

Does teaching for the public good make new or different demands on academics? Do we have to be something different? How do we do this? What do we become?

Debby Blaine

When I joined Stellenbosch University in 2007 as a senior lecturer in Mechanical and Mechatronics Engineering, I was sent on the PRONTAC/PREDAC lecturer training course by my department. Here my role as a lecturer was clearly defined by the three pillars of academic life: teaching, research and community service. It was at this workshop that I was introduced to the idea that there was more to this job than pitching up for lectures and bringing in research funds. I was inspired by the idea that I could make a difference in students' lives, and comforted by knowing there was the Center for Teaching and Learning that was there to support me on my journey. It was reassuring to know that there was actual research and resources available to help me grow as a lecturer. I joined the Critical Professionalism research group where a group of lecturers from different faculties and departments discussed what it meant to be professional in our academic career and how we could teach professionalism in our classes. We questioned the identity of the academic, looked at the influence of our own biographies as well as those of our students. This new forum brought a wealth of insight and understanding into what my role at the University was and what it could be.

So when pondering the question: Does teaching for the public good make new or different demands on academics? I now think I can reflect on all the discussions, presentations and workshops I have attended and answer yes, it certainly does. However, much of the onus lies with the academic. It is relatively easy to find a comfort zone in one's department, toe the line and cover the duties that are required of you. But when considering your teaching role, then to do only this limits your experience and influence on the public good. We are tasked with transferring knowledge to our students, training them to become practitioners in our communities, but a more hopeful and responsible lecturer tasks herself with making sure that those students not only understand content, but understand their role in society and take this role seriously. Growing responsible, reliable, fair, compassionate, diligent and ethical students has to start from our own example. And tasking oneself on a daily basis to exhibit all the admirable qualities of what we would like to see in our Stellenbosch Graduates is a challenge.

However, like all things important, once your eyes have been opened, it is nearly impossible to ignore your new role. So becoming and being a hopeful lecturer, focused on teaching for the public good, is less a function of what we do and more so of who we are. The doing part supports the being – spending time on careful preparation of one's lectures, reflecting on one's interaction with the student, the class and the community of practice, participating in discussion and sharing our experiences with other lecturers – these all feed in to being a lecturer who is professional. But the real change is in your heart, believing that you do have the power to affect a change, to help young people grow into confident, engaged and focused members of our society, and believing that it is your mandate to do your best to instill this code of excellence in the students and academics of our University.