

President of Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness (SLAIHEE),
Professor Nelun de Silva
Vice Chancellor, University of Colombo, Professor Kshanika Hirimburegama
Guest of Honour, Dr Suki Ekaratne
Delegates
Ladies & gentlemen

I consider it an honour to be invited by the SLAIHEE to deliver the keynote address at these academic sessions. I congratulate the President and the committee of the SLAIHEE as well as the Director and the Committee of the Staff Development Centre of University of Colombo for their commitment to organize this year's Academic sessions.

I cannot forget how I got inspired by then Professor SUKI Ekaratna in the sphere of Staff Development, especially after that memorable week-long workshop that he conducted with the help of Dr. Graham Gibbs at the Kandalama Hotel in Dambulla, in the year 2000.

President, Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I take this opportunity to sensitize you regarding few ailments that we come across in the curricula of higher educational institutions. As a physician, I thought of calling it curricular sclerosis rather than a curriculitis as these ailments seem to be more chronic in nature. During my talk I will highlight some such ailments and try to recommend suitable remedies.

As way back as the beginning of the First Century a Priest of the Temple of Apollo, in Delphi, Greece said that "*the mind is a fire to be kindled, not a vessel to be filled*".

As teachers we often overrate the importance of the content and underrate our influence. Often we do not realize how much we can influence our students as teachers. The impact of our teaching will extend beyond our lifetime as there is a small part of every teacher in the students we touch.

How often do we realize that students forget much of the content that they memorize? Thus, attempts to teach all that they will need to know is futile. Therefore, teachers must abandon the mistaken notion that unless they "cover the content" the student will be unprepared for the future.

So, what would be better than "covering the content"?

It is important that students develop an interest and love for lifelong learning. Inspiring and motivating students is critical because unless students are inspired and motivated our efforts are pointless.

As teachers, we should aim at engaging our students at a higher level in the Bloom's Taxonomy on Educational Objectives.

We know that learning is not confined to the cognitive domain. It takes place through two other domains viz. psychomotor and affective, as well. Often learning occurs with some overlap of these domains. It seems that the emphasis we give to affective and psychomotor domains in our instructional design, to be far from desired.

If we consider the lowest level in the hierarchy of the affective domain which includes receiving phenomena such as listening to others with respect, can we say that we often fulfil that

criterion? As teachers, we are expected to be good listeners but how many of us take a conscious effort to sub serve that role? Do we as teachers, pay emphasis in developing listening skills of our students?

Students may forget what you said, and forget what you did, but will never forget how you made them feel.

It is difficult to address issues related to listening skills at lectures. Teaching/learning situations like small group discussions and “role play” situations give ample opportunities to develop and assess listening skills. How often do you have small group discussions in your educational programs? Just recall as to how much time you devote to listen to your students when they discuss matters of educational nature with you.

Do you perform a role of an instructor or a facilitator, in your small group discussions?

I think as teachers we should invite questions from students, whenever possible. Often, we find that our students are not sufficiently proactive to generate a discussion. Therefore, teachers have to “break ice” and “keep the ball rolling”. We should inculcate critical thinking in the minds of our students by presenting questions rather than facts so that they can equip them with competencies to solve problems.

As facilitators we should develop our skills in structuring, phrasing and distributing of questions. The questions that we ask our students should be focused and clear. Questions should be thought provoking. If responses to questions are not good enough we should lower the difficulty level of questions and use techniques such as rephrasing and redirecting in order to generate a discussion.

As facilitators, how often do we use reinforcement techniques? Often it is important to give secondary reinforcements like verbal praise to sustain small group discussions. To sustain interest of our students, we need to employ the techniques of variation with respect to voice, gesture and movement in our teaching space, whenever possible.

As teachers, we may have a tendency to be stereo-typed and dominant in teaching-learning interactions. This trait is not uncommon amongst senior teachers. We should make a conscious effort to refrain from being dogmatic. We need to educate ourselves as teachers constantly and update ourselves. Although the core knowledge is very important, core knowledge alone is not enough.

As a senior Physician, I find that many of our young doctors performing poorly with respect to time management, communication skills, and to display poor attitudes towards their patients and their co-workers. They often do not show leadership qualities and adhere to accepted ethical standards. A study shown on this slide illustrates the gaps in their training and it is worth noting that these skills and competencies fall mainly into the attitudinal domain. I believe that these gaps are seen in other professions as well. As teachers we cannot be complacent regarding these gaps. We need to act.

President, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, the subjects that we teach change everyday. As teachers we cannot cling on to our old set of notes forever. Though this is obvious, I will try to illustrate this point with the help of some facts pertaining to my field of study, which is Medicine. In Medicine, new diseases are discovered with the newer insight to understanding of diseases on molecular or genetic basis as a daily occurrence. In addition, new drugs are discovered

along with new modalities of treatment such as advances in immunotherapy, gene therapy and transplantation therapy.

When we train medical students we have to be sensitive about the changing needs of the society such as the need to treat more elderly people due to change in the age structure of the population.

Sometimes we have to involve new concepts such as “day hospital” or “hospital-in-home” as cost cutting exercises. Medical undergraduates have to change their training to suit changes such as changing pattern of acute poisoning or substance abuse. As medical teachers we have to be sensitive to the needs and the demands in the private sector as well.

In Medicine, advances in technology occur by day and those include advances in the management of patients, telemedicine, development of newer complex prosthetic devices and robotic surgical procedures.

There is a vast impact on educational technologies with developments in the field of IT such as the internet, intranets, email, web-based and computer-based technology, digital printing, digital photography and podcasting.

If I may revisit my initial question, which is ‘What would be better than covering the content’ – part of the answer is to have small group discussions. Teachers must not worry about losing or wasting valuable lecture time for small group discussions, collaborative problem solving and inquiry based activities that take away time from covering the content. Rather than worrying about covering the content, teachers must design activities to focus student learning on how to use knowledge to solve important questions or issues. This is important because learning is not just committing a set of facts to the memory but the ability to use resources to find, evaluate and use information.

In fact, memorizing anything discourages deep thinking. Deep thinking is essential because understanding is the residue of thinking. To encourage thinking we must make learning more enjoyable and exiting so that learners become intrinsically motivated.

One way of doing this is by getting the learners to learn by discovery. Most of the time discovery learning takes place with respect to knowledge which is already known to the teacher though unknown to the learner. This kind of learning can take place by teaching-learning methods such as practical classes, projects, clinical training and industrial apprenticeships.

When a student undergoes clinical training or industrial apprenticeship or for that matter training as an understudy of a senior lawyer it takes several months or few years to acquire mastery of the subject. During such training, the trainee should be given responsibilities in a graded manner as shown in the slide which illustrates the concept of fading-in and fading-out.

It is not uncommon to find situations where junior teachers in the University being given major tasks even as new recruits by the Heads of their Departments. This practice of throwing them into the “deep end of the pool” should be discouraged. Junior teachers need supervised practice, as mastery comes with repetition as illustrated in the Kolb’s cycle.

As teachers we have to play a good role model so that our students are able to emulate desirable characteristics in their professional and personal lives.

President, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen I hope I have stimulated you to look at yourself in the mirror. I hope, I made you reflect through some your personal experiences as teachers.

I conclude leaving one of the early slides of my presentations which is one of my take home messages that I cherish - *The impact of our teaching will extend beyond our lifetime as there is a small part of every teacher in the students we touch.*

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Finally, I thank SLAIHEE and the SDC of University of Colombo for inviting me to deliver this address. Thank you.

Professor P L Ariyananda MBBS (Cey), MD (Col), FRCP (Lond), DCH (Cey), FCCP
Senior Professor of Medicine, Former Dean, Faculty of Medicine, Former Director Staff
Development Centre, University of Ruhuna