



# Critical thinking makes students responsible people

## Awardee

Mrs. SETO-TAY Cheo Lian, Millie  
(Years of Teaching: 22 years)

## School

St. Paul's Co-educational College

## Teaching Targets

Secondary 4 to Secondary 7  
(Liberal Studies)

## Beliefs of Teaching

"Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember,  
involve me and I understand - this is my belief to  
help students think and apply."



# Interview with the Teacher

Liberal Studies offers a platform for studying various subjects to acquire a broad base of knowledge in many areas rather than in one particular area. It is thought to make students become well-rounded and generally better critical thinkers. Mrs. Millie SETO-TAY Cheo Lian, teacher at St. Paul's Co-educational College and one of the awardees of the Chief Executive's Award for Teaching Excellence, couldn't agree more.

"It's an assortment of topical issues affecting day to day life. It gives the learner a rudimentary knowledge of those issues which may help them enrich their general knowledge as well as have a better understanding of other subjects."

To learn is to think. Mrs. SETO claimed herself as a facilitator in helping her students construct in their minds the basic ideas, principles, theories that are inherent in that topical content, then students could effectively use those ideas, principles, and theories as they become relevant in learners' lives. "What I do is to keep them on the same track of thinking without pinning down my opinions at the very beginning," Mrs. SETO added.

**Free one's mind by critical thinking**

As a responsible teacher, Mrs.

SETO cultivates critical thinking at every stage of her students' learning. "There may often be some controversial issues, value judgment, or environmental concerns which need to be taken care of."

"Therefore I can't jump to my own opinions straight away. I'd rather suspend my judgement and let myself adapt to what they feel and think throughout a lesson." Her awarded lesson plan "Dating and Marriage", for instance, exemplifies such significance.

"Our society has come to an age of internet love, which our past generations never came across. On the other hand, a marriage is a life decision. These are the reasons I brought up the topic. And most importantly, I have passion in this subject with a persistent hope of preparing my students to become responsible citizens in the future, as the decisions they will make when they grow up often involves a lot of conflicts and absurdities in the society." Mrs. SETO, therefore, has proven that schooling provides an excellent opportunity for students to form a rationally-thinking mindset, which would in a way help them testify the influence around them.

In her lesson plan of "Dating and Marriage" in the human relationship module, Mrs. SETO admitted that she would need to step into her students' world while following the syllabus. She would let herself get to know more about what pop songs or love songs they are listening to, what they are watching and reading, as well as observing their colloquial languages to design a role-play



Having Mr. Rene APPELL, the coach of Ms. LEE Lai-shan, to share his experience with our Liberal Studies students.

module. In return, students' participation has been heightened.

"Throughout our discussion, we took into account looks, age, marital status, education background, ethnicity, characters etc. I led them to weigh the importance of these criteria among those mate-matching advertisements from the newspapers and find out the reasoning behind their choices." Such dynamic interactions have benefited both the students and Mrs. SETO in a positive way.

The global warming phenomenon is a hot issue around the globe, which also aroused Mrs. SETO's interest to share with her students as an example within the environmental issue module. "I was honoured to be invited to meet the former Vice-President of the United States, Mr. Al GORE when he was in town in September last year and so I brought along my students upon our Principal's approval. I think it's a golden opportunity for students to meet the real person and talk about the real issue." Mrs. SETO further stressed that her adaptation of "out of the box" methods tend to introduce her students to a whole



new world by meeting different people from all walks of life. Another example is the relocation of government headquarter to the Tamar Site. "By showing them around, it's great to train up their interview and interpersonal skills."

An alternative teaching method would be taking her students out for excursions, as Mrs. SETO emphasised. "For instance, I've taken them to Mother's Choice when we discussed about the possible outcome of unconscious lust among teenagers, where I led them to think about the issues relating to value judgement from parents, peers and teachers."

### Down the road

"I've been teaching Liberal Studies as a subject since its launch in 1993, and our school integrated it with English as a useful tool, since many topics are indeed from the media source," she said, "so they are all issue-based. We chalk and talk. I just train my students to step into different stakeholders' shoes to form different perspectives. Simply put, I lead them in 'how to think' instead of 'what to think'."

"We design scenarios that occur. In the past, most students would rely on teachers in providing information, where nowadays they are encouraged to conduct their own research, data analysis and form their judgements thereupon, since there are strictly no set answers."

Mrs. SETO aims at incorporating current social issues in designing teaching materials and learning activities that suit her students' ability.

By doing so, substantial preparation is unavoidably necessary. Yet, though swamped with numerous projects from time to time, Mrs SETO's succeeded in overcoming the difficulties and thus strengthening the subject by craving a long way. "Initially there were only two modules for Secondary 6 and 7 and now it's become six modules for Secondary 4 and 6." She is teaching students as well as equipping other novice teachers for the subject to face the upcoming change in 2009.

### Sharing the fruits

"Sharing my thoughts and past experience with teachers would help Liberal Studies to develop, blossom and ultimately benefit both teachers and students, since I tend to think even though teaching materials may change, the focus identified with the issues won't."

Asked in what way students would be benefited from taking

Liberal Studies, Mrs. SETO said in general students would be keeping abreast of the latest news, improving project management skills, which she needs to sit down with them and guide them through. But most importantly, their enhanced communication skills are definitely an asset.

Given the nature of the process, critical thinking is never final. One arrives at a tentative conclusion, given the evidence and based on an evaluation. However, the conclusion must always be further evaluated if new information comes to hand.

"It's a combined subject intended to provide students with general cultural knowledge, provided as an element of a more specialised, technical, or vocational course at a school or college." Mrs. SETO concluded, "You'll be exposed to many new ideas and develop an interdisciplinary perspective."



*As a facilitator, Mrs. SETO's role is to serve as a catalyst in the process of learning.*



# Teacher's Sharing

An old adage states: "Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand". This is the essence of my belief in education – to help students to think and apply. This is what makes me passionate about Liberal Studies. I believe we are living in a "knowledge-explosive" world, it is important to teach students how to think and not teaching them what to think. This process does not happen automatically in the classrooms. However, an effective Liberal Studies teacher makes this happen. My approach in class is to be a facilitator; to require students to ask appropriate questions not merely to answer them; to gather relevant information efficiently and to creatively sort through the information found and not be spoon-fed; to reason logically and come to a reliable and trustworthy conclusion about himself and the world he lives in and not just to agree with me, his teacher. This may not be what students are comfortable with at the beginning but I should be consistent and persistent in developing such a mind shift in the thinking of students. Hence a Liberal Studies teacher should not be intimidated by questions. She is not supposed to have all the right answers. But she is also part of the process of learning and enquiry. The pursuit of students' questions and interests is valued.

As a facilitator, my role is to serve as a catalyst in the process of learning. The issue dealt with may be a controversy (Should the Government Headquarter be

relocated to the Tamar site?), a concern (To what extent could the air pollution be reduced in light of the existing Pearl Delta Development?) or a value-judgment type (Should sex education be taught in schools?).

For controversies, the students need to understand the arguments for and against; for concerns, to offer solutions; for value judgment, to clarify and commit to proper high-level values. Therefore, very often the solutions are usually open-ended or divergent. It is essential that I must be flexible, adaptable, and open to different opinions especially those, which differ from mine. Sometimes I have to suspend judgment, tolerate ambiguity, respect different views and be sensitive to the needs of students in order to generate an open atmosphere of learning. It also means trusting and being patient with students as they solve the problems. On the other hand, this does not mean that I am without convictions, opinions or answers but like a rudder, I need to lead students to strive for logic and validation in their arguments rather than implanting my own stance. This dialogue helps students to construct their own knowledge, develop core values and have ownership of what they have learnt.

Making use of current issues or life events can help students appreciate the interconnection among the different disciplines and the multi-perspective nature of the subject. The teacher's task is not simply to teach, but to create powerful contexts for learning.

Allowing 'real people' e.g. a Legco member / NGOs and 'real situations' e.g. visiting Mother's Choice be incorporated into the lesson plans can make a difference in the thinking and perceptions of the students. As an effective teacher, I need to act as a bridge, connecting the current thinking of the issues to the student's life. I need to be up-to-date with the current issues and problems to help students become better informed, interested in and concerned for the society in which they live. What I can and should do is to provide opportunities for students to transfer and apply their knowledge to new situations.

A recent example is when the former Vice-President of the United States, Mr. Al GORE, was in town to promote his global warming cause and his movie "An Inconvenient Truth". Some students and I had the privilege of meeting and interacting with him and various green groups in Hong Kong. Such an experience helped them visualise, understand, reflect and construct their own convictions on issues of global concerns.

However such endeavours will only be meaningful when there is sufficient prior knowledge and understanding of issues by the students. In other words, there must be first a foundation before a building can be erected. This foundation can be established by direct transmission of knowledge, which will be the first step. If done appropriately, this primary step can also enhance the preparedness of the students by widening exposures to related fields that might be



*Game booths organised for Secondary 1 students by Secondary 6 Liberal Studies students.*

important for the topic. The wider the foundation, the more likely will there be innovations and ideas, just like the building of "scaffolds" around the edifice erected.

For teachers, a thorough understanding of the curriculum and identification of relevant concepts of issues helps devise the Liberal Studies teaching strategies. Given the wide range of pedagogical aims, there is no one pedagogical approach that can fit all the requirements. Depending on the issues, appropriate activities such as role-plays, debates, brainstorming, mind mapping, discussion and simulation exercises are used to provoke critical thinking. These would promote enquiry, research, problem solving skills, communication skills and co-operation among students. Students with different abilities and strengths can be assigned to different kinds of activities.

### Learning outcome of students

When students actively seek out knowledge rather than receive knowledge; when they draw conclusions, form generalisations through induction and deduction; when they make observation or application of principles, their curiosity is aroused. They look forward to learning; they raise questions; they take calculated risks; they display appropriate skepticism; they ponder observations and confer with others. This motivates them to learn and retention from enquiry learning is superior to that from most other learning strategies.

Moreover, the highly personal involvement contributes to feelings of self-worth.

This process and outcome is most evident in project writing where students set their own project titles. The ownership of this research makes them seek resource materials; collect and categorise information; set questionnaires; conduct a survey or interview; compare and contrast findings; cope with difficulties and finally making "sense" through evaluation. The students begin to differentiate between opinions and facts and act in a level headed and not emotional way. They begin to understand and perceive problems from different perspectives. Students collaborate, cooperate and learn to meet deadlines. They are driven to investigate and to stretch themselves. This inevitably leads to success.

One result of such research project success is the excellent achievements of the students participating in the Chinese University Social Studies Project Competition. They have won every competition since their first entry in 2000, apart for the year 2005 when there was no competition. According to Dr. Stephen CHIU of the Sociology Department, the standard of the students' work is consistently of tertiary level. Such success builds their self-esteem.

In collaboration with other related subject departments, students are taken overseas such as to Singapore and Thailand. At the recent Harvard Model Congress Asia Conference 2006 held in

Bangkok, the students participated in a government simulation conference, where they were assigned the task and role of a specific senator or congressman or judge; or role played being members of international committees like the World Economic Summit, to debate and negotiate. They had to understand, research and play their roles even though sometimes they might not have the same convictions. They had to learn the different procedures the formal setting of the United Nations Building at Bangkok. This year they interacted with other participating students from Canada, Mexico, India and the Middle East.

The learning outcomes of Liberal Studies students are rich and varied. They not only apply what they have learnt in the classroom but later in their undergraduate studies. With maturity, they begin to realise the seeds planted in the Liberal Studies lessons are effective in their adult life.

### Inspiration obtained from teaching practice and how it affects my professional development

Liberal Studies will never be a "stale" subject. It is always fresh, buzzing with the latest happenings in local and world events. This leads to experimentation with new ideas as a way to promote professional growth. Discussions with my colleagues on how students learn how to learn also generates new ideas and gives me the impetuous to try new activities.





*Developing communication skills through group discussion*

## Summary of Assessment

**Effective use of current social issues closely related to students to develop tailor-made teaching materials, which helps nurture students' critical thinking and enhance their civic awareness**

Collaborating with my colleagues to plan our teaching, bouncing ideas from them, getting feedback from colleagues after a lesson observation can open my mind to new considerations and motivates me to keep moving ahead. In our school, we have common free periods allocated among the teachers to identify overarching concepts; design lesson plans and work out the action plans for the future New Senior Secondary Curriculum. It is this interaction of "iron sharpening iron" and seeing students mature and blossom that will keep the passion of teaching Liberal Studies alive in me. A wise teacher once told me "Don't be the sage on the stage, be a guide from the side" - being a Liberal Studies teacher allows me to be just that!

### Way of Access to Information of the above Teaching Practice

[www.spcc.edu.hk/family/en\\_achs.php](http://www.spcc.edu.hk/family/en_achs.php)

### Preferred Way of Dissemination Workshop

### Contact

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Mrs. SETO has a clear understanding and good mastery of the curriculum objectives, philosophy and teaching strategies of Liberal Studies. She is good at incorporating current social issues when designing teaching materials and learning activities that suit her students' ability. Through facilitating students' discussions on various social issues, she enhances their civic awareness and sense of responsibility. When designing the curriculum, Mrs. SETO adopts an enquiry approach by encouraging students to explore and discuss local and international issues which are controversial, of public concern, or related to value judgment. Mrs. SETO places great emphasis on nurturing students' critical thinking and helping them become socially responsible citizens who are committed to contributing to the society.

Mrs. SETO actively encourages her students to participate in activities and competitions outside the school to widen their horizon and enhance their self-confidence. Since 1999, with her encouragement and guidance, students have been participating in the annual event of "Social Studies Project Competition" organized by the Department of Sociology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. They have obtained high achievement in the competition with some of their reports rated as reaching the standard of tertiary level. Also, Mrs. SETO took students to overseas exchange learning tours. For example, she accompanied students to participate in the 2006 Harvard Model Congress Asia Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand, in which students played the roles of members of parliament, judges, representatives from other countries, etc. They then made use of what they had learnt about data collection, collation and analysis, the skills used in debate and negotiation, etc. to conduct a debate with participants from other countries on various international issues.

In a Secondary 6 lesson observed, which focused on the topic "Dating and Marriage" under the unit of "Interpersonal Relationship", the teacher firstly used a few love songs to introduce the theme of the lesson and effectively aroused students' learning motivation. During the follow-up discussions, she guided her students to find out the concepts of love from the lyrics of the love songs and successfully stimulated them to examine their own attitudes towards love. Subsequently, she distributed mate-matching advertisements extracted from newspapers and then asked students to discuss in small groups to explore the different expectations and values on love, marriage and relationships between the two sexes, as demonstrated by people of different sex and age. In the discussion and presentation, students were serious and willing to express their views. The dynamic interaction among students themselves and between the teacher and students showed that students are familiar with this kind of activities in their daily learning and have developed the related skills needed for discussion and presentation.