

**A short speech given on Homecoming Day of the 80<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary of the HKU Faculty of Science  
March 9, 2019.**

President Zhang, Dean Evans, colleagues, Science alumni and friends, I am delighted to be invited to share some of my experience with this Faculty.

To everything there is a first time and a last time. I will tell you something about the first class and the last class I taught as a full-time teacher of this Faculty. I am grateful to the Faculty for nurturing me making me what I am today.

On August 13, 1975 I reported for duty to the Head of Department of Mathematics, the late Professor Y.C. Wong, also my esteemed teacher and mentor. He informed me I was assigned to teach the course “Operations Research II”, a subject unknown to me. The specific topic to be taught was queueing theory, the study on minimizing the waiting time in a queue. Brought up as an abstract algebraist I was at first somewhat scared at hearing that I would take up a totally unfamiliar subject in applied mathematics. As a student of this Faculty and a mathematician I soon saw it in a different light. Every mathematician who is familiar with the long history and culture of this discipline will know that the artificial and mistaken demarcation of mathematics between pure and applied is neither correct nor helpful. Thus, I saw this teaching assignment as a challenge to learn rather than a chore to bear. I took a crash course on probability theory from my good friend LAM Kin of the Department of Statistics, and began to study intensively queueing theory on my own with tremendous help from Kin.

One month later I was bold enough to go to my first class in HKU. I told the students I was learning the subject just as they were,

only with the advantage of a head start of one month, and if I could do it so could they. Today this admission of ignorance would label me as an unqualified teacher. Lucky for me, in those good old days this honest confession turned out to attract one student in my class to become my first MPhil student the next year!

Thirty years went by. On May 7, 2005, a Saturday morning, I taught my last class in “Mathematics: A Cultural Heritage”, a course for students in all Faculties which I designed and began teaching in 1999 with a class of four students. Twenty years ago the administration had the wisdom to tolerate such a small class by seeing in it its intellectual value. I tried to embody in this course my conviction that teaching is to tell a story, a good story which arouses curiosity and excites imagination, a story about the long quest by the human mind for an understanding of the world around us. At the end of class a student came out and announced that, as it was my final lecture before my retirement, the class wished to thank me for what I had taught them. Another student presented me with a one-sided loop, the so-called Möbius band, with the phrase "teaching for three decades" written on it to signify that this will go on with no bound.

I always say, no matter how the environment and mood of the tertiary sector may change, for better or for worse, there are three places that I always love and feel comfortable — the classroom, the library and the swimming pool, in that order.

M. K. Siu

March 9, 2019.