



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 a bit about what you found challenging when you set out early in your career teaching or what kind of advice you would give yourself today looking back to that moment? What scared you or what would you do differently?

Timo: Early on as an early, early career teacher and researcher academic, I perhaps didn't back myself enough. I was probably somewhat insecure, being overwhelmed by the surroundings and feeling very junior. And as I said, not really backing myself, that probably translates into a certain amount of insecurity and teaching. And what I found was that I became a better teacher if and when I was finding myself, when I was grounding myself. So for me, good teaching is really about being authentic, because that's how you can then connect emotionally to the students.

If you try to somehow be someone or do something that you are not, I think then there is a gap between you and the students and that doesn't work well. One of the things that I tell my tutors, for example, and I always give them that I teach large courses, I always have a number of tutors is that I don't want them to just become clones of each other somehow or of me.

And whilst that might perhaps streamline the teaching a little bit, I am perfectly happy for each tutorial to be somewhat different experience because I want the tutors to learn to own the material, to own the space and bring themselves into it. If they are authentic,

then they can connect with the students. And without that emotional connection, I don't think you can really learn or teach. I mean, teaching and learning is just obviously two sides of the same coin.

I don't just try to apply that for myself. And nowadays I think it's pretty intuitive. It's comes, I guess, after 20 years of teaching experience, but that's something I try to teach my tutors, for example, as well, or anyone else that I want to give advice to is be authentic, be yourself. And teaching in many ways, for me, it's more about being rather than doing. Sometimes early career teachers will come to me and say, "Well, what do you do in the classroom?" As if there was some kind of cookbook recipe, do this, do that and then somehow it'll click.

To me it's not about doing, it's not about doing this or doing that in the classroom. And then suddenly it's a good class. It's all about being who you are and how you can relate to the students. Maybe that's where the thespian background comes in a bit is it's about storytelling, right? Even if there are mathematical models that you're trying to teach students, economics in particular, I guess, as a social science is ultimately about storytelling and that's where you have to be authentic, right? You can't just tell someone else's story. You have to own it. And I think that's what I would recommend to everyone is think about how you want to be in the classroom rather than what you want to do.

Katerina: I like that. And I would agree 100%.

Timo: Was there anything in particular early on in your teaching career that through you, that you find or found particularly daunting and looking back now after those years of experience, would you have liked to have done things differently? And what kind of advice would you give to others who just start teaching?

Katerina: I don't know, again, if this is normal. But maybe it is for women. But when I first started teaching, I was 28 and I was given masters courses to teach at the University of Hawaii. And almost everyone in the room was older than me. And so I come from culture and a background where age is everything. People don't assume you have authority based on your credentials and your degrees, it's based on your age and the way you look, particularly for a woman and for a woman of colour.

I had a lot of older Pacific and non-Pacific students who are like, "Where's the teacher? Where's the teacher in this classroom?" And here I was trying to do creative, innovative things. I was trying to get us to go into the Waikiki shopping centres and malls and sit there and observe bodies moving in time and space and place and they were like, "Has this been vetted? What is this?" But it was partly because of my age and my gender and the way I looked.

And so I had to navigate a lot of stuff based on those factors. I'll never forget becoming an associate professor. So reaching level D at ANU and then being sat next to a deputy vice chancellor for a dinner. And he said, "What are you studying in your undergraduate studies?" And there were just dead silence at the table. And in fact, the president of the Marshall Islands was there as well. And everyone just kind of looked gobsmacked. And I was like, "I'm one of your associate professors at the ANU." And his jaw dropped.

That's the kind of challenge that I've had since I stepped into a classroom, since I stepped into an academic department or program with people automatically wanting to dismiss me based on my gender, based on my age, based on my Pacific and African American background. Just like all of these assumption that the teacher and the authority or the professor in the room is a white male. So trying to navigate and get around that involved. Like you said, similarly having to have a bit of confidence, trying to be my authentic self. But also putting the learning and the transformation and those issues that I mentioned before about the importance of justice, the importance of addressing inequalities, the importance of bringing voices that have been marginalised into these privileged spaces of learning. When I put those front and centre, not often, but those things slowly started to fade away.

And I think the other thing that added to that kind of confidence and grounding was actually becoming a mom as well, when you just care less and less about what other people think.

Timo: Right, you put things into perspective.

Katerina: Yeah. You put things into perspective and you're like, "Yeah, okay. I got a baby." And in fact I would just bring my baby along to quite a few things. I've had my babies in the classroom, I've had babies on field schools. I've had babies at work because I don't teach one of those feels where it's dangerous, so children were looked after, but I've had to, yeah, manage some of those perceptions around what constitutes academic authority, who is the holder of knowledge in the classroom.

I would probably tell my youngest self not to worry about what other people think, not to get too stressed out about all the eyes on you or people making comments about the way you look or the way you dress or whether or not you have the qualifications to be delivering the material so that I could just get on with things and not be completely stressed outside the classroom.

The other thing is I would probably take better notes and better documentation of what I was teaching. Because now I've gotten to this point 20 years later in my career and I can't remember. And I think it's because I've developed this way of teaching. I don't have any teaching notes, I don't write anything down. I've never written a lecture down. I've never, ever had any kind of text and everything comes from the top of my head. Absolutely every single bit of content is off the top of my head.

Even a lot of my conference presentations, I'm not reading a paper. And so I am now missing the documentation of all of that knowledge up to this point, because now people are saying, "Please tell us more or how do you do it? Or what did you do?" But did it all intuitively and instinctively and create creatively. The downside of that is not having a body of pedagogical work and methods and approaches systematically documented to hand over to other people. And that's the questions I get more and more people are like, "Methods, please tell us your methods." But they've almost been too intuitively put together. I would advise people not to go fully down that track of off the top of your head.

Timo: But that's interesting because whilst I do, for example, have to use slides because I have to show charts.

Katerina: Oh, I use slides too.

Timo: You use slides as well, okay. But beyond that, I use very little technology. And increasingly less so because I find that it gets in the way with that storytelling that I was mentioning earlier. Actually, it often creates a barrier that it puts between you and the students. And so often I end up speaking a whole half hour often with interaction questions and so on to one slide and that's all there is.

And I've often thought when I look back at really gripping lectures where I sat at the edge of my seat and I was wondering what's going on here? Why are they so good? They just commanded the room somehow, but it wasn't because they had flashy slides or 1,000,003 props or whizbangery or whatever, it was that they were just great storytellers and they drew you in, right? And they often had sort of narrative arc as well in how they constructed their lectures. The good ones do that automatically intuitively, they don't think about it, but that is I guess what I'm sort of trying to achieve in the classroom as well. Because again, it's that connection that it builds with the students.

And that is I think much more powerful than thinking about the latest technological innovation that you can bring in. And for that reason, I think online learning is frustrating because it makes it that much more difficult to do just that, right? It's much more difficult to be in front of a screen than it is in a classroom and to get that.

Katerina: Yeah. Storytelling is a give and take of energy. And you can sense that in the classroom. If you have the audience, if they're with you. So when you do it to a blank screen or to a bunch of blank screens, I find that very disarming. I'm like, I don't know what my ... I mean, you have to develop other kinds of ways to inspire yourself.

Timo: That's right. And I find it much more strenuous teaching that way because you don't have the energy. It's like theatre really.

Katerina: Yeah, it's stressful. It's the give and take.

Timo: So when you're on the stage, if the energy from the audience comes back to you - that's invigorating and it gives you lots of energy.

Katerina: That's right. It's exhausting. Let's just say Zoom teaching is extremely exhausting and we appreciate the challenges of the pandemic. But our teaching excellence and inspiration and passions don't come from online teaching or engagement.

Timo: Let that be a lesson for the future, should anyone have ideas.

Katerina: That's right. Yeah, it's been really nice chatting with you. I agree with a lot of what you said. And I also especially appreciate the storytelling part because that's everything. A good classroom experience is all about sharing stories and having that actually be taken in by students. And that is the best way of delivering.

Timo: I agree. I think that's what gives meaning and if the students don't experience meaning in the classroom. If all they're doing is, as you said earlier, they just almost

[inaudible 00:57:44] learn how Pacific Islanders are or what they do rather than experiencing it or in my case, if they just take notes of some equations and they don't mean anything, then that's not a good class in my opinion.

Katerina: I think academics today, and you should probably have more of these kinds of conversations.

Timo: Probably. And I think there is something to learn across disciplines as well there.

Katerina: Definitely.

Timo: I was certainly listening to you and I thought, wow, there's some pointers there that I could incorporate into my teaching as well.

Katerina: Thank you.

Timo: I'm not sure about the dance bit.

Katerina: Yes, you could try.

Timo: But I will think about it. Exactly.

Katerina: You could put on those tap shoes maybe, the old tap shoes.

Timo: Only if you think about how to introduce some economics to your class.

Katerina: Oh, okay. I will try.

Timo: That's our challenge.

Katerina: I will try with the economics. I think I have put economics in a critical box and maybe you have inspired me to take it back out of the box and think about economic stories maybe, which are very relevant and which we're all experiencing and living. And those can be transformational too.

Timo: Okay. Sounds good.

Katerina: Good. Deal.

Timo: Deal. Great.