

An Undelivered Farewell Speech to Concerned Faculty, Bewildered Administrators, Hong Kong Taxpayers, Caring Parents, and the Undergraduates of the Chinese University of Hong Kong

Especially those interested in obtaining a good education in economics

This is an essay about the importance of writing, a university faculty that serves itself in the name of students, and the future leaders of Hong Kong.

Undergraduate students of economics at CUHK are seriously deficient in their ability to write. In addition, there are few teachers in the Department of Economics, who are both willing and capable of teaching them how to write better. This is my determination after a full year of intensive interaction with both students and faculty.

Writing is a relatively inexpensive medium for the dissemination of ideas to people whom we do not know. Political leaders and top managers often do not see changes that need to take place, because they are so distant from the people who could benefit most from them. Even when they are aware of problems, these leaders can often do little, because there are so many others of similar rank who naturally resist change out of fear that their own social status and personal life style will be disrupted. Thus, it is important that we learn how to write, because through writing we can touch distant leaders, who truly care, and enlighten others, whom we do not know, but who can benefit from the changes we seek to bring about. Once the truth is known by everyone or at least most, even reactionary officials are compelled to act.

Since what we write is to be read by people whom we do not know, it must be written in a way that transcends our own personal experience. Moreover, those who read what we write often have no idea about what we have written until they have read

it. For these reasons our ideas must be lucid, well substantiated, and interesting. We must command the attention of our readers with easy to understand examples and convincing logic. We must be able to answer as many of the important questions that our readers might ask without their ever having asked. These are not easy tasks, and it is for this reason that writing takes much thought, practice, and revision. Without proper incentives the required effort will never be generated.

CUHK instructors give many reasons why students should learn how to write, but until they reward and punish them with grades and appropriate coursework, will they ever bother to learn? Probably not -- there are simply too many other things that demand our immediate attention when we are young! How is it then that professors in the CUHK Department of Economics, who apparently place so much emphasis on their own publications, do so little to promote student writing in economics?

Indeed, learning to write takes valuable time away from a professor's personal agenda and research, but how does this give professors the right to place their own research above the teaching of Hong Kong's future middle managers, government administrators, journalists, researchers, and political leaders? Whether it is just plain arrogance on their part, or a poorly designed payroll incentive system is difficult to say. Whichever the case, most professors in this department care little about teaching students how to write -- even about economic topics.

Certainly this neglect is not a matter of

market competition, because CUHK is a primarily government-funded institution. Indeed, the very motivation for the chairman and others to point the finger of blame at Hong Kong's primary and secondary schools is that these are CUHK's competitors for Hong Kong tax dollars. Certainly you can find no recent research about the economics of Hong Kong's education system emanating from the CUHK Department of Economics! This is because clarifying the situation would let the cat out of the bag. Rather, what you see is intense competition for government rents (grant money) and personal prestige, whilst individual faculty members jockey with one another to get their names published in the world's top economic journals. Journals whose content is often so far removed from the real world that even many reputable economists are unable to understand it! Who pays for this senseless competition? The taxpayers of Hong Kong and their children, whose education is sacrificed, so that these "teachers" can fill their pockets with research grants and tour the world in the name of erudition. In the end the name of the game in the CUHK Department of Economics is not who can do the most for Hong Kong, but who can get the most from its taxpayers!

So as not to be speaking in an intellectual void, as many of my colleagues have wont, please consider the following facts. Of the entire staff employed by the university only one out of every five is listed as a "teacher". Unfortunately, of these only 15% are listed as instructors or senior instructors and remunerated only and entirely for their teaching performance. The other 85% of CUHK's so-called teachers are busy competing for journal publications, conference money, and office perks obtained through research grants at the taxpayers' expense. In short, only 3% of all university personnel, including administrators, technicians, grounds keepers, clerical workers, and pool guards are -- at least on paper -- truly devoted to teaching! In reality, even among instructors (teachers of non-

professorial rank) there exist important incentives to publish and shirk their responsibility as teachers; a large number of instructors are untenured and looking for work at other research institutions.

Please do not misunderstand; none of this should imply that the three quarters of total university expenditure -- nominally dedicated to "academic service" -- does not offer paybacks to the Hong Kong community. Surely it must, else how could things have gotten as bad as they have? It is difficult to cheat the unknowing unless the lie is at least partially believable. The bottom line is that much of this expenditure is not in the form of higher education to Hong Kong's youth, and much of it is spent with no other purpose than to occupy a "chair" in a luxurious environment filled with work related amenities. If you have ever wondered why businesses in Hong Kong are crying for better educated graduates; herein lies the answer.

In short, being around knowledgeable people is only truly useful, if they share their knowledge with you. Unfortunately, the knowledge that one obtains in lectures, one can usually better obtain from books, where one can read and understand at one's own pace. Most students do not attend lectures to learn, anyway! Rather, they attend to be entertained and find out what will appear on the next examination.

I am leaving CUHK not because I am running away from this abominable situation; rather because those who prefer to maintain it are pushing me out. Writing about economics cannot be learned in classes devoted to ancient Chinese poetry and 19th century English literature, but that is where the Economics Department at CUHK thinks it should be taught! Fortunately, most of my students have already graduated, and those that have decided to stay have little choice or other goals in mind.

In my mind the only questions that remain about CUHK's Department of Economics

are who will teach CUHK undergraduate students how to write, and how long will the charade continue? Specifically, who will have the courage to bring about the still needed changes required to ensure that students at CUHK are provided with proper incentives to learn how to write?

Finally, just how long will these so-called professors be allowed to place the blame for their own neglect and self-aggrandizement on Hong Kong's primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions, the Research Grants Council (RSG), and the Hong Kong government? Certainly they will not blame CUHK's administration, because the pro-Vice Chancellor is a "Professor" of Economics!

Both the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science[s], CHAU Kin Lam, and the pro-Vice Chancellor, LIU Pak Wai, have told me that I am creating enemies. Little does either appear to understand that my enemies were there before I arrived; I am simply identifying, who they are. Perhaps they are among them!

Foreign exchange without language is an invitation to conflict. English is the medium of international communication in East Asia. Hong Kong is a world class trade and financial center. What will it be tomorrow?

On July 31, 2001 I will have left CUHK. Rumor has it that there has been a mismatch. According to the department's chairperson my contract has expired....