



QUB TEACHING AWARDS

APPLICATION FOR SUSTAINED EXCELLENCE TEACHING AWARD 2018
(Open to individual academic colleagues who have been teaching within Higher Education for between 9 and 20 years)

Dr. Kurt Taroff, School of Arts, English and Languages (Drama)

1. PREVIOUS TEACHING AWARDS (200 words maximum)

I have never before won a teaching award.

2. CONTEXT FOR THE APPLICATION (300 words maximum)

I lecture in Drama, focusing primarily on the areas of theatre history, performance theory, and dramatic literature. In a subject with a high percentage of practical teaching in performance, it is crucially important that the classes that are more geared towards the theoretical side of the subject remain engaging and exciting for students. I have taught modules ranging from large lectures (70-120 students; with tutorials of 15-20) to small upper level modules of 15-20 students, in subjects ranging from the history of theatre from the Greeks to the medieval period, to American Drama in the 20th Century, to the theory and practice of adaptation in the contemporary arts. My overall teaching philosophy is focused on ensuring student participation, whether through traditional in-class discussions, or through student-led activities built into the structure of the module, including performances, presentations, group activities, and structured debates. I have long sought to utilize new technologies in my teaching, an effort that is the focus of this application. This has grown only more urgent over the last decade as technology has become deeply integrated into the lives of students (and their teachers). My use of internet tools for student activities—including the use of an interactive timeline creation tool as a way of actively thinking through history, and the use of online lectures as a way of encouraging student engagement with the lectures and freeing up additional class time for more interactive activities—is nothing more than an extension of that classroom philosophy into the students' individual study time. Student response to these initiatives has been extremely encouraging, both in terms of the feedback they have given and in the concrete results they have produced.

3. DISCUSSION

(a) How you are promoting and enhancing the learners' experience (1000 words maximum)

Since early in my teaching career I have been interested in ways of utilizing new and innovative educational technologies in the classroom and beyond. Since arriving at Queen's I have taken the lead in several initiatives to explore new ways of utilizing technology with regard to teaching and assessment. At all times, the underlying concept behind these initiatives has been to leverage student understanding of and engagement with computers, the internet, and contemporary technology in general to enhance (rather than replace) traditional methods of teaching.

In 2009, I began a fruitful working relationship with Dr. Gill Kelly, a specialist in Educational Technology in the Centre for Educational Development. Initially, I worked with her on utilizing a new website I had found called timeglider.com, which enabled students, working alone or in groups, to create historical timelines to which they could add images and video, and could separate events in the timeline into different criteria. Teaching a class in Theatre History from the 15th to late 19th centuries, I divided my students up into groups of four, giving each group a period of 100 years and then instructing each group to divide their work into four categories, with each student investigating one: playwrights and plays; theatre buildings; major historical events (especially those that might have some impact on the theatre); and other cultural landmarks. The individuals could then integrate their work into a single timeline for their period and group, which was marked as a whole (the group context demanding that they work together and putting pressure on individual students to make a significant contribution), and finally the work of all of the groups was merged together into a single timeline, creating a comprehensive historical view of the period. This final product not only highlighted the work of the group, but served as a useful study tool for the module's final exam. While the software and the project was not without its

limitations, the assignment proved popular in its own right and seemed to improve student outcomes in the module.

Without question, my most significant effort at innovation with educational technology has been my exploration of the 'flipped' classroom. When I came to Queen's in 2007, I was surprised to find that theatre history modules in Drama utilized the format of a one-hour lecture period and a one or two-hour seminar. In the US, I had always used longer sessions that were a mixture of lecture and discussion, but as I was told that students were accustomed to this format and that this was what was expected, I adapted, and developed a series of lectures in PowerPoint, as per the format. I have always been an engaging lecturer, and students responded to my style, but with fifty-minute sessions limiting the amount I could accomplish in any one class, I soon found that interactivity had to be kept to a minimum in the lecture session, reserved only for the seminar. But by the time the seminar came around, much of the momentum of the lecture had dissipated, and furthermore, since much of my seminar time was spent on practical assessments, there was little time remaining to discuss the plays and theories in any detail. Through discussion with colleagues of mine in the US who were experimenting with the idea, as well as my own reading into the research that has been conducted, I developed a plan for instituting my own version of blended learning and the 'flipped' classroom. I maintain the lecture/seminar time slots, but now the lecture period, rather than simply consisting of me talking at the students, became an opportunity to discuss issues arising from the lecture and the theory, with the seminar now dedicated completely to the plays themselves. In addition, with that more flexible time built in, I could introduce more engaging interactive activities, such as debates, improvised performances, and group work.

Using the online lecture delivery site VoiceThread (www.voicethread.com), I am able to integrate my own PowerPoint slides, videos (including, if desired, video of myself giving the lecture), and audio clips (as most of these systems allow). The advantage of VoiceThread, from my perspective, is that students can post comments (via video, audio, or text) that become attached to the slide in real time. In this way, students can engage directly with the lecture at the point where they have questions or comments. I can then go through those comments on before each class, and begin the period going through any issues may not have been fully conveyed in the lecture itself. I then open the discussion to any additional questions that students still feel confused about. This generally leaves 30-45 minutes for those more flexible, interactive activities.

Students have embraced the blended learning concept, and particularly the online lectures, as evidenced in comments such as: 'Voicethread lectures are the best lectures I have had at Queen's', and 'Voicethreads were very helpful as you can pause and take proper notes'. These sentiments, and the efficacy of the model, have been reinforced by the fact that exam results improved markedly since I implemented blended learning in these modules. I believe this can be attributed to the fact that because students can return to the lectures whenever they please, I can include less text in the slides. This forces students to listen more attentively and take better notes. Furthermore, the variety of activities I can now do in the additional time allows concepts to sink into students' minds through varied methods.

While I first used Voicethread in exam-based history classes, the students' experience with the format in First Year, and their comfort with it, has lead them to ask me to bring it into use in modules where I had continued to give live lectures, such as my second-year American Drama module. Student enthusiasm clearly demonstrates the efficacy of the flipped classroom in my teaching, and I continue to look for new ways to take advantage of the added time it gives me to engage and interact with students.

(b) How you support colleagues and influence support for student learning
(350 words maximum)

Since coming to Queen's eleven years ago, I have taken on a number of positions that have given me the opportunity to encourage and support my colleagues, both in taking on new approaches to teaching and using technology in the classroom as well as across the full range of educational issues that are at the

heart of our work. I currently serve as Director of Research for the School of Arts, English and Languages.

As Subject Lead for Drama, I lead a major curriculum review, working with colleagues to ensure that our offering was appealing to students, while also doing the hard work of preparing them for a future in theatre or any number of careers beyond the field. I have been a very active advocate for interdisciplinary education, supporting staff as they worked to create modules that might have appeal to students across the school and faculty (and at times, across the university), and have worked with David Phinnemore and the AHSS Faculty Education Committee to ensure that students have space within the curriculum to engage across subjects.

In my time as Director of Education, I have collaborated with colleagues and students on a number of initiatives aimed at ensuring that students feel supported in their learning, and that their voice is being heard. These include working expanding a Peer Mentoring programme that gives second and third year students the opportunity to help a new student find their way through all aspects of life at Queen's, and an initiative to conduct informal mid-semester module reviews across the school (in addition to the formal end-of-semester evaluations), ensuring that wherever possible, the student voice can help make meaningful change in module design (where possible) even when that module is already underway.

Finally, I played a key role in the development and approval of six new programmes in the Creative Arts that took in their first cohort of students this year. These programmes are designed to give student practical training for future careers, while maintaining the intellectual rigour associated with Queen's.

(c) Professional development activities you've undertaken and the impact of these activities on your approach (350 words maximum)

In 2007, I attended an HEA—Palatine Workshop for New and Early Career Lecturers where the idea of the 'flipped' classroom was briefly discussed. Following that workshop, I stayed in touch with Paul Kleiman, then head of Palatine (the now-defunct educational support organization for drama and performance programmes in higher education), and explored how these programmes, which place an extremely high value on presence, might best utilize the emerging educational technologies. Our discussions, combined with my own reading of the most recent research on 'blended learning', was a key influence on my efforts to bring VoiceThread and other technology into my teaching.

I was asked by CED in 2014 to give a poster presentation on the subject at their annual conference, where I met a group in Sociology who were also using the technology. After exchanging ideas and methodologies with my colleagues, I changed my approach to creating the videos, as well as asking students to vary the ways they interacted with the technology in making their comments.

In 2017, I applied for and was awarded Senior Fellowship in the Higher Education Academy. Part of the application required a review of recent scholarship, from which I discovered that the most recent research shows that the most effective online lectures feature both the lecture slides and the lecturer speaking, a feature possible within PowerPoint and VoiceThread and one which I have since integrated into these lectures.

Most recently, I have attended a workshop on innovative models of assessment. Still in progress (a second part will happen later in the Spring), this workshop is of particular significance as the university

moves to a new academic year structure, requiring subjects with long-held and well-reasoned methods for assessing student achievement to reconsider the timings and types of assessment that they use. With the first session focused on ways that students engage with a module based on its assessments, and the second on designing assessments that mesh with these approaches, these workshops will provide an important tool not only as I further develop my own assessments, but also, as DE, in helping my colleagues design more effective assessment strategies across the school.