress — to provide an arena for competing viewpoints to all get a hearing.

Over the years I’ve also written articles for high school teachers of econom- ics, for example in the journal of Economics and Business Educators NSW. I got invited to give talks at in-service training courses for high school teachers of economics. I also got involved in reform projects in HSC economics syllabus, though I’m not sure my ideas had much impact! It’s important to link these into pre-university work, but they are often only worth doing as it’s the foundation of young people’s understanding of economic issues, so that they have a good foun- dation for university study.

Assessment Practices – ‘I got my first year students involved in identifying assessment criteria’

Frank: Assessment of class participa- tion has always been an issue in our discipline, and I imagine in other disciplines as well. So I got my first year students involved in identifying assessment criteria and we used self and peer assessment to come up with a way of assessing class participation and I think it worked well! We now accept because they see that it’s fairer.

Finding the balance – ‘I don’t regard research and teaching as separate activities’

Amani: How do you balance every- thing? You’re all achieved a lot in one year.

Patty: I’ve done some of my research with Diane Dancer from the School of Economics and Political Science. Diane’s been able to provide some really useful feedback on this in week one that concepts and theories are in fact important as this is what students from the last course said were important.
Frank: I don’t regard research and teaching as separate activities. My teaching wherever possible draws on examples from recent research, including my own. And my research and writing I regard as a process of teaching – trying to inform and educate my audience. I spend an enormous amount of time on expression – in the classroom and when writing, which I regard as a highly skilled process of communication of ideas. The nice thing about research publications is the allure of possibly communicating ideas more broadly within society. That’s exciting but difficult to achieve.

Patty: Well I guess the reality is that focussing on teaching leaves you less time for other research but what I’ve tried to do is make my teaching part of my research as well. I’ve had some success but I’m still a novice in the discipline of higher education. What I need to do is to team up with somebody who is an expert in the field.

Rosina: Conferences provide a wonderful opportunity to meet research collaborators. I was at a conference when Ursula came up to me and said: ‘I like your work’, and I said: ‘well I really like your work’ and we started working together. After years of turning up to international conferences, I was invited to speak at other conferences, invited onto editorial boards for international education journals. Being on editorial boards is really good because you’re reviewing papers all the time. I think that’s the way to go, attend conferences, meet people, and tee up papers and joint research projects with them. And pounds translate better into Australian dollars!

The Scholarship Index – ‘very positive for the University of Sydney’

Rosina: I think it is a terrific initiative – it is wonderful to be acknowledged and rewarded. Teaching and research are our primary activities so I think that rewarding scholarship in teaching adds to the credibility of this kind of research. More importantly, as we receive the funds we can do more work. You can’t do research without funds, so it’s one way of getting the funding just to continue the research.

Frank: That’s just a choice of our two schools, by the way. Some faculties do not provide the money right to the individual level.

Rosina: I believe it provides an incentive for others to do research on teaching if they know that they will get further research funds. I think that it’s really good that our Schools want to acknowledge this, as it signals that this research matters and the scholarship of teaching and learning matters. I’m very grateful for the support of both Schools for teaching related research.

Patty: I was able to use my funds to go to an international conference on the scholarship of teaching and learning. When other participants at the conference saw ‘University of Sydney’ on my name tag they were very interested to find out about what was happening at our university and what it was like to be part of a university that recognized and rewarded the scholarship of teaching. Until then, I had thought that because it happens at our university it happens at other universities too. It is something very positive for the University of Sydney.

Recent teaching and learning publications

Patty Kamvounias


Rosina Mladenovic


Frank Stilwell


For further conversation with Patty, Rosina, Frank and Amani about the scholarly outcomes of their research into teaching and learning, visit the online discussion forum at: www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/forum or email Amani at: A.Ahmed@econ.usyd.edu.au