


Striving for *Excellence* – A guide for tertiary teachers

Volume 1

Striving for excellence
in tertiary teaching

Dawn Garbett & Rachel Williams

AKO
AOTEAROA
academy
OF TERTIARY TEACHING
EXCELLENCE

The logo for AKO AOTEAROA academy features a stylized, thick, lime-green letter 'S' that curves around the text. The text is arranged in a stacked format: 'AKO' and 'AOTEAROA' in small, bold, sans-serif capital letters; 'academy' in a larger, lowercase, sans-serif font; and 'OF TERTIARY TEACHING' and 'EXCELLENCE' in small, bold, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom.

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Striving for Excellence: A guide for tertiary teachers was compiled on behalf of the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence (The Academy) Executive Committee (2012). Our sincere thanks to the many Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award recipients who generously allowed the Academy Executive access to their portfolios.

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Dr Marc Wilson, (Academy Executive, 2008 Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award recipient and, Associate Professor and Head of the School of Psychology at Victoria University of Wellington) undertook the initial mining of the gems from more than 30 portfolios.

The images used throughout volumes 1 and 2 have been gathered from a wide range of Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awardee portfolios. Some of these portfolios were part of the mining project.

Print copies of *Striving for Excellence*, Volume 1 – *Striving for excellence in tertiary teaching*, and Volume 2 – *Tertiary teaching excellence in practice* are available for purchase at: www.akoatearoa.ac.nz/shop

Find out more about the project and download free PDF copies of the booklets at: www.akoatearoa.ac.nz/strivingforexcellence

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FOREWORD

The Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence comprises all the past winners of National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards. The Academy is New Zealand's body of nationally recognised excellent tertiary teachers and has a mission to provide advice and support on tertiary education and policy from a practice perspective.

It is a great privilege, therefore, to present this, the first of two volumes of insights gathered from these national awardees about what tertiary teaching excellence is, what drives excellent tertiary teachers and how they achieve what they do. There are some fascinating themes here and they are all inter-related.

Tertiary teaching is hugely diverse in terms of context, level, subject matter and, not least, the learners engaging in it. Nevertheless recurrent themes shine through. Passion both for their disciplines and the success of their students is common to all excellent tertiary teachers. Because of these twin passions, excellent tertiary teachers set high expectations of their students, but, at the same time, they listen to their students and are highly sensitive to their learning needs.

Above all, excellent teachers are reflective practitioners, with the ability to not just reflect meaningfully on their practice, but – the mark of true professionals – also with the ability to reflect in practice and, where necessary, change tack mid-stream to maximise the learning opportunities that arise within their classes. There is joy in what they do, there is caring and there is respect for their learners. Excellent teachers are excellent learners themselves and keen to apply that learning in a teaching context.

Thank you to Dawn Garbett, Rachel Williams and Marc Wilson for all their hard work putting this together. Thanks especially to the 30 members of the Ako Aotearoa Academy who so generously shared their portfolios about their teaching practice.

A final and special thank you must go to the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards Committee that has selected the national awardees each year since 2002. In particular I would like to acknowledge and thank Emeritus Professor Noeline Alcorn, chair of the Awards Committee from 2009-2013 who brought to this role huge experience, wisdom and inclusivity in the selection process. Noeline peer reviewed both these volumes.

Peter Coolbear
Director Ako Aotearoa

INTRODUCTION:

The Dimensions of Excellence

What is excellent teaching and how do you demonstrate and sustain being an excellent teacher in the tertiary sector?

These are two fundamental questions that all recipients of the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards grapple with on an ongoing basis.

In this two-volume set, excerpts from the portfolios of more than 30 national Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award recipients paint a picture of what excellence in tertiary teaching and learning means to them. It sheds light on the different ways in which these tertiary teachers make sense of their practice and find joy in their everyday work. It is our hope that the comments will resonate with you and inspire you to achieve excellence in your own practice.

These excerpts came from portfolios that were submitted by members of the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence (The Academy), teaching at institutes of technology and polytechnics, private training establishments, adult and community learning centres, universities and wānanga. These teachers come from a wide range of backgrounds and everyone has their own unique story to tell. We have woven their comments together to capture the essence and diversity of the individual portfolios.

The two companion volumes have been arranged as:

Volume 1

Striving for excellence in tertiary teaching

1. The personal philosophy and vision of excellent tertiary teachers
2. The personal and professional development of excellent tertiary teachers
3. The personal attributes of an excellent tertiary teacher
4. The goals and rewards of excellent tertiary teaching.

Volume 2

Tertiary Teaching Excellence in Practice

5. The foundations of excellent tertiary teaching
6. Assessment as a tool for excellent tertiary teachers
7. The site(s) of excellent tertiary teaching extend beyond the classroom
8. Working with diversity.

Each theme is introduced by guiding questions, which we hope you will keep in mind as you read the comments.

Kāore he mutunga o te ako

There is no ending to learning

The Personal Philosophy and Vision of Excellent Tertiary Teachers

Tentative definition: The set of personal beliefs and understandings that inform, guide and influence individual practice

Guiding questions:

1. How do excellent tertiary teachers frame or describe the relationship between teaching and learning?
2. How do they envisage their role as teachers in the tertiary sector?

Many excellent tertiary teachers articulate the relationship between the practice of teaching and the exercise of learning through the use of metaphor or simile. For example:

“I have asked my students to draw pictures representing themselves as teachers. Often their responses include the teacher as a travel guide – pointing out landmarks of note and driving their tour party from one sight to the next. Others see themselves as gardeners – nurturing, hoeing, weeding and cultivating the new generation. Others are sailors navigating uncharted waters, sales reps selling knowledge – these images speak volumes. My favourite representation

is of the teacher as a wizard. A teacher’s magic is in the threads that bind learners and teachers together through their interactions and relationships.”

“Students who become fired up with a similar passion that you have for a craft absorb skills, techniques, hints and knowledge and rise like a maturing bread dough. Igniting the fire of passion is not unlike seeding bread dough with yeast.”

“My role as a teacher is that of a prophet, interpreting the material that they are required to master.”

“In my opinion, teaching is like trying to help someone find a friend’s house in an unknown suburb by car. You could drive them there, or give them exact instructions on the way to go, and they will get there. But they will not have mastered the situation. If they are later asked to find the house again, but this time on their way without your help, they’ll probably get lost along the way. If you really want them to learn how to find the house, then they need to be doing the driving, being actively involved in looking for landmarks, albeit perhaps with a bit of assistance from a passenger. With my teaching I like to be the passenger assisting the students to drive their learning, so that they see the landmarks, understand the journey and have a deeper interpretation when they get to their destination.”

Teaching is regarded as an active and dynamic process. The role of the teacher is described in terms of being on a journey alongside learners.

“I like to walk beside my students on a journey of learning.”

“If I visualise my journey as a teacher, it looks a bit like a braided river: wandering in its bed but always coming back to the main stream eventually.”

“I find that there’s always some new and exciting discovery to learn about, and I’m as much a learner as my students. The



difference between us is that I have a much wider worldview, and a broader range of experiences within which to make sense of what I learn.”

“Leading the students to new places (even where I haven’t been before) is perhaps the most rewarding experience for myself and probably for the student as well!”

“To produce autonomous professionals, my role is to be a guide along their own journey by helping them ‘connect the dots’ rather than being a ‘knowledge dispenser’. I guide them to connect the dots between the theory and practice, the University and the profession, medications and patients, and provide them with a context for professionalism.”

The practice of teaching is often likened to that of parenting. Tertiary teachers are responsive to their students in much the same way as parents are responsive to their children: they nurture and foster independence through providing multiple opportunities to learn.

“I think that good teaching is like good parenting – we want our charges to leave



our halls or our homes and make their way in the world able to effectively and independently do the things we teach them, and ideally to exceed our hopes and expectations of them. To achieve this, teachers and parents must allow those in their care the opportunities to push the boundaries of the world around them, to learn where those boundaries are, and where their own boundaries lie.”

“We don’t expect that children will learn to swim by being shown once and we should not expect students to learn difficult concepts any differently. So let’s provide multiple learning opportunities for the same material.”

Challenging students and fostering their active engagement require each teacher to be the knowledgeable leader in the learning setting...

“As a leader of that community I must justify the transformative challenges it will face, to act as questioner, process coach, and synthesiser of theory and practice. My role is not simply to construct a coherent body of knowledge. It is also about fostering intellectual courage and independence,

preserving creativity, and modeling the ethical and process skills that define my discipline.”

“I have come to learn that there is always more to learn, that you can never stop and say, ‘I know all there is to know about this’, that there is always something out there to improve my knowledge base and to improve my practice.”

“As a teacher I want to inspire students to be interested in the depth of the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ and ‘where the knowledge comes from’. I want students to learn deeply and I focus on giving them the confidence and skills to find out, create and make judgments. Learning facts is not so important.”

“While it is central to present students with core knowledge and concepts, arguably a more significant role is continually to challenge student beliefs, perceptions and understandings.”

“Teaching and learning are evolutionary processes – just as evolution in the natural world is driven by the process of ‘selection pressure’ so are teaching and learning in the classroom. The students undoubtedly represent a significant ‘selection pressure’ driving changes in teaching and learning and the situation is an ever-changing one.”

...or to be the mentor:

“I believe that the best (experiential) learning is accompanied by good mentoring.”

“...positive learning is built on strong mentoring and collaboration.”

Developing a relationship with students – as a mentor, collaborator or professional – is fundamental. For example:

“I believe that teaching is about relationships; a way of being with, and relating to others, not simply developing a repertoire of content-related delivery skills. It is critical to build effective relationships with students.”

“I also believe that loyalty to one’s colleagues and students is a fundamental aspect of professionalism, without which there can be no genuine trust and, therefore, no genuine respect and collegiality.”

Personal beliefs about the nature of learning and how best to facilitate positive learning are clearly articulated by these teachers. Learning is seen as active, participatory and the students’ responsibility.

“Like life, learning is a series of events occurring simultaneously being woven together, creating a new fabric, a new reality. Life is not a solitary journey but a collaborative activity and I believe learning needs to reflect this.”

“To facilitate learning about content and how to teach content at the same time, it is important that student teachers take responsibility for teaching their peers.”

“Involving students in community-oriented activities, in which they are responsible for creating and sharing learning resources, is an effective way to promote deep learning. It helps build self-awareness for learning processes and gives students a sense of control over their learning.”

“So what is a good teacher? The key requirement is the realisation that it isn’t about you. It’s about them, the students. They do the learning.”

Although these teachers see that learning is the students’ responsibility, they regard their responsibility as teachers as more than just transmitting content. They set high standards for themselves and their students.

“I never expect my students to do anything that I wouldn’t do. I model expected behaviours and effort.”

“To promote the development of moral reasoning abilities, I avoid advocating my own personal beliefs, eschew dogmatic statements and instead tell stories of actual lawyers who have faced ethically-challenging situations.”

“My approach is to set high standards and expect professionalism.”

Importantly, many teachers recognise the potential that learning at a tertiary level has to influence multiple facets of a student’s life. Learning is regarded as life-changing and empowering. The importance of the teacher’s role in their students’ journeys is never underestimated.

“Learning does not remain with the individual but touches the lives of their whānau and their communities.”

“People who experience successful learning come to love what they do because of the enjoyment it brings. People who love what they do will contribute greatly to their families, the places they work, and to their wider communities.”

“When working collaboratively in an environment of care where individual progress is celebrated, the fabric of a learner’s life can change.”

Concluding thoughts: Thinking back to the guiding questions, how does your philosophy underpin your practice? If you were to describe your role as a teacher, what metaphor springs to mind? Do you believe that students are ultimately responsible for doing the learning? As a teacher, is it your job to find ways to ensure that students can be successful and engage in the process of learning?

The Personal and Professional Development of Excellent Tertiary Teachers

Tentative definition: The activities, experiences and influences that shape the personal and professional development of these tertiary teachers.

Guiding question:

- How do excellent tertiary teachers continue to grow and develop as teachers both personally and professionally?

The portfolios of those tertiary teachers who were commended for sustained excellence provide detail about how they maintain their high-quality practice. The importance of early influences and sources of inspiration are commented on by several awardees, although in one case it is the desire not to replicate them that had a greater impact.

“I have been driven by a desire to reproduce as best I can some of the attributes of the personalised teaching that I experienced in six years as a student in Oxford.”

“I remember the excitement of finding an essay by Alan Jenkins that put into words what I had

known, but not articulated. He characterised education as a process of ‘drawing out’ rather than ‘filling up’, and he described the distinction between being an ‘authority’ and being ‘in authority’. This crystallised much of what is important about my teaching role for me.”

“I emerged from Cambridge believing that ‘good’ teaching was nothing more than clear lecture notes: Theorem – Proof; Theorem – Proof. All else – motivation, insight and application – was left to the student. I was initially astonished to see the learning resources produced by my New Zealand colleagues. In a shock realisation, I grasped the fact that their methods would reach students, and mine wouldn’t.”

Several awardees refer to their development as *ad hoc*, but despite this, they all continue to seek ways to improve their teaching.


“Since my first teaching opportunity in 1994, my approach to teaching has evolved and developed; first through trial and error (natural selection in teaching!), then as I started to develop an actual teaching philosophy in my search for a personal teaching style.”

“There was no formal training; it was simply a case of ‘copy those who have taught you’, and it was assumed that everyone knew how to teach. I was soon to realise that learning how to teach requires a lot of time, effort and reflective practice.”

“My journey as a supervisor has been shaped by a range of influences: being supervised through MA and PhD degrees; my unfolding understanding of the academic vocation; reading and hearing key thinkers who write about pedagogy and leadership; and, most of all, those I have encountered on supervision journeys (both students and colleagues).”

“I made time to embark on a deeper study of ‘how teaching and learning worked’. I understood then that there was more to becoming a teacher than just teaching the syllabus. I wanted to understand what made learners learn better and how my teaching could enhance learning opportunities for my students. I therefore started on a long and ongoing voyage into learning about learning.





I had the objective then and now of putting what I learned into improving my teaching practice. Working first through a BEd and then an MEd, I also saw the need for scholarship into the very under-researched area of vocational education.”

“In my early years in the classroom I taught in fairly conventional ways, but in the search for excellence I have refined my teaching practice. [Later in my career] I was allowed to experiment freely and to fine-tune my delivery.”

Throughout their professional teaching careers, these excellent tertiary teachers sought help and guidance from mentors, role models and experienced colleagues. They display an ongoing willingness to explore new strategies and approaches and to keep adding to their knowledge from a range of sources.

“I realised quickly that my most effective teachers were also my mentors. They each provided frameworks for me to make and learn from mistakes and, through this process, develop self-efficacy.”

“I’ve been a university teacher for 43 years. In that time I’ve met many good teachers, and a very few great ones. I’ve tried to distill the essence of what each of them excelled at, and adapt it to my own style and

personality. Thus, many aspects of what I do I owe to others.”

“I have had some outstanding educators. They gave me lessons well outside the curriculum, how to behave professionally, ethically, humbly, and with good humour, and by their own actions were role models. They showed me the curriculum is just a guide; that there is so much more that young adults need to learn. I have, as much as I have been able, modeled myself on them.”

“Exposure to great facilitators and tutors at workshops and conferences gives me the opportunity to learn from and share ideas with motivating and energetic tutors and facilitators from around New Zealand.”

“Linking with wider professional networks has kept me abreast of current professional development foci for practising teachers.”

“My experiences working with Pacific Island leaders and Māori communities taught me a huge amount about the need for deep personal integrity as a teacher. Working with these groups also taught me the value of teaching by storytelling and indirect journeys of discovery.”

One approach awardees refer to frequently is watching their colleagues teach. Observation of peers is referred to as pivotal in their development and as one awardee comments, the ability to record and critique their own teaching is also invaluable.

“When other staff are teaching, I attend their lectures in the video theatre in order to have a staff presence there. This has given me the opportunity to watch some excellent teachers at work.”

“As a young lecturer, I soon became aware that a key factor in successful lecturing was an ability to communicate verbally. I therefore made it my business to attend lunchtime talks by renowned masters of the English language.”

“Since I began my teaching career, I have made every effort to develop my teaching skills, always striving to be the best I can. It is for this reason that I have observed other courses offered by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. As a participant in these papers I was introduced to the theory and practice of language teaching, and had an opportunity to put this theory into practice. We were encouraged to build on our own individual teaching capacity, to focus on team building and collaborative learning.

We were also encouraged to reflect and evaluate our own learning and adjust [it] accordingly. All of these skills easily transferred into my teaching practice.”

“I believe it is critical that I should lead by example. I do this by mentoring and supporting other staff members wherever necessary, providing open access to my classes to colleagues, and being willing to share the teaching resources that I create.”

“I have taped myself occasionally to check clarity and pacing.”

Most awardees use multiple methods to gain a different perspective about their teaching and many refer to the practice of writing reflective journals to record their own evaluations of sessions. Reflecting on their teaching, and their students’ responses to it, is a way that these teachers seek to constantly improve their practice. For some, conducting research is the most effective means to that end.

“As a teacher educator I undertake research and draw on it. I am compelled as a professional to create opportunities to refine and strengthen my teaching by researching my practice. When introducing initiatives, I

assess their effectiveness, think about how to apply them in other settings, and share the results with others.”

“[My] research has helped to reinforce and inform my teaching, allowing me to blend my findings into my teaching practice.”

For other awardees, reflecting on the feedback provided by their students is an effective way to improve their teaching.

“At the end of each lecture, and at the end of the course, I schedule time to ensure that I review my teaching and the course and lecturer evaluations, particularly the qualitative comments. This personal evaluation has given rise to several new directions.”

“It is above all the students I work with who most guide my improvement. Each semester I seek feedback, and regularly make changes as a result.”

“After students have completed activities, I review the effectiveness of my teaching. This may be through asking students to share their ideas in a pair or larger group or reporting back to the class. I may ask students to write, draw or demonstrate ideas. I use this information to refine my approach or to revisit ideas that I feel have not been understood. I can also use this information to feed forward into future discussions.”



“Asking students for formative feedback via a Critical Incidence Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1995) is a way for me to evaluate the effectiveness of my approach. Each week students are asked to jot down when they have felt most engaged, distanced, surprised, affirmed and confused.”

“I received feedback from some students in the final course evaluation that they ‘could not see how bits of the course fit together’. This observation led me to reflect on the possibility that whereas I could see the logics of the course, they could not. My response has been to use the online teaching delivery system to compose regular Friday Updates in which I include observations about the links between the preceding week’s lectures.”

“Student appraisals can be swayed by a charismatic lecturer, or so I’m often told: the ideal is to get feedback from as many sources as possible. So I’m always keen to talk teaching with my colleagues in the faculty and the Teaching Development Unit, before using the combined feedback from all these sources to inform changes in what I do in the classroom. In the case of the students, it’s absolutely essential to know that their feedback has been heard and, where appropriate, acted upon.”



“Like my students, I want to know that what I am doing is working. Reflecting on student feedback about my delivery is just as important as giving my feedback to them about their progress.”

“I reflect and refine, critically evaluating my teaching. Identifying elements that could be improved, I try to design improvements, whether it is new content to be taught, a new way to teach existing content, or a way to make assessment fairer. I constantly experiment, observe, reflect, seek many kinds of feedback and implement desirable changes.”

“I think that, as teachers, we never cross the threshold to excellence unless we reflect deeply on our teaching. This includes not just responding to student feedback, but also continually asking ourselves why we are doing what we are doing.”

Many excellent tertiary teachers have designed their own methods of gathering student feedback to inform their practice. Often this means designing specific evaluation forms or questionnaires; facilitating focus group discussions; allowing students time to critique their learning before leaving class; encouraging online discussions; or monitoring students' engagement informally.


"Designing an evaluation sheet that seeks feedback in specific areas of my practice is valuable as students tend to provide broad affirmative comments rather than specific points on how I might enhance my teaching."

"There is a complex interplay between assessing student learning, ensuring that we teach what we 'think' we teach (explicit vs. experienced curriculum), and evaluating my ability to be an effective teacher. To understand my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher I use multiple forms of evaluation. This creates a full picture, which will help guide my reflection and modifications in my approach."

"To identify areas that were either not sufficiently covered in classes, or that were causing student problems, I organised a 'peer' meeting as a focus group to identify

things that were working well and where the areas that needed some improvement were. Students were purposefully selected and invited to a feedback session. They were chosen to include students that had passed the first time, students that passed on the re-sit and those that had to repeat the course. So that they could be open and frank in their discussions, a final-year student (who had been through the course) acted as a facilitator to take note of ideas/concerns and comments and then to collate these so that individuals could not be identified. The feedback received via this method was not only useful to identify areas to address, but also in getting to the real issues that our students were facing with this course in much more depth than could have been achieved via paper-based course evaluations."

"When I am teaching I am constantly looking for signs that the students are engaged and making sense of new information. I often draw their attention to the clues that I am reading as I am doing this, but it is difficult to pinpoint the subtle nuances in body language and tone of voice that I tune into as an experienced teacher. By making explicit the feedback that I am acting on, I give them access to the sort of information that they will need to inform their own decisions as teachers."



“I concluded the session with questions and answers because I sensed that there were questions that students wanted to ask, but they were anxious about such a personal topic.”

“One common theme of student feedback is that for every aspect of a course that students like there will always be at least one student who does not like it. While most students find online quizzes helpful, there is always one or two who do not like them. While the vast majority of students find the library information literacy programme very useful (based on feedback given directly to library staff at the conclusion of the module), there is always one or two who find it not to their liking. The trick then is to find the balance, recognise that it is not possible to please everyone all the time, and also provide a sufficient variety of learning experiences that as many students as possible find something that aligns with their learning style.”

“By programming evaluation into every session I can immediately adjust to better meet the needs of the learners. Not just a quick five-minute ‘how did that go?’, but enough time to allow full reflection on the implications of delivery, resources etc. on their learning.”

“I willingly take on board constructive suggestions from students and colleagues, which provide me with the opportunity to learn and grow, both personally and professionally.”

“I believe that ongoing evaluation of my effectiveness as a teacher is of real importance and I use a number of approaches to that evaluation, including reflecting on each lesson, encouraging students to critique my teaching, and seeking the input of colleagues. It is my practice to get their feedback while the current cohort is still with me, so that I can strengthen and improve my teaching in ways that work well for THEM.”

Concluding thoughts: In the quest to sustain excellence, many of these teachers reflect on their practice using journals and feedback from students and peers. The comments in this theme highlight that excellent tertiary teachers see learning about their profession as an ongoing journey. They are never content with the status quo. They are always looking for evidence that what they are doing is having the desired effect, and if it isn't, they are willing to try new ideas. These new ideas can come from students, colleagues, or research. Do you have influential "teacher role models" in your life? Who do you aspire to be more like or, perhaps just as influentially, who do you not want to be like?

The Personal Attributes of an Excellent Tertiary Teacher

Tentative definition: The characteristics and qualities that are held in high regard and demonstrated by excellent tertiary teachers.

Guiding question:

- What are the personal attributes, or characteristics that are most commonly cited by these excellent tertiary teachers?

Although many of the awardees wrote at length about their vision of teaching, few explicitly describe their vision of an excellent teacher. In one case, an awardee articulates a vision of excellence that she believes is common to both herself and her students. In this short excerpt, she describes her vision of the personal characteristics of an excellent teacher:

“I am privileged to be teaching teachers in a tertiary institution. Every student who enters my classroom has had different learning experiences but they are connected by the common aspiration to become teachers. We share a vision of what it is to be an exceptional teacher – someone inspirational,

knowledgeable and caring...And as each student learns, they teach me and enrich my learning.”

The themes of inspiration, caring and respect are woven through many of the portfolios. In one, a tertiary teacher explicitly defines what caring means to them:

“What are the qualities of a caring teacher? Enjoy your students; be honest with them; don’t be afraid to show them that you care; show them respect; listen to them; and laugh with them!”

In another, an awardee describes the importance of exhibiting honesty and humility as tertiary teachers:

“One thing I hold as a central principle: any teacher who aspires to excellence must approach this high calling with friendliness, humility and absolute honesty in interactions with students. More, much more, is required, but students will also forgive much in those in whom they sense at least these attributes, and they will sense them very fast.”

Not all awardees use definitions or central principles to illustrate the attributes of an excellent teacher. Some simply describe their attitudes about, and behaviours exhibited in, their role as tertiary teachers. From these excerpts we were able to infer a great deal about the personal characteristics of excellent tertiary teachers. Without exception, the concepts of caring, collaboration and a generosity of spirit are present.

“I don’t talk down to my students because it isn’t so long ago that I was in their place.”

“Effective collaboration can only come into being in respectful spaces where people feel comfortable voicing uncertainty. I believe in being honest, considerate and kind to my students and work hard to encourage non-threatening group dynamics where all participants treat each other with genuine sensitivity.”



“When designing collaborative courses, I believe one needs a generosity of spirit – to meet colleagues halfway and be willing to stretch ourselves as well as our students.”

“I have an open-door policy for my office and students can freely come and talk to me about any matter. The years have seen me help students through personal crises from taking them to counselling, to urgent home relocation, to just listening to them talk through problems. I believe pastoral care is a critical part of a safe environment conducive to good learning.”

The environment in which one teaches can have a tremendous impact on student learning. Two of the awardees commented on the relationship between the nature of the classroom environment and student learning.

“Showing genuine enthusiasm about teaching a subject helps students feel enthusiastic about learning it. Teaching large classes means that often there is more than one stream, and sometimes it is necessary to teach the same class three times in one day. I work hard during every class to infect my students with enthusiasm.”

“I have discovered that my enthusiasm is infectious and as my postgraduates progress along their academic careers, they in turn become equally as passionate about their own teaching.”

In both excerpts above, the awardees describe their enthusiasm for their subject matter. The concepts of enthusiasm and passion for teaching were ubiquitous in the portfolios sampled for this project.

“I care passionately about teaching. It is simultaneously the thing I know about, the thing I do and the thing I have chosen to research.”

“It is important to be passionate about one’s subject matter to excel as a teacher, but it is equally important to be passionate about teaching itself.”

“I have two main passions in my professional life – education and frogs – and it is no accident that these two passions are intertwined in nearly every aspect of my working day.”

“I am an enthusiast. I believe in either giving 110 per cent to a task or declining to take it on. This has been an enduring personal philosophy that has pervaded my academic career, especially with respect to teaching. One of my long-time mentors once memorably said, ‘Bite off more than you can chew...then chew like hell.’ I have incorporated this dictum into my teaching philosophy.”

As we read through all the comments it seemed to us that many of the awardees adopt the ‘bite off more than you can chew and then chew like hell’ mantra. In fact, numerous awardees describe behaviours that illustrate incredible commitment and a drive to go above and beyond the call of duty, as the following excerpts illustrate:

“As the coordinator of these papers, I believed I should be able to cover the lectures of any lecturer should they fall ill or go on sabbatical. With that in mind, I attended all the lectures on the course (over 700 lectures with 40 different lecturers), and

by so doing, I now have a huge amount of experience in observing lecturers with very different lecturing styles and techniques.”

“For the past decade I have routinely analysed the pass rates by year level and ethnicity across all undergraduate courses to ensure I always understood the academic performance of each cohort in our department. Initially this was viewed by some as being an odd thing to do, superfluous to requirements. However, gradually, the data from my Equity Reports started to be included in the Equity and the Treaty of Waitangi section of our Department’s Annual Plan and Annual Report.”

“We have now developed an academic launch-pad for our advancing Māori and Pacific Island (MPI) students. Since 2001 we have identified MPI students for summer studentships in biology, in which promising students are given exposure to a research experience.”

“Numbers are only one side of the story, however. I always tutor in my own courses (a virtually unique occurrence in our School) because it allows the coordinator to be

‘visible’ outside of the lecture classes, to ‘feel’ how the course is going in ways that aren’t otherwise possible, and because it is a fun chance for a more one-on-one teaching experience.”

The concept of a challenge being a barrier to overcome was central to a number of portfolios. Many tertiary teachers wrote about their ability to recognise potential challenges for their students and proactively seek solutions to these problems. In some cases, the teachers generated the solutions without student input...

“My gut feeling at the time was that the students were likely to be clever because they were the best students from their schools and were struggling academically because of the social context rather than lack of ability or preparation. All that was required was to provide the conditions for the students to demonstrate their abilities. The outcome of our discussion was the Tuākana Programme (TP), which greatly reduces the attrition rate of Māori and Pacific Island students in the first year of university study.”

...but in most cases, solutions were generated as a direct result of student feedback.

“Students are well informed as to what I plan to do with their feedback. If specific issues arise during the course or if I feel the class is not responding the way I had hoped, then I will often invite anonymous comments through a Blackboard discussion board and make the appropriate changes during the lecture block.”

“A number of students commented that they felt most distanced when I gave them a pen-and-paper diagnostic assessment task. In reporting this back to the students, we discussed how I could have modified the strategy to make it less threatening and how they could use a version of this diagnostic method to engage students in their own classes.”

“As an experimentalist, I expect at times that implemented changes will be less well received. When that happens I modify the course. For example, I introduced student choice and self-reflective journals. More recent evaluations demonstrate the success of these refinements.”

That teacher’s propensity to experiment is not an isolated case. Many of the tertiary teachers wrote at length about their novel approaches to teaching and their willingness to experiment.



“I used to run a social theory course in a room with no desks, the point being to de-centre authority in an obvious way.”

“After years of trying to communicate to students the importance of a confident approach, and seeing little progress, I picked up an idea from Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Blink*. Studies have shown that people ‘primed’ with opposite stereotypes – Professor and Hooligan – perform differently on general knowledge quizzes. People asked to think about professors before their quiz do significantly better than people asked to think about hooligans. Was this the way to convince my students that mindset really does matter...? I designed a class experiment to see if I could demonstrate the same effect with my students – using quizzes on the course material. From the students’ perspective, we were doing two quizzes and watched videos before each quiz simply to ‘clear our minds’. One set of videos was from the Scottish movie *Soccer Hooligans*, the other set featured gifted children and Danica McKellar, illustrious actress and author of the book *Math Doesn’t Suck*. Doing this experiment for the first time was nerve-wracking – I had no idea whether it would demonstrate the point I wanted to make. But marking the results was extraordinary. After the ‘Smarts’ videos, student answers were careful and analytical,

including extra working and diagrams drawn in the margins. After the ‘Thugs’ videos, the answers were sloppy, careless, and often missing. Students even noticed for themselves their different feelings as they approached the two quizzes. The difference translated into a small, but significant, improvement in marks due to nothing more than ‘thinking smart’.”

“I wanted to ensure that the students were benefiting from the class. I thought that my lectures were rather captivating, so when I came across a study by Paul Cameron assessing listening in lectures, I decided to repeat it. Cameron had found that, even when the most popular teacher was lecturing, students were hardly listening. I arranged for one of my lectures to be interrupted at five intervals, while I was mid-sentence, and asked students to write down what they were thinking at the moment of interruption.”

“At times, in order to create a learning environment that achieves relevance, I find myself using a teaching initiative that places me at the cutting edge of chaos. I risk looking a fool if the activity falls flat. [At times like this] I feel vulnerable and well out of my comfort zone.”

Moving outside of one's comfort zone and being flexible and adaptable appear to be trademarks of excellent tertiary teachers. In the final two excerpts for this section, the individuals describe the manner in which they strive for flexibility and adaptability in their practice.

"My teaching is characterised by flexibility and diversity. The courses I've taught involve vastly different ways of viewing reality. For example, 'Research Methods' is based on a scientific worldview, 'Advanced Cross-Cultural Communication' adopts a social constructionist viewpoint (reality is an artifact of culture and society), while 'World Religions' is phenomenological (deals with multiple realities)."

"I strive to be adaptable. Supervisory arrangements that will work for the student, and flexibility in mutually exploring a topic area new to both parties, can pay dividends. Had I constructed myself as a narrowly defined specialist in one or two areas of scholarship early in my career, I would have had only a fraction of the enriching supervisory experiences that have widened my professional networks and contributed to reshaping my own scholarly interests."



Concluding thoughts:

Excellent tertiary teachers display many different attributes but they all care passionately about what they do and they all strive to do better. Excellent teachers take risks, innovate and respond to challenges in their everyday practice. They are committed to learning more about the impact that their teaching has on students' learning. When was the last time you did something novel in your teaching? Were you pleased with the results of that change? What will you change next time to enhance students' learning in your class?

The Goals and Rewards of Excellent Tertiary Teaching

Tentative definition of goals: The short- and long-term objectives that excellent tertiary teachers hope to achieve for their students through their practice (goals) and for themselves (rewards)

Guiding questions:

1. What do individuals identify as the primary objectives of their practice as tertiary teachers?
2. What do these teachers describe as the rewards of a career in tertiary teaching?

When asked to reflect on their objectives, or the goals that they have set, most Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award recipients provided similar responses. They each recognised the important role that they play in preparing the next generation for life ‘beyond the classroom’. Regardless of the field of expertise, these teachers want to equip their students with the skills and knowledge to be effective practitioners in the real world, as shown in the following excerpts:

“I want the students I teach to be effective professionals, whether as academics or working in the industry. I want them to become the sort of professionals that I

would want to work with. They need a thorough grounding in the processes and methodologies of their discipline but must also understand the context of their work, the need to act responsibly and ethically and be able to collaborate effectively with other professionals and the public. This implies a responsibility to teach beyond the normal curriculum, to facilitate learning outcomes more professional than knowledge-based in nature.”

“I assume responsibility for preparing students with skills allowing them to function effectively in today’s work environment.”

At the same time, these teachers also have a clear eye on their students' future trajectories.

"I am very conscious of 'future-proofing' our students for the new roles that may develop."

"I believe literacy is a fundamental right and I am passionate in doing what I can to enable others to develop their skills to improve aspects of their lives that will facilitate more opportunities and choices."

"My ultimate goal is to see learners walk out our door with self-belief and literacy skills sufficient to make more choices and to pursue their dreams."

"A key outcome of my programme is that students graduate with a realistic appreciation of what police life will be like, and the mahi (work) they are getting themselves into. I ensure that they learn how to think through problems and see the reality of how policing is a career that requires continual learning."

"I design activities that incorporate a range of learning styles (visual, aural, kinesthetic), and learners are encouraged to identify which worked best for them and why. This knowledge can be taken to any new learning situation where the student can critique the 'teaching' rather than believing they are unable to learn."



"My objective is to provide students with a repertoire of theories, tactics and techniques that will enable them to maximise their own negotiating effectiveness."

As evidenced in the excerpts above, most excellent tertiary teachers see it as their role to prepare students for the realities of life outside the tertiary classroom. Others share this view; however, instead of focusing on skill acquisition and development, they are driven by a desire to instil passion and excitement for the subject in their students.

"Student teachers with undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees have already achieved a high measure of academic success. My goal for them is that they learn ways to engage their students and fuel a lifelong love of learning about science."

“I hope to enthuse them to really want to go out and find the knowledge they require and to help them develop the necessary skills for doing so.”

“When I am invited to teach kaupapa Māori in other courses, I consider it a thrill and a responsibility, and the onus is on me to pass that thrill and responsibility on to taura.”

The concepts of passion and growth run deeply throughout this theme as evidenced in the following statements:

“Above all, I want my students to experience the sense of excitement I had as a student (when pursuing my first degree as a mature student), the sense that each new discovery is a koha or gift.”

“My passion and purpose is to inspire students to achieve their goals, ensuring they believe in themselves, and develop a drive for continual personal growth. This is the reality of why I teach.”

Some awardees articulated professional goals that reflect a personal belief in the importance of pushing student boundaries and challenging firmly entrenched conceptions in order to empower them.

“I begin to play the role of questioner – pushing them to defend these values, deliberately doubting their conclusions in order that they develop skills to defend them against rigorous critique. What does a peaceful world mean and is that possible? Whose justice are we talking about there? Such questioning is a strategic part of the empowerment process and students find themselves working as a group to defend each other’s conclusions.”

“To develop our autonomous health professionals they need to be engaged in active and deep learning and be problem solvers, so I set up situations where they ‘solve the puzzle’ for themselves.”

“Tertiary education does not simply exist to give students a meal ticket in the form of a degree (though, of course, that’s a desirable outcome!) but it also exists to make them better thinkers. They will only be better thinkers by having to think. They should feel free to question, debate and challenge. By engaging each other in the subject matter, we all become better thinkers. Even if, by the end, they don’t believe they have any better answers, they should at least be able to ask better questions!”

“My role during the block courses is to challenge their concepts so that they can work out the limits of their understanding.”

“My major goal is to work on extending and challenging the very top students.”

“My goal is to challenge student teachers to construct their own understanding of what it is to be effective professionals in a complex environment without losing sight of their vision.”

This drive to push students and encourage them to reach new heights was most aptly summed up by one awardee:

“Whāa te iti kahurangi ki te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei – pursue excellence – should you stumble, let it be to a lofty mountain.

For many of the excellent teachers, setting goals and helping students to achieve them is a hugely rewarding experience. Many awardees said that the rewards of a career in tertiary teaching are bountiful. They find personal satisfaction in the work they undertake and feel privileged and humbled to be able to teach at the tertiary level.



“I was unprepared for the intense personal satisfaction that results from assisting others to achieve their life goals, and quickly changed my career aspirations. The privilege and responsibility of being part of my students’ life process has encouraged and sustained me in my teaching roles since then.”

“One of the most rewarding things to hear from a student is ‘Well, I won’t be taking any more of that subject but I enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I would and I got a lot out of it’. That’s probably only beaten by ‘Well, I thought I would hate your subject but now I’m going to do more of it’.”

“My passion for my language is also shared with my passion for teaching and researching...I have had an opportunity to fulfil a dream of becoming a proficient speaker, an effective teacher of te reo Māori and a confident researcher.”

“Some of the most rewarding parts of what I do are not what you might expect. It’s the time in the supermarket checkout line when the operator says, ‘Hey, you were my lecturer last year. That was my favourite course!’ It’s when a student stands in your office and is delighted to have wrestled and struggled with the material and made it through. It’s when a student sheds tears (of happiness) because they can now graduate when they weren’t sure they ever would and you know you helped them there.”

“My greatest learning has come from the literacy learners themselves. They have shared their lives and their hearts. They have shared strategies that have worked and I have been privileged to be able to take these, add them to my kete, and share them with others.”

“It is an awesome privilege and a commitment we all make as teachers to make a difference in the lives of our students. ‘In the end, our work lives its ultimate life in the lives it enables others to lead’ (Elliot Eisner).”

While the awardees quoted above spoke of the rewards associated with making a difference in the lives of others, the following spoke more specifically about the privilege of helping others to learn...

“The double light-bulb moment has happened a couple of times while I was explaining something to the student, and both the student and I simultaneously and fully understood the concept. Leading the students to new places (even where I haven’t been before...) is perhaps the most rewarding experience for myself, and probably for the student as well!”

“Seeing the thrill of learning light up the faces of the people I teach is a great privilege and an even greater pleasure.”

“I’ve never lost the joy. The joy of that moment where the lights go on in a student’s eyes and they see something they haven’t seen before. Or they see the world in a different way. Or the time when you try something different and it works. These are the rewarding times.”

...and to develop important life skills.

“I have had the privilege of watching more than 250 students come through my programme and develop career skills, self-belief and a willingness to keep learning.”

Teaching at the tertiary level has sustained most awardees personally and professionally.

“Some students will naturally love the subject and want to go on even if they didn’t know it before they started. They are usually easy to inspire and they usually do well. Watching these students on their journey is a joy.”

“I’m proud to claim such a teaching philosophy as ‘Always learning, learning in all ways’ to embody and drive my work.”





“Nearing the end of my research and teaching career, I can’t believe how lucky I have been to have had the delight of interacting with so many talented, wonderful young people. They have kept me young at heart.”

“At the end of our time together our journeys continue – usually on their separate ways, of course. But we are changed by each other. How have I impacted on their journey? What will they take from our time together into the rest of their life? What have I learned from them? How will I change what I do in the future? Learning is a shared activity.”

Concluding thoughts: From all accounts, it is both a privilege and a responsibility to be a teacher in a tertiary institution. The intrinsic rewards that accompany teaching well – making a difference in the lives of students; and knowing that their students are achieving their goals – are sincerely articulated in the portfolios. This is more than a “job”. It is a deeply satisfying profession that they are fully committed to. What or who motivates you to focus on teaching in your institution? Are there intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards for a teaching job done well? And, as stated in the introduction:

Kāore he mutunga o te ako – There is no ending to learning.

See also: Volume 2 - Tertiary Teaching
Excellence in Practice
In print at: www.akoaootearoa.ac.nz/shop
Or online at: www.akoaootearoa.ac.nz/strivingforexcellence



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