Many events inevitably structure a faculty's ritual year: the succession of committee meetings, the start of teaching, the examination period. Teaching Days do not yet belong in the indispensable category. The practice of designating a specific annual date for discussions and presentations of issues surrounding pedagogy began at the Conservatorium in the late 1990s, the brainchild of the then Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching, Dr. Ross Gilbert. When I became Associate Dean in 2004, the mantle fell to me. I have now organized five Teaching Days and the event seems likely to remain an on-going part of the faculty calendar. So it's useful to take stock. What follows is a personal reflection on Teaching Days as a concept, faculty experience and organizational challenge.

Rationales
Teaching Days sound like a good idea. Within a faculty, the routine round of staff meetings, common room conversations and corridor encounters offer little opportunity for broad-based, collective discussions of pedagogy. A larger university culture that values research much more than teaching only reinforces the sparse attention likely to be paid to pedagogy for its own sake. Learning and Teaching Committees do constitute a more direct and even muscular engagement with the intricacies of faculty educational environments but they also represent a referral of responsibility by the larger teaching community to the few. Anyone sitting on such a Committee knows the challenges in transforming an agenda item on learning and teaching into an enduring aspect of life and culture within a faculty.

In two important ways, Teaching Days respond to these shortcomings in the tertiary education workplace. Most obviously, a Teaching Day creates a specific, structured occasion for public conversations about what is still, for many, a core business of the university. This is an emotional as much as an intellectual opportunity, since Teaching Days celebrate successful and creative teaching but just as legitimately also anatomise frustration or failure. This emotional elasticity gives Teaching Days a potentially special resonance.

But the opportunity to reflect on pedagogy is only part of the value of Teaching Days. Teaching Days also operate as counters (perhaps antidotes is better) to the corrosive disciplinary and administrative fragmentation that characterises faculties as institutions. By drawing together a cross section of staff – full and part-time, tutors and lecturers, administrators as well as teachers – Teaching Days initiate personal connections and knowledge transfers that do not arise from day-to-day patterns of encounter and exchange. Especially through linking a faculty's disparate communities of practice, Teaching Days can produce new group projects, fresher or more confident individual approaches to pedagogy and, ultimately, deeper understandings of what constitutes the elusive concept of faculty identity. In the balkanised corridors of any university, and especially in remote campuses like the Conservatorium, the value of this cannot be underestimated.

Timing
However appealing Teaching Day is as an idea, organizing the event can be hair-pullingly difficult. Not the least obstacle is fixing on a date. At the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM), Teaching Day takes place in late February, one week before teaching resumes. There is much to recommend...
this time of year. At the end of the long break staff are as refreshed as they are ever likely to be and still free of timetabled teaching commitments. For the organiser, this means increased leverage in persuading staff to present as well as attend. But, for some faculties, the event may be better located in either a mid semester or mid year teaching break.

Ensuring Attendance
The date is one hurdle. The effectiveness of any teaching day then depends on its capacity to not only generate attendance from numerous staff but also river participants to their seats throughout the proceedings. From some faculties come stories of Teaching Days where curious onlookers arrived for the first session and then promptly disappeared. The event is thus abandoned to the stalwart few who long before experienced a Damascus moment in relation to the value of teaching. This scenario haunts the organiser of such events.

At the Conservatorium, about 60 staff participated in the 2008 Teaching Day. In a relatively small faculty this is an achievement. To attract a satisfactory turnout, I urge at least some of the following strategies:

• Pay casual staff to attend. With mass teaching increasingly the province of part-time teachers, this is an essential recognition of the indispensable contribution of this group within most faculties.

• Shameless publicity. Frequent, weakly humourous reminders seem to have an impact, as does outright grovelling. As the day approaches I’ve resorted to emails such as ‘Be still your beating heart, the Conservatorium’s 2008 Teaching program is now available’, ‘Two sleeps to go’ and, one day before:

You thought it would never come, The 2008 TEACHING DAY starts promptly at 9.30am, tomorrow, Recital Hall West. Information, ideas, music, movies, passion... for years to come you can tell the world: I was there!

• Plan for less, not more. Given the time demands on continuing and casual academics, a full day listening to discussions of teaching is a large ask. The Conservatorium’s general sessions run from 9 or 9.30am to 1pm. The afternoon provides an opportunity for a small number of specialised sessions aimed at staff with particular incentives to attend.

• Active support from executive staff.

• A good morning tea. Frugality breeds contempt. As one participant commented after the Conservatorium’s culinary purse strings loosened: ‘The better quality morning tea produced better quality interactions’.

And, of course, success breeds success.

Only Connect: Content and other Useful Strategies for Engagement
Such incentives stimulate attendance but, on a number of levels, thoughtfully designed content patently adds to the allure. Topicality, for example, really counts. This doesn’t mean that larger university learning and teaching priorities should dominate the agenda. Rather, presentations work best when they connect directly with issues seen as critical to the particular pedagogic circumstances of a faculty. For all sorts of reasons, universities often promote outcomes-based, homogenising discourses concerning learning and teaching. It is precisely the opportunity to develop more nuanced and differentiated approaches to educational challenges that constitutes much of the enduring appeal of Teaching Days.

A provocative treatment of at least some topics also helps. To achieve this, avoid conceiving learning and teaching too narrowly. Well-intentioned discussions of such issues as assessment, feedback, IT and curriculum reform are important items on any Teaching Day program. But encompassing the more frankly political aspects of these and other teaching issues is also desirable. At the Conservatorium, such approaches can produce memorable and moving sessions. A 2006 forum titled ‘Casual Teachers and the Conservatorium: Can You be Casual and Belong?’ is the best example. Strategically designed to
increase part-time teacher attendance, this session also acknowledged one of the then most striking aspects of the Conservatorium’s educational workplace: nearly 70% casualisation. Not only did many part-time staff participate but the opportunity to publicly voice the casual experience resonated almost equally with full-time staff, some of whom spoke with galvanising eloquence. On a slightly different tangent, just asking casual staff to present can also produce unexpectedly positive results. After sitting on a Teaching Day panel one such staff member remarked, “this was the only time I ever really felt part of the Conservatorium”.

With specificity and controversy, sensitivity to diverse needs and interests is the most crucial consideration in constructing content. More than anything, variety can stimulate genuine engagement. This is certainly true in a highly compartmentalised faculty like the Conservatorium where teaching bifurcates into performance and academic areas and these fundamental divisions fragment, in turn, into instrument-based units, genres (like jazz), and the discipline divisions represented by composition, musicology, music education and general studies. Supporting this mix are teaching mediums that include lectures, tutorials, workshops, master classes, orchestras, small ensembles and one to one tuition.

There is also the spatial challenge of units taught in Macquarie Street and main campus.

Catering for this multiplicity is not, however, for the faint-hearted. Teaching Days need to move across a lot of different areas but in such a way that the various sections of the audience can draw from each session different but productive inspiration. This also means that presentations intended primarily to inform need the balance of deliberately controversial sessions, generic issues require leavening with much more specialized insights.

In packaging the latter, one of the more rewarding approaches is to reveal hidden areas of practice. Superficially simple sessions outlining what a particular teaching unit does or the aims, processes and tensions within specific programs can generate high levels of interest. The Conservatorium’s 2008 Teaching Day is an example of the attempt to interweave diverse perspectives. The program included sessions on: ‘21st Century Pedagogy or Innovation at the Conservatorium: Opportunity, Threat or Irrelevancy’ (a forum with 5 presenters); ‘Skills Education at the Conservatorium’ (a deliberately provocative session that questioned a number of faculty and university shibboleths); ‘The Secret Life of Units: Ensemble Laid Bare’ (another group presentation from members of a somewhat mysterious Conservatorium department) and ‘How Much Difference Can Culture Make to Teaching and Learning’ (a mix of autobiography and professional insight from three presenters).

As this program indicates, diversity extends to modes of delivery, excepting that ‘crisp and concise’ presentations should be a constant. No individual presenter should talk for more than 15 minutes. Otherwise, Teaching Days also benefit from the formulas drawn on by generations of conference organizers: attention to pacing, a mix of individual commentators and panels, a limited resort to discussion in small groups and a judiciously structured succession of multimedia moments. At the Conservatorium, for example, short film presentations (and an occasional PowerPoint) help sustain audience attention. Film also has one other value.
The Elephant in the Room: Representing Students

While there is considerable virtue in at least one annual gathering of faculty teachers for a bout of collective navel-gazing, teachers are only half of any learning equation. Yet integrating students isn’t always easy, especially in a small faculty like the Conservatorium where every student experiences the rare intimacy of a 1:1 teaching relationship. To ask our students to critique their learning experiences before an audience of their teachers is to ask a lot. When a flesh and blood encounter is too difficult to organize, a film can work well. Several years ago, I began filming interviews with students to screen at Teaching Day. One film asked the retiring Head of the Conservatorium Students Association to look back honestly on her experience at the Con; another interviewed students on the role of imagination in learning, another asked an international student about life and learning in Australia. Films work best if they give staff candid glimpses of the ways in which they are perceived and valued by students. It is significant that these interviews are often nominated as the best aspect of the program. Beware, however, of simply imaging what staff already know.

What to Avoid

While there are no hard and fast rules, evaluations of the Conservatorium’s Teaching Days reveal certain shared aversions which probably have applicability to other faculties. In general, Conservatorium staff prefer to avoid:

- **Outsiders.** Motivational speakers in particular. There is a strong desire by faculty members to own the event. As such gatherings are infrequent and of relatively limited duration it is much more important for faculty colleagues to reveal themselves as teachers than to be harangued, however charmingly, by experts.
- **Spin.** Staff welcomed philosophical and theoretical reflections but eschewed the sanguine, rhetorical window-dressing that sometimes flourishes in today’s corporate universities.
- **Policy detail.** This is seen as better left to committees or for individuals to pursue through documents on the net.
- **Long sessions from individual speakers and speaker over-runs.**

In Conclusion

Most years I evaluate Teaching Day. In the responses are phrases such as ‘worthwhile and fascinating’, ‘collegial and productive’, ‘innovative and inspirational’. One participant summed up: ‘Good mix: policy issues, practical information and encouragement, and something to reflection’. There can also be harsh comments—usually in relation to emphasis, program omissions, overlong sessions or softly spoken presenters. But of all reactions, the clearest is the pleasure staff take in the act of connection with one another and with other, little known areas of the faculty. In assessing value or benefit, perhaps the best guide at the Conservatorium is the universally expressed desire that Teaching Days continue. Personally, I would like to do more to maintain the interest and energy which is, at least some of the time, released. Organizing two successful events a year is problematic and too much to fit in with other, little known areas of the faculty. In a world in which reporting upwards on learning and teaching can seem more important that the activities themselves, it is easy to lose a sense of the visceral transfer of passion and enchantment that is involved in transmitting knowledges and skills. And also the sheer element of risk integral to committed and creative teaching. At their best, Teaching Days celebrate this while offering a meditation on the crucial role that individual institutional contexts play in constructing and then reconstructing the experiences of both learners and their teachers.

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