Outstanding Teaching with Chika Watanabe

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Transcript

Hannah Cobb (HC): Hello and welcome to another one of our Faculty of Humanities Good Practice in Teaching podcasts. My name is Hannah Cobb and I'm the Interim Associate Dean for Online and Blended Learning and I'm really excited that today we're joined by Chika Watanabe from the School of Social Sciences. Chika won the 2021 Faculty of Humanities Outstanding Teaching Award. And so we've asked Chika to come along and join us today, just to talk a little bit about her outstanding teaching and to find out sort of what makes that teaching outstanding and the secret of her success. So thank you for joining us, Chika. Tell us what works in your teaching for you.

Chika Watanabe (CW): Well, thank you so much for having me. That's a hard question but I hope you'll talk to students as well to find out. I teach but also I've been the undergraduate director, and been involved in undergraduate programming for, you know, the last few years, so I know what students complain about. I know what students often like in classes. So I try to reflect that in my teaching, I suppose.

And one of the things the students like is to, well, one, not have 100% of the assessment to be one thing. So, in my classes I usually have a combination of assignments in a final assessment, usually an essay 75/80%, and then 20/25% be some other kind of task or activity. And lockdown was awful for all of us, but one of the things that came out of lockdown were some innovations that we had to do, but ended up being things that I will probably implement for the rest of my career. And one of them was the use of, for example, collaborative reading. So there's a software called Hypothesis. I have to confess I started out with a different software called Perusall, and to be honest, I prefer Perusall, but the university uses Hypothesis, which is completely fine. It's basically a software where students do the readings online and they make comments on their reading and they can read each other's comments so then it becomes this collective exercise, this collective experience. Students really enjoyed having the asynchronous space where they could share each other's ideas on the reading and they really, really like that. So I think that really created a sense of community of, you know; I mean it's online but you know, asynchronous during lockdown. I realized that it was actually something that students really appreciate and like to do, even now that we're back in the classroom.

One thing that I have done this semester is I've been reading a book called 'Ungrading'. And, you know, I think ungrading, it's an uphill battle, but one of the things that, you know… There were a lot of pedagogical suggestions in there and one of them was to create spaces for students, do a metacognitive, you know, thinking about their learning and I'm sure you

know, education experts will say, oh that's so obvious! but I have never really created that space in my teaching.

So at the start of semester, I did a survey where I asked first if any of the students would like people to be masked in lecture and or seminar and even if one person said, yes, I've asked everyone to mask, but included in that, I also asked, you know, how do you learn best? And I was really surprised that the majority of them, their answer was that they learned the best collectively or when they're working with other people. And this was really unexpected because I thought they were going to say, things like I learn visually or I learn if someone tells me in a lecture, I don't know, I just had other expectations. I just didn't expect them to say that they learn best when they're collaborating with other students. So that's really underlined for me the importance, of software like Hypothesis or, you know, other kinds of small group work, that I use that, that they would do. I teach primarily undergraduate students, so this is primarily for third year and I've done it with second and third-year undergraduate students.

I can say more about Hypothesis, because Perusall and Hypothesis or any other pedagogical tool, can't just be used. You can't put Hypothesis on your activities and that's all you do because that, I know some people who do that and that just doesn't work. I give marks for Hypothesis participation and I give them very specific criteria that they have to follow in there. For example, they have to make at least five comments. One of those comments has to be in response to a classmate's comment. So, this is the thing that Perusall did automatically. So Perusall would only give you high marks if you were interacting with each other and if you were making particular kinds of comments. Anyway, so you have to have some kind of pedagogical framework using these tools. You can't just use them without any, you know, stepped usage. But yeah, I think creating a space where students can collaborate and learn from each other is actually how they learn best, they tell me. And I enjoy that myself more.

HC: It's really good, it's brilliant hearing you, sort of talking about that, and that kind of collaborative process and creating those communities. I've also been reading about ungrading recently as well, it's so interesting. We can put some links below this podcast that will link people to things like Jesse, was it Jesse Stommel's work, or what was the book that you were reading about it?

CW: No, it's someone called Susan Blum, she's an anthropologist.

HC: I think there's a few people who've done some leading stuff and I know Susan Blum's the other person I was going to ask about. There's such interesting work and you mentioned before we were recording the podcast that you've been thinking about un-essays as well. It would be really interesting to hear about that as well, a little bit more.

CW: Yeah, so I teach this final year / MA combined module called The Anthropology of Development and Humanitarianism. And in this class students do a final essay. Actually I've changed that format as well, but anyway 75% is an essay, 25% is a small group task. And in this small group, they are divided into four groups. There are two seminar groups, and each seminar group is divided into four smaller groups. And each small group is about five students or so, five to seven students, and they all work together to produce a final product by Week 10. Then in Week 10 we have some aid workers come and visit the class- we've had people from the British Red Cross or Save The Children, a local legal advice organization for asylum seekers and so on. In these small groups students work together to produce a blog post or a lesson plan they've done in the past. But this year, because I've been thinking about the un-essay, I've asked them to produce "quote/unquote" exhibit piece and they have to also produce a text, so sort of like in a museum, you know, you would have a text that explains the conceptual art somehow. So they still have to write collectively, they have to write a 1,000-word text that explains how an anthropological concept or approach can help us understand a development or humanitarian issue better. So they write that post, but then they also have to produce an art piece. So they've created a video or they created… one group has made a board game about refugee resettlement and so on. So this is the sort of un-essay activity that that I'm experimenting it with this year. We'll see how, so far they've done, this is so much more exciting than reading just the text for me and I'm actually having them also write a self-assessment this week, it's due on Thursday. So I want them to reflect on their process of learning in the small group. So they need to write about the concept that the group engaged with, but also about their learning, what did they learn? What did they learn about their learning? So they have a little bit of required self-reflection that they have to do.

HC: That's really fantastic to hear about. I think if people aren't familiar with the concept of ungrading, I think, this is a very simplified overview, but basically, it's about taking grading out of the equation. So that students aren't looking to get the highest grades, they're looking to reflect on their learning. So it's something that's worked very successfully in the American system, whereas I think in the UK, it's much harder to implement. But it sounds to me, like, the way that you've got them to think and to reflect about their learning, take some of those kind of core principles of ungrading and really embeds that without dealing with the kind of grading side. I know that some of the things that, that the basis of your outstanding teaching award have been your alternative assessment and it really sounds like this kind of really thoughtful sort of engaging assessment is working brilliantly for you and for your students. It sounds fantastic.

CW: Thank you. I mean, I think for everything, whether it's alternative… but I think also with like standard essays and exams, which I think our department we need to do more of, is to really break it down and really build up the student's progression towards that final product.

So, you know, like I said with Hypotheses, you can't just roll out Hypothesis without any instruction. You can't just expect it to work, just by putting it up there. Same with an essay, you can't just say, here's the essay question, write. Right. And then, we assess them on that. And same with group work. You can't just say, like, here's a group project, do it, right? Like, you know, one of the things I really learned in HNAP (Humanities New Academics Programme) was someone… I can't remember who it was, but explained their small group project activity and they're really emphasize like you really need to have some individual mark component in it because students don't like it when it's just the group collective mark. So every year, even though the students do small group only like 60% of that is based on a collective mark, there's 20 percent based on the self-assessment which is an individual mark, 20% based on the Hypothesis mark which is basically like participation; but at least there's some element of individual mark in it. Because teamwork is hard. Someone does more work than others, usually, right? So at least there's some equity there. Then also students submit an informal peer assessment where they can tell me if someone hasn't been contributing that well, you know, and then I will reflect that in the individual marks a little bit potentially, depending.

HC: That's absolutely brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing all of these kind of different ideas. I think like having the space to sort of share these kind of good practices is so important. I love that you'd heard about it from someone on your HNAP and then it sort of fed into your teaching, which has led to your outstanding teaching, which is now feeding into this podcast and hopefully will be food for thought for others as well. It's really brilliant to hear all about that. Just sort of hearing about it, it makes so much sense why your students nominated you for this award, it sounds like there's some really sort of thoughtful and creative but also sort of challenging ways that you are approaching assessment and teaching and learning and creating that kind of sense of community. It sounds really brilliant. So thank you so much for sharing that with us. It's been really brilliant to hear about it. And good luck with the rest of the year and playing the board game.

CW: Yes, thank you very much.

HC: Thank you.

Links:

[Ungrading by Susan D. Blum (book)](#)

[Ungrading by Susan D. Blum (blog post)](#)

[How to Ungrade by Jesse Stommel (blog post)](#)