To teach is to touch a life forever…

Ilse Truter
Department of Pharmacy, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Prof Truter is the 2013 winner of the Johnson & Johnson Distinguished Teacher of the Year Award.

Teaching as a profession, and the profession as a business

Teaching is not a job, it is a passion. In its broadest sense, teaching can be defined as a process that facilitates learning. Similar to medicine and law, teaching was once regarded as a profession. A profession is broadly defined as an occupation, practice or vocation that requires mastery of a complex set of knowledge and skills through formal education and/or practical experience. Teaching is the specialised application of knowledge, skills and attributes in order to provide a unique service to meet the educational needs of individuals and society. Being a professional inherently also implies that a person chooses teaching not just as a mere job or a means to earn a living, but because he or she has the opportunity to make a difference to society and to fulfill a need.

In addition to providing students with learning opportunities to meet curriculum outcomes, teaching emphasises the development of values and ethics, and guides students in their social relationships. Teaching also employs practices which develop a positive self-concept in students. Although typically the work of teachers takes place in lecture venues and laboratories, direct interaction between the teacher and students is the single most important element in teaching. In addition, teachers require pedagogical expertise to develop academic programmes and curricula, facilitate learning and assess students who come from increasingly diverse social, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds.

But teaching in higher education today is a business. The total state subsidy for universities in 2012 was R20.9 billion. Student numbers in higher education in South Africa have nearly doubled the last 20 years to nearly a million students. Less than 50 000 full-time permanent staff is employed by South Africa’s 23 public universities. Approximately half of that number constitutes instruction and research staff. Our business is driven by full-time equivalents, and we write articles for journals that are accredited by the Department of Education so that our universities will receive a subsidy. We interact with society and business to obtain sponsorship and bursaries for our students. The higher education landscape is rapidly changing. Teaching has become a business. And a business requires leadership, possibly one of the most important weaknesses in South Africa currently.

The three pillars of academia in a dynamic environment

The three pillars of academia are teaching and learning, research and innovation, and academic engagement. I believe that it is not possible to be a good academic if you are not actively involved in all three aspects. Also, the three components should form a whole, meaning that the research must feed into teaching, which again should be applied to academic engagement activities, which again must feed back into teaching. I have chosen Pharmacy Practice as an area in which to excel, since it is a vibrant, exciting and dynamic environment. It is constantly changing and the challenges are endless. Also, it is the most exciting discipline within which to integrate the three pillars of academia.

The giants of the past

My journey from contract lecturer to full professor was an interesting one. Numerous fascinating and diverse people crossed my path. I am especially fortunate in that several pharmacy “giants” surrounded me as mentors. Firstly, there was Prof Jan Serfontein, promoter of my PhD in Pharmacy Practice. I regard Prof Serfontein as “the father of Pharmacy Practice” in South Africa. Secondly, there was Prof Ian Wiseman who introduced me and the rest of South Africa to the exciting research area of drug utilisation and pharmacoepidemiology. He had the vision and entrepreneurial spirit to establish the first research unit in South Africa in this field, the Drug Utilization Research Unit, which is still successful 20 years later. Thirdly, there was Prof Terry McCarthy, Head of the Department of Pharmacy when I started my BPharm degree, another “giant” who left an indelible mark on me as a young academic. Finally, there was Dr Theunis Kotze, a statistician with a vast knowledge of epidemiology, who gently coerced me into submitting my first manuscript to an international journal. Furthermore, I had the privilege of studying at two exceptional universities, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University [formerly University of Port Elizabeth (UPE)] and North-West University (formerly Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education). UPE allowed me to spread my wings and to explore academia to the fullest extent. North-West University afforded me
the opportunity of fulfilling a dream; a second doctorate based on
the submission of a compendium of research articles. I am proud
to be an alumnus of both these universities.

My teaching philosophy

My teaching philosophy is to empower students to become the
best that they can be by leading by example, providing them
with a stimulating experience in the classroom, and motivating
them to want to know more; in other words, not to become mere
pharmacists, but to become the best possible pharmacists that
they can.

I am not conversant with the full spectrum of educational theories
and concepts, but I follow some basic guidelines in my teaching:

• A teacher must know the subject matter well (without being
arrogant). The questions posed when lecturing should convey
the sense that it is not necessary for all the details to be known,
but that it is unacceptable not to pursue the answers. Therefore,
a teacher needs to be enthusiastic about the subject, as though
what is going on at that moment is the most important thing ever.
And a teacher must be lifelong learner and actively
participate in continuing professional development, both as a
pharmacist and as an academic.

• Effective teachers know that the world and students have
changed since they completed their under- and postgraduate
studies, and search for opportunities to address gaps in their
knowledge and ability. Therefore, they refrain from reading
the textbook that they authored 10 years ago to students, and
calling that a “lecture”. They take students on an educational
journey in the classroom during every lecture, explore new
knowledge and engage in challenging debates.

• A good teacher is always positive. Students do not want to hear
that a teacher does not earn enough money, has too many
students or too many meetings, is trying to satisfy unrealistic
expectations, or is burdened by an impossible workload.
Although these issues are real, good teachers believe that
today is the best day ever, and that tomorrow will be even more
promising.

• Good teachers know they cannot complete the work alone, and
that team effort is required. With the vast amount of information
available, it is more effective to work collaboratively, than
competitively, towards solutions.

• Good teachers focus on learning and are familiar with their
students’ levels of achievement. They know that some students
need more encouragement, while others require more
challenges. A good teacher establishes clear expectations so
that students know where they are, where they need to be,
and how they will get there. Students must be empowered to
achieve their personal best, and to appreciate respectfully that
not all of them are on the same level.

Good teachers display professionalism and are respected by their
peers, students and the community. They strive to make a positive
difference in, and have a footprint on, every student with whom
they engage, and the community and environment in which they
work.

Theory underlies what we teach, so students cannot become
good practitioners without a thorough theoretical grounding.
This must take place in the foundation years. Thereafter, theory
must be applied by means of case studies, scenarios, role play and
whichever practical learning styles are appropriate. A pharmacist
must be able to think on his or her feet, and this skill must be
learned early on. I use a lot of examples, pictures, stories and case
studies when I teach, because information is available everywhere,
but the real skill lies in their correct application.

Rutherford Rogers, a librarian at Yale, said: “We’re drowning in
information and starving for knowledge”. The skill to be a critical
thinker has become crucial, to know which knowledge is credible,
and the best way in which to apply that knowledge in practice.
I believe that we are successful if we can instil a sincere thirst for
knowledge in our students. Students want to be “entertained”
and challenged, and to be active participants, rather than mere
observers, in the classroom.

In conclusion

Academics need to learn how to navigate and undertake academic
responsibilities, not only within a society that is rapidly changing
technologically, but also within an ever-increasingly complex and
competitive higher education context.

The well-known Christian theologian, John Wesley, said: “When
you set yourself on fire, people love to come and see you burn”.
This is my message to all young academics. Let the passion for
pharmacy and teaching/academia burn in you. People will see
it, and they will draw closer to see what is happening. Too many
people just exist, and too few people live with a purpose and a
passion. As pharmacy academics, we have the opportunity to
leave footprints behind that will change lives.

I have chosen academia as a career because I want to make a
difference in society where I believe there is a need. I do not
want to merely perform a job, but rather to fulfill my calling. The
philosophy in my life is Carpe diem. Every day is a new opportunity
in which to make a unique difference and to fulfill God’s purpose
for my life.