

Capturing the Voice of Experience

Carmel McNaught

*Centre for Learning Enhancement And Research
The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

This issue of *Education Research Journal* is aimed at gaining some understanding about how teachers in higher education in Hong Kong coped during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis of March to June 2003. We are not presenting the results of a carefully planned research study. How could we do so? SARS struck with frightening speed. There was no time to form an elegant multi-faceted evaluation plan in order to examine the changes in teaching strategies that teachers adopted. We all worked with very short time spans and with rapid revisions when plans went awry. It was a time of fear and a time of action. It is the nature of the action that I want to explore. The “data” for this investigation are seven narratives written by nine colleagues at my University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). There were three narratives with a focus on institutional or

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Carmel McNaught, Centre for Learning Enhancement And Research, Room 302, Academic Building No. 1, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong. E-mail: carmel.mcnaught@cuhk.edu.hk

Questions Used for the Interview With the Chairman of the SARS Task Force

- At what point did the University realize that this was not a Prince of Wales Hospital (PWH) problem but an institution-wide one which would need a coordinated approach?
- From that point how long did it take before the initial structure of the SARS Task Force (STF) was established?
- What is the formal status of the STF?
- How did the STF initially see its task? I know the terms of reference but how were these initially interpreted? How many factors were noted that would need coordination? [In the article, I'd like to diagrammatically map these as a number of discrete but overlapping factors.]
- How were concerns prioritized, for example, how did the handling of classes and examinations weigh against the logistics of campus cleansing?
- Were there particular points when juggling all the factors was more difficult than at other times?
- How was information collected? And checked? Who did this administrative work? Who are the silent "besides-the scenes" workers? Did these people easily emerge?
- Who managed the STF website — both content and technical matters?
- How were time pressures handled?
- Was there much dissension about decisions, e.g., on class suspension and resumption, face mask policy? How was it handled?
- How did the structure, membership and brief of the STF change over the days and weeks? How can you summarize its evolution?
- When did the STF realize that SARS is likely to be a longer-term problem, rather than a short defined crisis?
- At that point, did psychological issues gain more prominence?
- Most importantly, what are emerging as ongoing strategies and principles for university policy?

departmental level concerns, and four narratives written by teachers focusing on their experiences in trying out new (to them) strategies to support the students they taught in specific courses. In this editorial I will describe the process used to elicit these narratives. These narratives were written and refined during the period May to September 2003.

The first narrative presented in this issue is focused around the experience of setting up the University SARS Task Force. In this case the Chairman of the Task Force, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Jack Cheng was interviewed by me using the set of questions opposite which had previously been sent to Jack. I then used this interview, the minutes of the first 22 Task Force meetings and the archived copies of all iterations of the SARS website <<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/sars/>> till the end of April to draft a narrative. This then went through a few iterations with Jack before the final form crystallized.

A narrative was also written by two staff of the University's Information Technology Services Centre (ITSC). These were Philip Leung, Assistant Director of the Centre, and Christina Keing, who manages the Web-Based Teaching group at CUHK <<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/wbt/>>. In this case, the content of the narrative emerged from a long discussion Philip, Christina and I had in mid-April 2003. We agreed that the ITSC contribution would be along the lines of how ITSC accommodated new pressures on the IT infrastructure during the time of SARS. This could include issues such as the increased mail load and Internet traffic within Hong Kong and to the rest of the world, as well as the need to plan carefully to ensure that key personnel remain available (the "clean" team). Implications for future IT planning would also be included. Again, there were several iterations of the narrative, as reflections became more focused.

The pressures on departments were very high and I wanted to capture the experiences of teachers and students at a programme level and so I contacted the chairman of the department which was the first to place a departmental entry on the SARS website, the Department of Physics. The questions I sent to Leo Lau are:

Questions Given to the Chairman of the Department of Physics

- What were your initial reactions to the possibility of classes being suspended?
- What was the atmosphere among the staff? What concerns did they voice? How united were their opinions?
- What was the range of decisions you needed to make about provision of support to students?
- What was the range of decisions you needed to make about the maintenance of morale in the department and continuation of other academic functions?
- How did decisions get implemented?
- What were students' reactions?
- What worked well and what didn't?
- On reflection, what are the implications for ongoing departmental policy about the curriculum?
- On reflection, what are the implications for ongoing departmental policy about channels of communication with students?

There were four narratives written by teachers about how they coped with supporting students in their learning within the contexts of specific courses. I knew of the work these teachers were doing, either because I worked with them on other projects or because colleagues mentioned their good work. These stories are, therefore, in no way a representative sample of all the changes in teaching and learning that occurred at this time at CUHK. However, each teacher focused on a different aspect of her/his teaching and the choices of technology that each used were different; thus, each narrative differs from the others. A summary of the context of these stories is in Table 1. It is important to note that the use of technology was not elaborate. It was new for these teachers and innovative in that sense.

The teachers wrote narratives as a response to a series of questions provided by me. Each set of questions was tailored according to what I knew about the context of the teacher. Questions covered the nature of the

Table 1 Context of the Four Narratives of Teacher Working in Specific Courses

Teacher(s)	Context and pedagogical focus of change	Choice of technology
Irene	Interactive real-time lecturing, including visiting speakers, to part-time students (who are also full-time nurses) in a post-graduate midwifery diploma	A video-streaming system for the teachers; text-chat in WebCT for the students
Andrew and Enders	Interactive real-time tutorials to final year medical students	Students access the intranet site of images in one window and an MSN chat room in another
Derek	Feedback on written drafts of assignments to undergraduate students in a range of courses	"Track Changes" and "New Comment" facilities of Word for students' drafts; e-mail for communication
Lixian	Final assessment in a course on introductory discourse analysis changed from formal examination to take-home examination	Electronic submission (WebCT or e-mail) of the take-home exam answers

course being taught, where the idea for the teaching innovation came from, the logistics of getting technology operational, the design of any online teaching, personal reactions to doing something new, what worked well, what didn't, feedback from students about the process, and general reflections. A typical set of questions is:

Questions Given to Teachers of Specific Courses

- What is the general nature of your course?
- What are the usual strategies you use for this aspect of your teaching?
- Where did you get the idea on using this new strategy from?
- How did you feel the day you began? Nervous, confident, excited?
- How did you get the system for using the technology set up?
- What were the easy bits? What were the challenges?
- What actually happened?
- How successful do you think it was?
- Has there been feedback from students?
- Would you do it again?
- What would you change?
- What does the University need to learn about supporting this type of activity?

In the process described above I tried to act as an enabler, as an aid for clarification. Some of my colleagues had not engaged in this type of reflective writing before; others were very experienced. In the case of the SARS Task Force narrative, I was deeply engaged in the writing; the pressures on the Task Force members were so great that this was the only viable strategy. So, with some narratives it was easy to be essentially a background editor. However, with others I constantly had to check myself that I was maintaining the voice of the authors and not allowing my own reflections to color the stories. For example, the dialogue between Andrew and Enders was constructed from separate contributions from Andrew and Enders. The dialogue format seemed to me to mirror the process that had actually occurred. The key to the validity of this approach is each author's satisfaction that the final narrative is indeed an authentic representation, and the process followed in the development of this collection of narratives involved constant requests for that validation.

The main section of the issue contains the seven stories. This is then followed by the three editors' reactions to this collection. Each editor comes to the collection with a different discipline focus and a different set of analytic skills. This enables multiple perspectives to be made available to readers to assist their own analysis and construction of meaning.

David Chan uses his skills as an educational psychologist to analyze the collection from the approach of narrative therapy. Roger Cheng is a philosopher and he brings this analytic tradition to his analysis. Because I have been so intimately involved with these narratives, my own reflections will be in the form of an examination of the overall themes emerging from the collection as a whole.