



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: Timo, can you tell me how teaching fits into your overall academic career at the ANU?

Timo: Teaching to me is an integral part of being an academic. I would not like just having to do research for example. But I would also not like to just teach. So I very much buy into this principle of research, informed teaching or vice versa, just the two being inextricably linked. And that clearly also comes through in my teaching that I bring in, the flavour that I bring is informed by my research interests. I'm primarily behavioural economist, for example, so I try to bring in aspects of psychology.

I do rattle on the cage of sort of the mainstream in many ways. And that to me is part of, as I said earlier, of trying to get the students to think critically about what they're taught so that it doesn't just end up being an exercise inculcation, but that they have that ability to think past the first line of inquiry.

For me personally, I suppose that teaching has been crucial for me here. Not least because I was, since 18 years, basically on a string of fixed term contracts that I've had to have renewed and I've always had to teach much more than my colleagues. Partly that's okay because I enjoy teaching, but everyone knows that your prospects of progression, for example, depend on your research output primarily. And I would say in my field almost exclusively as opposed to teaching.

I think whatever accolades one receives in teaching probably does not have a very large impact on your career. As much as I love teaching and I like it. And like I said, I can't separate the two, it's like a stool with three legs. I can't imagine sort of taking one out, that's all part of being an academic.

You don't want it to be too lopsided one way or the other. You want the stool to be aesthetic and practical. I would like to continue teaching and I will continue teaching, but probably a different balance would be good. And I think that's how a lot of faculty probably feel. They may perhaps resent the unequal distribution of teaching loads for example, the difference in teaching that's perhaps hoisted on young faculty who do not have tenure versus those who do have tenure. There's a political battle going on there, sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle. But it's in a way the elephant in the room that everyone is aware of. What about you? You've been nodding a lot. That sounds like you seem to agree.

Katerina: Oh, I agree 100%. But I think I've had maybe a different journey through the academy. I don't know if I could pull up specific factors that made my teaching journey count for more compared with others, but I think it has. I know that's unusual. I think the norm is exactly what you described. We have a lot of casual teachers. We have a lot of people on fixed term contracts. We have a lot of people who do way more teaching than others who are in permanent or continuing positions and at much higher levels, associate professors and professors, et cetera. I was recently promoted to full professor at ANU.

Timo: Congratulations.

Katerina: Thank you. And when they asked me, "What is the significance of this for you?" I said, "I did it putting teaching first, valuing teaching and having my teaching shape the most of my career." I've had two academic jobs, one in the United States and one in Australia, both were teaching based hires. Both were about developing programs. It wasn't just step in and teach. It was like, "Let's figure out how to build this from the ground up." And so they were challenging and complex, not just from a teaching curriculum angle, but from kind of like a whole of program design inner context in which research is the thing with all the shiny bells and whistles and spotlights.

And everyone's talking about, how's your research grant going? Or have you put in for an ARC grant or dah, dah, dah, dah. I did not come through that track of ARC grants. That is one of the things I'm extremely proud of at ANU particularly, where I have wonderful colleagues who are very successful in this space. But I came through it putting, teaching front and centre, valuing teaching about other things. And I would say since 2007, so we're now in the year 2022, I've had 18 months total for research.

Katerina: 18 months in total. When I was putting together my portfolio for promotion and thinking about the teaching award and all of that, I had to do all of these calculations, think of my percentages, dah, dah, dah. And I was like, "Yeah, that's what I've been doing mostly." Now, I don't teach those big, big courses, even though I guess, lecture in big courses and so on and so forth, though my courses have grown in numbers significantly over the years.

Timo: Which is a sign of your success.

Katerina: Which is a good sign. But I think it's because I flip everything. So for me, it's even in terms of my own research design, I don't go, "Here's a theory. Here's a model. I will go out into the world and explore it." I go, "What's in the world?" So in my classroom I do the same, I'm like, "Who's in this classroom. Where are you from?" And I actually start from the students from their context, from their backgrounds.

Online teaching makes me quite nervous because everybody's got their cameras off. I have no idea where they're zooming in from, because I actually care about the specific life journey context, whether it's social, political, cultural, geographic, of everyone in the room. Because I actually pull on that to inform the content of the class. We do a lot of activities and exercises where I'm like, "What's your favourite thing? What's your most precious heritage item?" You want to understand what's important to Pacific people, first you bring me the thing that's most important to you, we sit in the classroom and then we'll talk about it, so that you're coming from a context of understanding already and valuing the actual activity rather than it being this theoretical sort of exercise, like those Islanders think this and those Islanders believe this. Or, oh, how interesting and quaint. We over here in these cities, we're different.

I'm all about starting from where you're at and incorporating that into the classroom, so I do that, I would say in everything, not just teaching, but my research, my administration, I've got a very heavy administration role. I'm a deputy director of my school, so I look after 110 PhD students and I have to try to understand all their lives and their issues and their challenges and their successes as well. I'm constantly trying to understand people, be compassionate towards their context and their situations, and then harmonizing that with the regulations and structures and expectations of an institution. I do all of that very intuitively now because I've been in the academy a long time and I pull on my creative skills to kind of keep all of those things together.

When I imagined full professor, I didn't go, "Well suddenly I need this big multimillion dollar grant and then maybe I'll get it." Or maybe I should have three books instead of one book. I just don't use the dominant metrics. I care about them, but I don't care about them enough. I care more about the quality of our teaching and our learning and our transformation, our impacts on our students, on the societies that we live in. I care about justice a lot and I impart that to the students as well. So when I put those things front and centre, all the other excellence comes with it.

Some people think you got to put research excellence front and centre. And then all the other bits and pieces come together. I do the opposite, I start from where's the injustice or what's unequal or what do we need to reframe? What do we need to change? And then build from that, so it's not the model into the thing. It's what is life? What is this world? What are humans facing? What is the most important to 19 year olds? Who are the 19 year olds in this classroom? Where have you come from? What do you care about? What do your parents care about? Do they care about you taking Pacific studies?

And we have these activities where students once came up with this thing of, what is the pitch that you would have to make to your parents to convince them that it was okay to take Pacific studies instead of economics? Because economics, physics, no problem. Pacific studies, what's that for? I put teaching front and centre and that has always shaped my career, and I love that. And in fact, when I was doing my PhD here in 1999, one of the first places I went to was whatever previous iteration of the center of teaching and learning existed.

And I got a teaching diploma because they used to offer these teaching certificates and diplomas because I was so excited about the teaching side. And then the research was like, yes, I was doing my creative research. I was filming, I was dancing. I was learning about the impacts of phosphate mining in the Pacific, so many things. But I was passionate about being able to convey this stuff to students and seeing that transformation. Teaching is at the heart. I would save my career and many of my colleagues and I, we recognise that that's not the norm.

Timo: Yes. I was thinking throughout that this is unusual.

Katerina: Yeah, it's unusual.

Timo: Hence I think it's remarkable that you've been able to achieve that. Let me ask you, do you think that can be achieved in every other discipline as well? Is it just a matter of implementing the right structures? And if so at the university level, because I find that getting recognition amongst your peers, for example, really just comes down to where you have published, right? If you've published in the top five or 10 journals, for example, you will get instant recognition.

And if you are forever struggling to publish in those top five or 10 journals, you will never have that same kind of standing. There's so much to be said about the whole publication process, who controls the journals, the editorship and so on. That does not mean that I don't value research. And I think it's really important as I said before, I think it's an integral part of academia and of teaching as well. But it seems impossible to me as an individual to want to change or even improve on that system because it in my eyes requires a wholesale change of the system.

Katerina: Yeah. I would agree with that, but I think one of the things I figured out how to do a few years ago is how to get and put together the evidence for the impact of the value of the teaching and the learning side together. And for that profile to be quite visible, how to ensure that whatever positive things I was doing in the classroom or with students or in this curriculum development or pedagogy space became visible. So things like research, publications, books, dah, dah, they're visible in that they kind of pop up in the metrics, in those databases, dah, dah, dah, dah. And the other stuff we do does not at all.

There's so much hidden stuff, hidden work that academics do that never pops up. One of the advantages of the web, one of the advantages of social media is that you can build a profile that tells a more clear and holistic story about the kind of work that you do. Now, no, I didn't create my own personal website. I'm not one of those people and I have no time. I literally have no time to make a Katerinateaiwa.com kind of website. Mind you students at the University of Auckland built one for me, bless their hearts. I didn't know.

But as part of their projects of documenting Pacific thinkers who've made an impact, they built a whole website about me. And so that was fabulous because I was like, "Oh, that's the kind of impact I've made." And this is coming from other people. I have nothing to do in terms of crafting that narrative. But I do disseminate a lot of my work or my ideas and approaches via social media. I would say, Twitter and Facebook aren't leisure. These are not leisure time off spaces for me. I run the Facebook page of the Australian Association for Pacific Studies, for example, which has 4,500 people within the group.

I'm always curating knowledge and information and media and stories for others and putting them together and making sure those are disseminated because that tells people something about me as well. And I'll also usually then be relating it to the kinds of Pacific studies that we do or something that I'm involved in. I'm a visual artist as well so I have an exhibition, a research based exhibition that is actually just opened in New Zealand yesterday or the day before yesterday at a gallery in Auckland.

And that's got all my research in it, hanging from textiles, from a ceiling. And so there's a lot of media and publicity around that happening as well. So I've kind of put together an academic portfolio and profile and collection of activities that very clearly demonstrates engagement and impact. Now engagement and impact are actually some of the things that ANU will struggle a little bit trying to communicate to others because outside of the journals, high impact journals that maybe a small number of people will read, but they seem to be top tier.

Timo: Prestigious.

Katerina: Yeah, journals. They don't know how to tell that narrative about the impact that academics are making in wider society in their local, regional, national, global kinds of communities. But my impact and my profile is really clear, not by me writing it all down and putting it on a website, but being visible and sometimes maybe a bit too accessible, right? So via social media, I get dozens and dozens of requests to speak. For example, speak here, speak there, speak everywhere.

That's already demonstrating impact because people are like, oh, they want her to speak to them because they care about what she has to say. The downside of that is time and energy and care and wellbeing for yourself and your children that you're trying to raise. But so there is a sacrifice in that, but it's raised the profile of the things I love that otherwise academia wouldn't care about. Forget about trying to count art as your social science and humanities impact.

But the more people review my exhibition and the more people go, "I will pay you to write about your art in this journal." Then the more you can demonstrate that people value that. Even if it's not in the top tier journal, someone likes it, wants it, needs it, an entire gallery's going to pay to host that exhibition. I never went to an art school, but I have my research based art in galleries. It's just thinking outside the box really truly, but also taking risks because it's risky to do things differently.

But I tell people that the payoff is more than what you think. This is not like reckless risk, but it is daunting in that you're working outside the expectations of the system. The system's telling you do A, B, C, and you'll be fine. What I tell my students is do A, B, C, and you'll look exactly like everyone else. How will they distinguish you when you're all applying for the same job, the same scope?

Timo: But as you said, the point is if you do D and E it comes with a risk.

Katerina: It comes with a risk. So you have to be open to that risk taking and have a strong fortitude or be okay with failure. Failure is fine. Failure is part of the growing and learning process. It can be devastating and awful. But I've had a lot of failures and I've had a lot of public embarrassments and all kinds of things, when my risks didn't pay off

and everything went wrong. But that's part of how I think I got here at the ANU. If I can be okay with failure in front of 300 people with all eyes on you, then it's okay to take risks within the ANU institutional context where I think we are privileged. And we have people looking out for us at ANU, which is not the case for some people at some other universities.

Timo: Totally subscribe to that.