Focus

Driving to Discovery

By Michael Gibb

How many uses can you think up for a paper clip? You have three minutes. Go!


This correspondent managed 15, but at least one was possibly illegal (picking a lock), one of dubious taste (an earring) and another unlikely (a toothpick).

The paper clip test was one task creativity expert Dr Barry Kudrowitz set for attendees at a symposium in April on building the Discovery-enriched Curriculum (DEC). The two-hour session was a key event in a series of activities geared towards incorporating the two new foci of discovery and innovation into CityU’s overall curriculum.

Dr Kudrowitz, an assistant professor in the College of Design at the University of Minnesota, was using the paper clip game as an example of divergent thinking and spontaneous flexibility. Interestingly, he explained, studies show that children aged 3 to 5 are far more creative in their responses on such tests than adults are.

The symposium was a chance for CityU to hear more about Dr Kudrowitz’s highly specialised class on discovery and innovation at MIT where he earned his PhD in mechanical engineering with a thesis titled “Ha ha and aha! Creativity idea generation, improvisational humor and product design”.

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The inter-disciplinary Toy Product Design course encourages a diverse group of participants to conceive, develop, test and produce a new toy, in collaboration with local toy companies and children, the end-users. “To encourage innovation and discovery, we try to make the class immersive and active, making the experience as real as possible,” he said.

Past games created by the students, all presented at the end of the course to toy designers, engineers, children and the University of Minnesota community, have included Frubble, a bubble-making Frisbee; Blubbles, a megaphone that produces more bubbles when you yell louder; Safari Soakers, an elephant tricycle that pumps and sprays water from a posable trunk; Jules the Jellyfish, an illuminating jellyfish bath toy; and many, many more.

He said the course, which has attracted media attention in the US, might seem “extreme” to some. Dr Kudrowitz and his team dress up in lab coats, play music as the students enter and exit the classroom, and create an atmosphere more akin to a television show than a traditional lecture-based format.

“We try to keep the atmosphere playful to encourage greater levels of creativity,” he said.

The Q&A touched on ways and means of assessing and measuring creativity and cross-cultural and affective factors that might impinge on the introduction of some of the strategies Dr Kudrowitz presented.

The symposium, organised by the Office of the Provost, included talks by four CityU academics on their efforts to promote discovery and innovation in their teaching and their home departments and schools.

By way of a follow-up, Dr Kudrowitz and his team ran three half-day workshops aimed at enabling individuals and teams to think about how any of their current or planned courses can help promote discovery, innovation and creativity.
Hollywood’s treatment of extraterrestrial life forms is ingrained on the face of popular culture. From *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to *Star Wars* and *Men In Black*, audiences have been made to laugh, cry and quake in their seats at the prospect of encountering aliens.

But our acute interest in the possibility of life forms existing beyond Earth provides fascinating material for academic investigation, an area of study that Dr Joseph Wong Chung-kai (below), Laboratory Manager in the Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering, relishes.

“I used to belong to a UFO club and I found that the questions people asked and the ensuing discussions were intelligent and very interesting. That’s when I began my own research into this phenomenon,” said Dr Wong, the founder of the Hong Kong Institute of Ufology.

His extensive knowledge of ufology—an approach to understanding the plethora of reports and sightings associated with unidentified flying objects—has culminated in a significant contribution to an inter-disciplinary Gateway Education course titled “GE2307 Science, Fiction and the Supernatural”.

“In my portion of the course we look at definitions of terms used in ufology and consider the structure of our solar system and knowledge about space and time,” explained Dr Wong, who joined CityU in 1987 and is an expert in digital techniques for assessing building structural integrity.

“We review important UFO events and use scientific research methods to try to understand and learn from ufology,” he added.

Students taking the course learn about close encounters and sightings and ufology in history, art, popular culture, government projects and conspiracy theories.

Interestingly, Dr Wong observes, ufology is more mainstream than people realise. You can study for a PhD in astrobiology and exobiology, both of which are concerned with the study of the origin, evolution, distribution and future of life, at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, better known as NASA, and at several other universities in the US.

In addition, in the past few years, several governments around the world have declassified top secret files documenting thousands of sightings and alleged contacts with aliens.

Whether you believe in life beyond Earth is not the question so much as, how do we explain the hundreds of thousands of sightings worldwide?
When Mr Dean Fisher (right) won the Teaching Excellence Award three years ago, he knew exactly what he would do with the $150,000 teacher development grant.

“I wanted to help teachers at CityU by spreading good practice and by showing examples of how the use of ePortfolios can lead to the enhancement of teaching and learning,” said Mr Fisher, Associate Head of the English Language Centre (ELC).

The money was invested in publishing an 80-page booklet entitled *Integrating ePortfolios into Teaching and Learning: 10 CityU Case Studies*. It was put together by Mr Fisher, the principal investigator, Ms Hokling Cheung, Education Development Officer, and the ePortfolio team in CityU’s Office of Educational Development and General Education. The publication has been distributed to all full-time and part-time academic and teaching staff and senior management.

The plan is to hand the booklet out at international conferences that focus on technology and learning and to other higher education institutions in Hong Kong.

The case studies in the publication, written through extensive interdepartmental collaboration, suggest ways to integrate ePortfolios into the curriculum, detailing the benefits for students and teachers.

“An ePortfolio is a way of presenting yourself online, a multimedia environment of personal artifacts selected for a specific purpose from a personal repository or archive,” explained Mr Fisher, who joined CityU in 1998 and began researching ePortfolios five years ago.

“In an ePortfolio students can showcase their best work to present evidence of their expertise and accomplishments to a specific audience such as an employer or a teacher.”

The pedagogic advantages of the ePortfolio might not be immediately obvious, Mr Fisher said. There is usually a steep learning curve for everyone involved. But, he continued, the portfolios are effective platforms for reflecting on intended learning outcomes, exploiting technology for learning, and building up a body of work to show prospective employers.

“Our research carried out in face-to-face interviews with a number of different employers in Hong Kong suggests some employers are likely to look at a job applicant’s ePortfolio because it presents a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted picture of the student and his or her achievements, attitude and abilities,” he said.

A soft launch for the publication was held last month, and the team behind the project (left) plans to expand the message to the whole campus.

“An ePortfolio is only a tool and won’t magically turn you into a better teacher or learner. What will make you a better teacher is how you shift your pedagogy to include such a tool in your teaching,” Mr Fisher said.

For more on ePortfolios, visit [www.cityu.edu.hk/edge/eportfolio](http://www.cityu.edu.hk/edge/eportfolio)
We have all experienced it—the anxiety that comes with speaking a foreign language. Even the most accomplished speakers of other tongues on occasions get butterflies at the prospect of holding forth in a language they learned later in life. Issues such as self-identity, cultural knowledge, a host of cognitive and emotional processes and waxing and waning levels of motivation are enough to make anyone a bit fretful.

Fortunately learners of Putonghua at CityU are in safe hands. Dr Jackie Yan Xiu (below, 4th from left), Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics (CTL), is an expert in cultural identity and language anxiety. She is also the driving force behind the Putonghua Salon and the founder of Putonghua courses aimed at non-Chinese speakers at CityU.

“Many speakers of foreign languages feel that they are not really ‘themselves’ when they use the other language, and this can cause anxiety,” said Dr Yan, who obtained her PhD in second language acquisition, interpreting and translation studies and sociolinguistics at the University of Texas at Austin.

The Putonghua Salon is designed to reduce levels of anxiety as much as possible by creating a comfortable, friendly and easy-going environment in which speakers of all levels of proficiency can drop by to practise their skills. Some speakers there are nearly fluent; others, like this correspondent, possess just the basics.

“We focus on listening and speaking and employ a lot of games and activities designed by student helpers to encourage real communication,” said Dr Yan, who joined CityU in 2000 and set up the Salon in 2008. The participants, a mix of local and overseas exchange students plus members of staff, discuss set topics for each session, play games like charades, act out role plays and sing Mandarin songs.

“The student helpers add a lot of energy to the classes,” Dr Yan said.

The sessions run during semesters A and B and attract 20 to 30 people each week, complementing the more formal, credit-bearing Putonghua courses run by CTL, such as the long-running introductory course for non-Chinese speakers, which is particularly popular with overseas students.

The Salon is also a research exercise supported by the Teaching Development Fund and CTL. As the principal investigator, Dr Yan studies learner motivation, proficiency and attitudes, and also looks at the usage of Go Chinese, a software package for learning Putonghua.

“Learning another language is rarely easy but we hope the Salon offers a way of building confidence and making the whole process a lot of fun,” Dr Yan said.
The Human Resources Office organised a farewell party on 28 June for this year’s 14 retiring academic and administrative staff as a tribute to and appreciation of their long-standing contributions to City University of Hong Kong (CityU).

Professor Way Kuo, CityU President, Professor Arthur Ellis, Provost, Professor Paul Lam Kwan-sing, Vice-President (Student Affairs), Mr Gabriel Chan Sai-man, Chief Administration Officer, Professor Christian Wagner, Associate Provost (Quality Assurance), Ms Helen Leung Lai-wa, Director of Human Resources Office, and other heads of university administration attended the farewell party.

Speaking on behalf of Professor Kuo, Professor Ellis expressed his gratitude to the retiring colleagues. He also wished them good health and hoped that they would enjoy their retirement. Also, Professor Ellis invited the retiring colleagues to return to CityU often and visit their former co-workers. Finally, Professor Kuo and other members of the management proposed a toast.

Mr Godfrey Liu Kwok-fai, Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics, has been at CityU for 27 years. “When I first joined CityU, there were only four colleagues in our department. The courses we taught were far less varied than the ones offered nowadays. Today’s programmes keep changing to answer to the needs of society and our students now have a greater number of choices.”

He said he believed that education is not a tool but a series of intrinsic functions. A teacher’s primary duty is to convey important fundamental knowledge and then inspire students to explore further by themselves. Mr Liu likens his own retirement to “arriving at the destination and getting off the train” and the time has arrived for students to develop their own selves.

Mrs Jeanette Wa Liang Hsien-shau, Assistant Professor in the Department of Accountancy, has taught her subject at CityU for 24 years, bearing witness to each stage of CityU’s development. Her most unforgettable moment at CityU was when the institution was upgraded to university status. Although there were challenges, she swiftly adapted to the new teaching and learning environment, thanks to the support of her colleagues.

Mrs Lee Ho Siu-fun, Sports Attendant II of Student Development Services, has worked well with her colleagues for 20 years. They have all become a close-knit family. On the eve of leaving CityU, she said those she would miss most would be her long-time co-workers as well as students and alumni frequenting the sports complex. In her retirement, she plans to learn to use computers and do voluntary work, making her life more fruitful.

Other colleagues* who are retiring this year are: Mr Chan Ming-lim, Technical Officer, Department of Manufacturing Engineering and Engineering Management; Professor Kenneth Chan Shun-yuen, Department of Economics and Finance; Mr Kong Wai-yu, Labourer, Department of Physics and Material Science; Dr Leung Kwan-kwok, Associate Professor, Department of Applied Social Studies; Mr Leung Wai-chuen, Semi-skilled Labourer, Campus Development and Facilities Office; Dr Oswald Siu Tsun-pui, Principal Lecturer, School of Continuing and Professional Education; Professor Vijay Kumar Bhatia, Visiting Professor, Department of English; Professor Wang Huaiqing, Department of Information Systems; Ms Wong Shuet-ching, Semi-skilled Labourer, Campus Development and Facilities Office; Professor Oliver Yau Hon-ming, Chair Professor, Department of Marketing; Professor Zee Yun Yang, Visiting Professor, Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics.

(* Listed in alphabetical order of the English names)
Not long ago, a calligraphy show by the artist Dr Zee Chi-ching was held at the Run Run Shaw Library, coupled with a dozen calligraphy workshops, each of which lasted about one hour, with an eye to promoting calligraphic art. As one of those in charge, I was delighted to see the workshops attract a large number of participants—not only CityU staff and students, including overseas students on exchange programmes, but also senior citizens from outside campus. Some of them attended nearly all of the workshops, which shows people’s interest in calligraphy, despite the fact that the handwriting of most Chinese people is much poorer than before.

Over the millennia, the use of a writing brush to produce Chinese script evolved from a practical skill into an art form as treasured in Chinese culture as Chinese literature, a point expanded upon in my CCIV course “Chinese Calligraphy and Literature”.

The old Chinese saying “Characters and writing, headwear and clothing” denotes Chinese civilisation as a whole and implies that one’s handwriting gives one the cultural equivalent of personal looks. Today, computer typing is more commonplace and penmanship is hardly valued. Yet one’s handwriting, like one’s dress sense, is still regarded as reflecting one’s personality and cultural refinement, hence the saying “one’s writing, one’s person”, which I believe remains as true as ever.

For example, a teacher who writes well on the blackboard will win respect, and a job applicant who demonstrates attention to detail through neat handwriting on an application form will often impress. In my classroom, I notice that a lot of students try to produce their most beautiful characters for their own names.

In Hong Kong, few students have neat handwriting, but most are enthusiastic about calligraphy, particularly traditional couplets for doors or gates at Chinese New Year. The problem is often insufficient training.

One essential aspect of training is repeated practice. True, nowadays it is hard for Hong Kong students to practise copying model handwriting with a settled heart because of heavy schedules and the many temptations of this colourful world.

But such practice not only improves handwriting. It also cultivates temperament. If you hold your breath while copying the model, you will also encourage greater self-restraint and composure. Over time, calligraphy practice will nurture a more reflective temperament, making you more patient and attentive to detail. So the benefits one might reap from practising calligraphy reach far beyond handwriting itself.

Also, in my workshops, I notice that half the participants fail to sit properly. Many sit cross-legged; some lean to one side; some are bent flat on the desk. These habits are bad for writing, harmful to eyesight, and represent inelegant manners.

Confucius said a gentleman who wears his robe and cap properly and maintains a dignified appearance inspires respect, a point calligraphy students should bear in mind.

The response to the calligraphy workshops and the students’ interest in my CCIV course remind me I am not alone in my pursuit. The problem is we have insufficient space and time for more students to practise calligraphy.

I hope CityU can run more calligraphy courses and workshops to help the Chinese art of calligraphy survive – and prosper as well.
Building linkages across the planet

A scholar will earn himself considerable respect not only if he has scored notable achievements in his own field, but also if he has true zeal for promoting academic research and knowledge exchange with his peers.

Chair Professor Ron Chen Guanrong of the Department of Electronic Engineering is typical of this kind of scholar, a fact reflected in the international recognitions that he has earned throughout his career.

For instance, Saint Petersburg State University of Russia recently conferred on him a honorary doctorate, commending him for his outstanding achievements in scientific research and his remarkable contributions to promoting cooperation between Russian and the international scientific community.

Professor Chen has gained due recognition from the international scientific community for his pioneering work in laying a foundation for chaos and anti-control theories. In the early 1990s, while working at a university in the US, he met by chance a group of Russian scientists who were furnished with very advanced theories on chaos theory research. His interest aroused, so consequently he decided to work with them to organise an international conference on the advanced subject of common interest.

At that time, the US and other Western countries were rather reserved about academic exchanges with Russia, and vice versa. Undeterred, Professor Chen issued invitations to renowned scientists from different countries for a conference in St. Petersburg, with his academic calibre and position adding status to the event. That was in 1997 and five conferences have been held since then. During this period, significant academic exchange activities have been witnessed, especially among Russian, Chinese and US scientists, enabling Russian scholars to further closely cooperate with the international academic community.

Professor Chen is modest when he looks back over his endeavors, saying he has served only as a bridge and admitting that the honorary doctorate was somehow unexpected. Likewise, he was surprised to learn that he had also been awarded the Leonhard Euler Gold Medal by the Euler Foundation in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Professor Chen said that he sees it as a principle in life to contribute to the world by helping others in scientific research within his capacity, adding that the two special honours have inspired him to continue his zeal for promoting academic research and knowledge exchange with his peers.

Inter-disciplinarity is not just for academics. It seems mixing up individuals, groups, family members, staff teams and mixed staff/student teams is necessary in the modern world.

In the table-tennis competition, Mr Perry Kong Tat-fun, a new staff member, won the men's singles. He joined Campus Development and Facilities Office just six months ago. The competition was a lot of fun, he said, especially the final round. “As far as skill is concerned, my rival and I were more or less on a par with each other. So the outcome was not certain until right at the last minute,” Mr Kong said.

The badminton and table-tennis championship is part of Wellness March, a campus health initiative held annually. Other activities and events include lectures, workshops and outdoor activities such as sports. The overall aim is to help create a healthier and happier life for all.