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Zooming in on education

In 2013 dr. Makiko Sadakata received the Faculty of Social Sciences' Teaching Award for her excellent work in teaching courses on research methods to BA and MA students of Artificial Intelligence. In addition to successfully bridging the gap between research and teaching, she has inspired her students to take their work to the next level, taking some of her MA students as far as presenting their paper at internationally renowned conferences. Reason enough to sit down and ask her a few questions about her experiences as a teacher.

Text: Kayleigh de Block

What does being a good teacher mean to you?

'During my time as a teacher, I've experimented a bit on what works best for me and the students. Initially I thought I was supposed to fill up one and a half hours' worth of lecture time with me talking and students taking notes. As I was giving my lecture, however, I noticed that my words were not reaching the students: they were starting to drift off and fall asleep, which, naturally, hurt my feelings a bit. It did, however, make me realise that just talking to your students isn't always the best method.

Now my approach to teaching is essentially the opposite of what I was doing before. Instead of just talking to them, I continuously ask questions and help the students get to the right answer themselves. This way, I hope that they are actively involved in the learning process. Of course I can't be 100% sure they really enjoy this way of teaching, but students are always asking questions, which is generally a sign they're paying attention.'

Did you always want to become a teacher or was it something you discovered later on in life?

'A little of both I suppose. I remember at elementary school my dream was to become a teacher, but then I forgot about it when I started doing my own research. It wasn't until I got the opportunity to give a couple of guest lectures that my interest in teaching was rekindled. I was reminded of the things that drew me to it in the first place; the interaction with students. It gives me great joy to be able to enthuse them about subjects that I like as well, and there is nothing quite like witnessing that 'aha-moment' when they've really understood something.'

How do you combine doing research with teaching?

'For me teaching and doing research are not that far apart, especially when you're teaching a course on research methods. A course on "methods" sounds quite boring, but it is quite the opposite. I try to use as many practical examples as possible, and it helps that I have my own research to draw from; it's material that I know inside out and that I am very enthusiastic about, which makes for a more engaging lecture. Sometimes students become enthusiastic about the same topics I like, which is great, and sometimes they come up with great ideas that excite me, which I then try to motivate them to take further.

Some of the reports came out from the course that I have been teaching my students were of outstanding quality, so I encouraged my them to submit their papers to conferences. Last year, one paper was even nominated for an award, which was a huge deal. It's highly unusual for an MA course paper to not only being accepted, but be among the top student papers presented. It was an extraordinary experience, for me as well as the students. It's very fulfilling to see too – that we have managed to stimulate students to believe in themselves and really go for it.'

Are there some things that you find difficult about teaching?

'When I was a student myself I didn't really think my teachers cared whether I failed or not. I never realised that as a teacher you can feel really sad when you can't let a student pass. This wasn't something I had expected to feel.

Another aspect that took some time for me to get used to was the planning involved in teaching. Teaching a course means you are responsible for a student's grades and their life maybe – failing your course might mean they fail the entire programme – so it's important to have a clearly structured schedule for everyone to adhere to, myself included. Students do unexpected things, especially when it comes to deadlines or ideas for research projects, so all these things I have to try to foresee and plan ahead for.'

Finally, if you could give one piece of advice to your fellow teachers, what would it be?

One of the best tips I got from my colleagues when I first started is 'don't give answers but ask questions'. Doing that has turned teaching around for me. In my experience it works well for both teachers and students, which motivates both parties to take it to the next level.'