



Timo and Katerina: Talking About Teaching

The ANU [Centre for Learning and Teaching](#) (CLT) presents “*In Conversation With...*” a video series which seeks to pair two academics from different parts of the ANU campus and different stages of their careers. View the videos and the [whole series here](#).



Dr Timo Henckel (left) is a Senior Lecturer of Economics and a Research Fellow in the Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis.

Professor Katerina Teaiwa (right) is Professor of Pacific Studies and Deputy Director - Higher Degree Research Training in the School of Culture, History and Language.

View the video [here](#)

Transcript below

Katerina: Hi, Timo. I'm Katerina.

Timo: Hi. I'm Timo as you've just said.

Katerina: Lovely to meet you.

Timo: Likewise, and congratulations on your award.

Katerina: Thank you. Congratulations to you too.

Timo: Thank you.

Katerina: What do you teach at ANU?

Timo: I teach economics all the way from first year undergraduate to graduate as well. My main field is macroeconomics, so I'm interested in the big picture questions. How does unemployment come about? Why do we have business cycles? How do economies grow? Environmental concerns associated with economic growth and those kind of questions.

Katerina: Nice.

Timo: What about yourself?

Katerina: I teach Pacific island studies at the ANU. And I have been teaching here since 2007. I don't know about your trajectory through ANU, but mine is a little bit different in that I was hired to actually establish the first program in Pacific studies at the ANU, the first teaching program. So it was building it from scratch. No undergraduate had had the opportunity to sit in a class, focused on the Pacific. I had to convince a lot of big researchers who'd been doing things in their own way for maybe a couple of decades to step into an undergraduate classroom.

Timo: So you were up against ANU admin right from day one, that's-

Katerina: Admin, researchers.

Timo: Habits.

Katerina: Habits, concepts about students and academics and the divide between them. And it's interesting that we're in the Coombs Building because the Coombs Building was this space where a lot of high level prestigious researchers would do a lot of really interesting and important work on the Pacific. And this is where we started with that undergraduate program. So we had to gather over 30 academics together and have a conversation about how we were going to create undergraduate courses and how we were going to do it across all of these different disciplines. So there were the anthropologists, there were the linguists, there were the archeologists and the natural historians. There were the regular historians. There were gender studies folks.

Timo: There were economists in this building too by the way.

Katerina: There were economists, but there were ... I think we had one really prominent, wonderful economist of the Pacific, who was actually from Fiji at the time. And so he was part of the conversation as well. Gathering all those folks together, not only did I have to imagine what kind of class will I teach about the Pacific, but how am I going to make it work in a program that is potentially delivered by all of these other folks who are going to be trying to translate their research into undergraduate pedagogy, et cetera. And I have to say it was quite challenging. When I say today I'm teaching Pacific island studies at the ANU, it's kind of been a journey to get to the flavour of the kind of Pacific studies that we teach here now. So yeah, and it's very interdisciplinary.

Timo: That's good and modern, right?

Katerina: Yes.

Timo: A lot of teaching anyway, I think is a process of trial and error as you probably would've experienced, right? You don't know exactly where you're going to end up and what works and what doesn't work, and there can be what you think are great innovations that actually don't work very well and much smaller innovations that actually have much more of an impact. Is that your experience from-

Katerina: Yes, there was a lot of trial and error. And in fact, I'd already tried out a few things because before I came to ANU, I was teaching as an assistant professor at the University of Hawaii. And I'm naturally a really creative person. I have to bring something creative into every research project, every teaching opportunity and classroom. And when I would try creative things with certain groups of students, it sometimes backfired tremendously because people expect a certain kind of structure.

When they go into a classroom, they want to know what the expectations are and they particularly want to know how to get good grades. I come from a background where I've always questioned and critiqued different kinds of classrooms. And if I don't feel there's any passion or creativity or care or transformation in it, I try to throw out the book and I try to do it in my own way.

Sometimes that doesn't work with students and you have to employ different kinds of techniques and evidence to convince them that this is a good way for us to embark on our teaching and learning journey. There was quite a bit of that when I taught my first class at the ANU. And what I would do is I'm also big on documenting everything, so I'd always get students permission to like, okay, let's take a photo together. And if they're doing some activities, can I do take a photo?

And I would just keep documenting this class as it would grow and change and transform throughout the years. And then I would show them the previous group. Just our class, I'd say, "Okay, this is the group before, and this is what they did with what we learned." It was sort of this research led teaching kind of approach where the evidence for the next cohort became what the previous cohort did.

Timo: That's very clever. That's good.

Katerina: So yeah, that sort of worked to get the creative elements kind of embedded into the curriculum and for people to be convinced about it. But then I also brought in models from other Pacific studies classrooms around the world. So some of the best teaching is in New Zealand, for example. So my own sister, my elder sister led an amazing Pacific studies program at Victoria University of Wellington. And a lot of her learnings, her pedagogies, her techniques have been incorporated into my classroom and reimagined for the Australian context.

And then she took some learnings from other Pacific studies classrooms. Now when I teach my students, not only do I show them previous cohorts, I show them classrooms in other countries as well. I'm like, "This is this group and they're in Wellington and they're learning some of the same content, but this is how they're doing it differently." A lot of what I do is highly contextualised and placed geographically, institutionally, et cetera. And then I kind of triangulate and articulate that with a more generic global approach. So is that similar or different from how you teach your economics?

Timo: Sounds like you put a little bit more thought into the process ex-ante as I do. That may be for a couple of reasons. I think part, I assume that your classes are much smaller than mine.

Katerina: Yes.

Timo: I'm dealing with large classes. So that invariably limits the choices I have. And I find that one of the frustrating aspects about my teaching, because I remember several years ago when I had a small second year honours course with only 12 students, I was able to do quite different things and really enjoyed it. And I think the students enjoyed it as well. So that does put some serious constraints on how I go about convening my course. What you said about some innovations appealing to some students and not to others certainly rings true.

For me, what's really important is I always see my mandate not just about imparting knowledge and understanding, but also motivating the students and getting them excited about the subject matter, especially because I teach a few introductory courses, both at the undergraduate and the graduate level. For me the motivation aspect is a really important one. And so I think a lot about, well, what motivates me and that's the spark that I want to project over to the students. And for me, economics really is about caring. It's about making the world a better place. It sounds a bit romantic perhaps.

Katerina: It does for economics.

Timo: Exactly. But that's precisely what ... I don't want students really to come in there and think this is the course I'm going to take so that I can end up becoming a CEO at Goldman Sachs and make lots of money. And maybe that's overly prejudiced or opinionated on my part, but I bring that out pretty early and I think that it's a social science and it's about caring. It's when you talk about unemployment, it's not just a statistic, but these are people who are suffering and that is why we care about it. That's why we want to think about policies to avoid that hardship, economic growth, right?

It's not just so that the rich can become much richer, but let's think about the bottom end and how we can lift their living standards. Because that to me matters much more than the rich becoming richer. More recent issues such as inequality, which are issues that students really care about. You find out early on that those are the kind of topics they pick up in the media. And that's partly what motivates them to take economics if that's their choice of topic and degree.

The problem is that the introductory courses, for example, are often taken by students who are not economics majors. In fact, in the first year courses, it's less than 20% of the students who are actually economics majors. So you have to reach those students as well. And if I can at least get them to care a little bit, to get them to come to the realisation that economics is perhaps not as cold hearted as most people think, but that it is a meaningful way to think about the world and to also solve some ... yeah, or think about some serious problems. Then I feel like I've achieved a fair bit already.

Katerina: That's so interesting. Especially when you talk about kind of reframing these ideas about economic growth and who that benefits. That's really interesting from a Pacific studies perspective, because I come from a particular kind of critical genealogy of thought in Pacific studies that is particularly critical of economic growth and of the concept of development.

For example, when you're talking about lifting people up, right? So there's an assumption that they are not up, they are down. And so the criteria for what constitutes under development is a core part of Pacific studies in that our very first exercise is a reframing exercise. Meaning what constitutes a state of deficit and who defines this

deficit. Going back to, for example, when development became a thing, like a postwar, 1940s. And suddenly the whole world was underdeveloped and it had to be developed, that had such a massive impact on the Pacific in that suddenly everyone was underdeveloped and didn't come from a context in which what they already had for thousands of years was meaningful and significant

Timo: It became very clear in the language when they referred to first world and third world, right?

Katerina: First world, third world.

Timo: Yeah, exactly. There was a clear.

Katerina: Everyone else in the middle.

Timo: Yes.

Katerina: Yeah. So that actually is part of the motivation and inspiration for the brand of Pacific studies that we teach. Because we start from these ideas that you have to flip the dominant concepts of scale of power, geopolitical, economic, social, cultural power. All of those things have to be questioned and challenged so that we can come to a more nuanced perspective of what constitutes a better life or wellbeing or any of those things. Because it seems to be like with climate change, development got us here.

Timo: Yes. I'm totally with you on the critical approach to economics, and I try to bring that in. Again, I'm somewhat hamstrung by the need to teach certain core methodologies and approaches. I mean there is a certain canon in economics. But what I always try to do is teach the students that they do not just swallow that canon without assessing it critically and thinking seriously about the assumptions that go into the models, for example, and how the outcomes of those models actually depend on those assumptions.

We often say that economists suffer physics envy. They've got this hubris among the social scientists that their science is better and more serious and more scientific than all the other sciences. And I try to alert the students to the danger of this. And so early on just last week, for example, we had an introductory course where we just talk about measurement, measuring economic variables and how laden that approach already is if you focus on GDP as a measure of wellbeing. We talk about what the limitations are.

Even if you think it's a measure of material wellbeing, constrain it to that by virtue of what's counted and what's not counted, how it can be gender biased, regionally biased, all those kind of things. I do try to alert the students to that so that at least they can in a way make up their own mind and develop that critical mindset which I think is really important. Because ultimately I think what makes a good economist is not someone who's got command of all these technical models. And as you know, it becomes quite technical and mathematical. But a good economist is someone who has good judgment. Someone who is able to understand in what context a model is appropriate and in which context a model is not appropriate, so that they don't just are given a hammer and everywhere they see a nail and they use that hammer, but they can be more nuanced as you said, and more discriminatory in their application of the models.

Timo: And the only way that works is by really understanding the models sufficiently well. So they don't swallow it, hook, line and sinker. But they think about the assumptions and think through how those assumptions actually apply. And of course with that goes good understanding of the real world as it actually is. It's not just some ivory tower stuff, but they need to connect it to the data and the real world and understand the limitations of the data as well, as I said earlier.

Katerina: Yeah. I think I take similar approaches, but I think about those methods or those tools in terms of a toolbox or a tool kit, so that I encourage students to appreciate that it is important to sort of have a depth of understanding in certain methods and things. But it is also okay to take tools from different traditions, schools of thought, disciplines and non-academic contexts and non-academic knowledge systems as well, and combine them and put them all in that toolkit together.

And then to think about going out into the world and trying to see things from all of these different, multiple perspectives at the same time. We talk a lot about the differences between disciplinary knowledge, interdisciplinary knowledge, multidisciplinary knowledge, and trans-disciplinary knowledge, and try to understand when and in what context and in what moment it's useful to take which approach.

And we've kind of decided in Pacific studies that mostly it is the trans-disciplinary and maybe something as complex and challenging like climate change gives us that space to know that if you just took one approach, one method, one box, even if it was the scientific one, you would not solve the challenge associated with climate change. I appreciate those ideas and those approaches. But what I try to do is get students to think in this really multi-sighted, multi-sopic, multi-scaler way, whenever they approach a real world kind of situation.

If you had something in front of you, you were out in the world, I don't know you were in a shop or you were in a mall or something, you would be able to have multi-sensory vision around it. And we use a lot of metaphors that are drawn from indigenous Pacific knowledge, where we have ancestral figures who are able to do that sort of thing in a real way and effect change, transform things, influence things, et cetera. But it's a matter of kind of knowing what to employ and when, and being contextual at the same time.

Timo: Can I try to put that to completely different words?

Katerina: Yeah.

Timo: I'm trying to see whether that actually is able to build a bridge a little bit to what I'm trying to do. Mainly that is for me as one of my high school teachers who I've always revered said, "Knowledge in itself is meaningless." Knowledge is useful to us or has meaning when it's somehow ... well, it has to be imbued with meaning, right? So there is a certain emotional component. You have to care about it. You have to somehow be able to put it into context perspective. Is that essentially what you're trying to do is to bring the human aspect into it, as opposed to ... And being human of course has many dimensions, right? Emotion being an important one.

I don't think any knowledge exists without the human perspective in that we only know as humans what we know. Even science, even our science is constructed by us. So there is no kind of knowledge system outside of the human because we only know what we know. My assumption is always that everything is human. Economics is human. Physics is human. Because a dog will experience physics differently from a human. We only know what we know through our construction of a knowledge system for physics.

I don't feel like I have to introduce the human or the social or the cultural, that assumptions are there, that these knowledge systems are already. For example, our dominant forms of economics are imported primarily from Europe into the rest of the world. They are constructed. They come from particular traditions, histories, schools of thought, and we have to all sign up to it, right?

Same with political systems, right? Pacific people had very different political systems. Concepts about democracy, for example, are not God given. They are constructed by humans.

Timo: Absolutely.

Katerina: I don't reduce the human. I say to everyone that all knowledge is constructed already by humans that have come before us and they are not objective. None of them are objective, because they've all been constructed. Now who constructed them? From which parts of the world? Winning which wars? Running which empires? Which dominant knowledge systems came from where and that empowers students to go, did we all have choices in how we signed up-

Timo: Did we sign up to this?

Katerina: Yeah. Did we sign up to this? Do we have to be living under a capitalist extractive system that assumes fossil fuels are the one way in which we should be powering our lives, for example. They have to be able to question things. But in order for them to question things, they have to know that there is no objectivity. And so that's probably one of the biggest challenges in academia because objectivity underpins everything. We are taught that what we're learning is objective.

Timo: Yeah, the presumption of objectivity.

Katerina: The presumption of objectivity, which is actually impossible. It's actually impossible because it's all constructed. All of it is constructed. Once students get a handle on all of this stuff is constructed, then they kind of understand how you can employ different things because you can employ different constructions to make impacts on the world. The fact that we drive Audis, the fact that we have straight roads, the fact that we have traffic lights, dah, dah, dah, dah, all of that comes from a particular concept of how we ought to live. When you run into a problem and it's very complex, how are you going to transform and change that if you assume there's only one way to live? There's only one good way to live. There are only these better ways to live. You will never change it, because you'll be like, "Well, we're stuck with it."

Timo: That goes to the core questions of philosophy, right? What's the good life?

Katerina: Exactly. Yeah. But we're all living under particular European philosophies and maybe to an extent Asian philosophies that are dominating the world at the moment. What we're trying to do is pull out the values and the philosophies and the knowledges from parts of the world that have been ignored mostly in academia, like the Pacific, like other indigenous communities around the world and saying, "Do these communities possibly have other extremely useful and valuable ways of being and living in the world?"

And so the fact that we Pacific people come from the largest body of water on the planet, which is one third of the whole entire planet means they probably have some value, strategies, approaches, tools that can help us live in a world, which is now suffering because the planet is not able to regulate itself in the same way because of human intervention into the environment.

Now there's all this interest around the world in oceans and bodies of water. And it's like, ooh, how can? We've been so terrestrially focused on the demographics, how many people, which are the largest, the biggest, the strongest, the most powerful. And the Pacific reframes all of that, because you're talking about smaller communities, small islands, small peoples, and saying, "Maybe we have something to learn from them." That's what I bring into my Pacific studies classrooms, so I try to make the small voices much, much bigger in terms of how they can add value to your toolkit in terms of your teaching and learning journey.