



Academics must rise

Prof Sandy van Vuuren



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Sandy is the 2015 winner of the Johnson and Johnson Teacher of The Year award.

I never thought I would be the academic reiterating the words "Back in my day.....", but yes, I have reached that age. Academic teaching has changed dramatically in the last 16 years that I have been lecturing. I clearly remember my first exposure to the "other side" where I no longer was a student, but suddenly a pharmacy staff member.

I started my first day as a technician, all wide eyed, young, energetic and keen to learn. Lorraine Osman (yes, our Madam Editor) held me captive and I have never had a dull moment since. Thirty-two years on and I'm still here, maybe not as young or wide eyed, but certainly ready to match the youth with new challenges.

Why am I still here, I am often asked. The salary is questionable. Despite what many believe, juggling research and teaching is stressful and managing more and more demanding students is becoming the ultimate challenge. But here I am, and besides my occasional tirade, I am here to stay. Yes, students have changed. This has been especially evident with the # Fees Must Fall campaign. While students protest on issues affecting their economic situation, their political standing and their right to an education, we need to ask ourselves what the impact is on the academic learning process. Students used to be "seen and not heard" and would often sit quietly in the class, take notes and seldom challenge what has been said. Nowadays, as an academic, you had better well be prepared! Know your work, because at some stage in the lecture you will be challenged. While this may be a scary thought, especially for younger academics, it is not necessarily such a bad thing. Gone are the days where you can rush into the lecture with last year's slides and think you can impress the youth. They want new knowledge and they want it now. The students of today are of the "now generation". Before students have had their first cup of coffee, they have already caught up on the news headlines (News 24) and connected with their contacts (Whatsapp, FaceBook, Twitter or whatever is the trendiest, quickest way to connect). So if as an academic, you go into a lecture and think you can just wing it, think again. The youth all have their smart phones and are ready to check up all the facts. Before thinking about banning cell phones, rather consider how to deal with handling them during teaching. If a student picks up

their cell phone to check a fact, is that really such a bad thing? They are interested, are learning and engaging, which is one of our main purposes as teachers. Of course, one needs to ensure the use of supplementary technology does not become the main source of information, so my philosophy in this respect is to embrace these changing times, accept (with the exception of exams) that students will have their cell phones available during class. The challenge is how to ensure that the student chooses to rather observe the focus of the lecture rather than the "urgent whatsapp" that has just pinged. I do this by ensuring that notes have missing information which requires the student to complete during the lecture. If a student picks up their cell phone to photograph or video a part of a lecture, I am not averse to this. The youth today spend a lot of their free time communicating by watching video clips, looking at images (e.g. instagram) and messaging. If I can incorporate some of their learning into this medium then they are more likely to be receptive to the learning process. It is for this reason that almost every lecture is complemented with a video elaborating on some aspect. This keeps the student interested and retains a certain level of bridging the age gap. It also gives the student a sense that as an older peer, I am in touch with their needs.

Pharmacy is a dynamic, patient-oriented profession committed to fulfilling the health care needs of all communities. I believe the student needs to take pride in their profession which needs to be constantly reinforced in teaching. Back in the day, pharmacy students took great care in promoting how ethical they were and stood out amongst all medically affiliated students. As pharmacy lecturers, we need to reinforce this. Showing pride in your work, being on time and instilling a sense of ownership in the profession can go a long way in encouraging the student's belief in their chosen profession. Minor aspects such as how to write an appropriate e-mail request to a lecturer (or other peer) is important and often overlooked, so correcting students on this aspect will not only provide a guideline for professional courtesy but also mutual respect. Take students on industrial visits, get people from the profession to promote the field and engage in discussions that will make the student excited and eager to learn more.

In my teaching, I aim to get the student to think beyond learning for exams. For many students this is their priority but I use questioning methods that will enable the student to make decisions that will draw on the broad based knowledge which

they have been taught. My philosophy is to try to get the students to relay knowledge in a confident manner. I feel students often answer exam questions based on key words that they have learned. In doing so, some students miss the point of the question. For me this is an important skill to impart to students. If a patient enters a pharmacy and asks the responsible pharmacist a question, the pharmacist should be able to respond by listening to the question, answering with the appropriate knowledge and communicate in a clear confident manner. Knowledge must pertain to the question and not to anything random that the pharmacist just knows. Patients need to leave the pharmacy with the assurance that their queries have been answered adequately as this will retain the integrity of the pharmacist. I believe that teaching the syllabus is more than relaying knowledge but a means to instil life skills. Strict lecture and practical times are adhered to. By ensuring that I am on time always and prepared, I set an example of good time management. I expect the same from the students as time management is a necessary skill in life. It always amazes me that traffic seems to be the issue for an 8:00 lecture. Why is it a surprise that there is traffic early morning? When the pharmacists do qualify, do they really expect their peers to sympathise with this on an ongoing basis? We are custodians of knowledge and have the privilege (or responsibility) to mould the future of our youth. This means starting with the basics such as mutual respect and leads on to providing life skills that will empower the young pharmacist to take ownership of their profession.

What about research? Academics are constantly being bombarded with the pressure of publishing and trying to juggle teaching and administration with research. The emphasis of research often outweighs teaching. The debate of workloads is ongoing and as

academics we need to use all the universities resources available to manage this juggle. If the University offers writing retreats, go on them. If they offer courses that ease one into the process of research, grab the opportunity. I believe that to be a good teacher at tertiary level, it is important to be actively involved in research. To be involved in research teaches you to be critical, analytical, have good time management and most importantly, to be up to date with progressive thinking. These skills are imperative in the training of young pharmacists.

Lecturing is a dynamic form of improving oneself. The natural process of learning is by trial and error. When we engage with the students we will make mistakes and the lecture we give this year may differ next year and the next. After all, the driving force that makes us improve is to learn from the mistakes from the past. It is this philosophy that will help the students to improve themselves. The challenge lies in constantly keeping the syllabus updated and in tune with the present student's needs. Trying not to delve on the failing aspect and more on the "how did it go wrong?" aspect will help to develop a stronger work ethic. We need to arise above mistakes, both those we make as academics and those of our students and embrace the learning process. Remember, one learns more from the mistakes that are made than from getting things right first time. In that way the teaching experience does not become didactic and remains integral to the learning process of pharmacy students.

The Pharmacy degree is only the start to the pharmacists learning process, but provides a firm foundation for pharmacists to continue learning and becoming the kind of pharmacist South Africa needs.