



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
ENGAGING THE WORLD

The Meaning of Teaching

Kai Bu

As I proudly claimed on [my webpage](#) at the beginning of this semester, this summer, I'm enjoying teaching [CMPT 300: Operating Systems I](#) at the GREAT [Simon Fraser University](#).

Thanks to the [Dual Degree Program](#) between SFU and my home institution [Zhejiang University](#), our colleagues have the opportunity of visiting and teaching at SFU. Numerous SFU faculty members – such as Janice and Martin – have, in turn, taught at Zhejiang University. (Out of respect to the SFU tradition, I am referring to whomever appears in this post by their first name.) Since my arrival at SFU, many faculty members here such as Danyu, Greg, Janice, Janet, Jiangchuan, Keval, Mohamed, Qianping, Stephen, Tara, Tracy, and Zenian have, and continue to offer me help and advice on teaching and research. I wish I had more time and opportunities for research collaboration with SFU professors, but for most of the time thus far, I have been working on how best to teach CMPT 300.

As a non-native English speaker teaching students with a higher English proficiency, I sometimes do reflect upon the deeper meaning of my teaching at SFU while trying to present clearly the teaching materials in lecture. Now that the semester's end is approaching, I am wondering how best to prepare you all for the final exam. Besides thorough preparation for the remaining lectures and the review session, I decided to write this post. Consider it a long thank-you note. I hope it will motivate you, in part, to study CMPT 300 more efficiently and, ultimately, make achieving a better grade easier for you all.

Together, let us make CMPT 300 a great teaching experience for myself as the instructor, and more importantly, a great learning experience for you, the students.

1. A secret

If you attended the first few lectures, you may still remember that I received my SFU ID weeks after the semester started. Before that, I could not update [the course page on CourSys](#), which happened to have another instructor's name on it. I contacted the administrator about this and then checked up on CourSys occasionally.

Not long after our first lecture, I tried to google the course page. Then, a CMPT 300

related post popped up. In the post, a student asked for advice about whether or not to drop CMPT 300 because my accent made him or her hard to understand what I was saying.

Hmm, I was hoping a more warm-hearted welcome from students.

To be honest, I'd say the characterization in the post is less than equitable.

You may have simply dropped the course, walked away, and studied happily ever after with other perfect professors, leaving your comments there forever.

But what could I do with that?

If you really dropped the course, you would have hardly given me a chance to prove myself to you.

That really sucks.

I talked to my sister about this post, getting the comfort and encouragement that whoever wrote that post wouldn't give me.

Am I over-thinking this? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

I care because I value my opportunities for teaching and seek to contribute to students' growth in whatever way possible.

After buying an expensive [textbook](#), spending the time reading it, creating slides, and rehearsing those slides, I certainly wouldn't want to leave students with an impression akin to those of whoever wrote that post.

Nonetheless, I would still like to thank him or her. His or her commentary has encouraged me to learn, prepare, and practice more.

Though this move was inceptioned by whoever wrote that post, its intent was not solely for his or her benefit.

It has and will be for those who decided to stay, for whatever reason.

Some may need to take at least one course this semester, while others might be inclined to take as many courses as possible;

Some may have registered for this course, believing that Steve would be the professor;

Some may simply care less about which specific instructor teaches the course;

Some, hopefully, may make this decision really because they like the way I teach.

I sincerely thank each and every one of you for taking the adventure of CMPT 300 with me, and I truly appreciate your continuing support, understanding, tolerance, and cooperation.

As you can probably tell, I have tried and continue to try to provide you with a great learning experience. At the very best, I hope studying CMPT 300 with me ends up being one of your not-that-bad decisions.

2. Nothing to prove

Of course, to impress SFU students, I should learn from how SFU professors teach.

I came across several [CMPT 886](#) video lectures by [Nick](#). These were impressive. The expertise and confidence shown throughout the lectures was admirable.

With the [anecdotal commonality between you and UBC students is that you both applied to UBC](#), I opted to check how [UBC](#) professors teach as well. Do you recall the ["Profs Read Rate My Prof Comments"](#) video I showed in one of our lectures? That is UBC! Those were UBC professors with considerable expertise, yet still, they must work harder to prove themselves to their students.

We have a similar [website](#) to "Rate My Professors" in our [Zhejiang University](#). As junior faculty members, we usually don't get many comments on that website. So it was interesting and exciting to see the first ones about me. Around that time, I couldn't help checking upon updates from time to time; Until a rather harsh one made its way to me.

You see, being a faculty member tends to make one in a constant state of evaluation. With every lecture one gives, one runs the risk of boring some students into dropping the course or incurring the wrath of the comments from denizens of the Internet.

With every paper one writes, one must be prepared to receive critiques from several reviewers. ("Fun" fact: Days after writing this, I received [two sequential rejections](#) on July 12. One came before our CMPT 300's Thursday lecture session, and one came after. Guess I suppose I will encourage my students to pursue a Ph.D. less frequently, at least for a while.)

Without realizing when it started, I began paying close attention to what to say and do and the affect upon others such actions have.

Just like what the extraordinary [Auggie](#) was told by his teacher:
[Be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle.](#)

Also, you may resonate with the same message from [13 Reasons Why](#) and [Dear](#)

[Evan Hansen](#). (As a side note, both shows have really great [soundtracks](#).)

In the end, it should probably never be about proving to others.

It could be more about the pursuit of a better version of ourselves, while encouraging others to grow whenever possible instead of making others feel the lesser.

Such sentiment is perhaps best said what I found at about the 1 minute mark in this [clip](#) when searching for a video of Dear Evan Hansen to link into this post:

[You have nothing to prove, only to share.](#)

3. Something I want to share with you about CMPT 300

"I teach here only once; I don't want to fail anyone."

You may have considered this to be a joke when I said it in class.

In the case of the former, perhaps, but as you will see shortly in this post, I would certainly love to teach here again.

As for the second part, I was most certainly not joking. I sincerely hope to fail none of you, and continue to work towards that very goal. Together, this is achievable.

As I discussed with you in class, I consider the deeper meaning of my teaching at SFU.

At [Zhejiang University](#), I have more opportunities to work with students through means other than teaching. Among those blessed opportunities are being their mentor, supervising their final year projects, writing their reference letters, and collaborating with them on research projects.

However, teaching at SFU for the first time and for only one semester raises the challenge of novelty whilst playing-it-safe. Especially since it is my first time teaching Operating Systems, I spent a majority of the preparation time on reading and understanding the textbook, and subsequently creating slides. This leaves me with less time to design interesting and unique teaching activities. Previously, I would encourage students to take on challenging class projects worth bonus credits. However, I opted not to try that in this case due to the relatively large number of students in our class and some degree of uncertainty in how best to reward active students without raising concerns related to the fairness of grading.

As a non-native English speaker teaching students with a higher English proficiency, I have needed to pay more attention to the clarity of the teaching materials and my

presentation. For example, I have attempted to organize the content on each slide into a series of logically progressive questions. It has been my hope that this helps you to better understand the core idea of the content and concepts being presented. Further, I try to provide specific grading rubrics along with assignment and exam questions. I have also tried to give reply to CMPT 300 related emails as quickly as possible, especially for emails from students that had to miss a class and wanted to be filled in on the topics mentioned in said class.

Teaching in this way took a great deal of time.

The more time I spend teaching, the more I realize the meaning of my teaching of CMPT 300. A slide deck for a lecture of one hour or two usually takes days to prepare. Taking off the time for creating slides, reading and understanding a chapter may still take at least hours or one day for a student. So, I hope that my slides and lecture save you all some time in learning. You have always been the motivation for me to concentrate on CMPT 300. Teaching CMPT 300 well is what I keep striving in order to display my respect for you all. I hope that means something to you.

The major reason as to why the course takes so much time for me to prepare and for you to study is probably the relatively expansive variety of topics within its syllabus. This was also the conclusion of some students. Given these many topics, it is challenging to decide upon which to focus more for exam preparation. Don't worry. Look at the up-side: You paid your tuition. Don't you want to get as many concepts as possible out of this course and make it worth every penny? Secondly, remember the review slides we use for the midterm exam? As we discussed in class, the textbook presents various design techniques of operating systems. We can gain a better understanding of operating systems through comparing the pros and cons of different design choices. This is very helpful to cultivate a mindset that understands things from different perspectives. Such a mindset is really important for problem solving and decision making in work and life. Alright, back to the course. Not all of the topics are suitable for designing less-open exam questions. Since some of you told me that the review session and review slides were helpful for the midterm exam, we shall have a review session again for the final exam. Its coverage won't be narrowed down to only the topics to appear in the exam paper though. I need to make sure that it still covers key topics as comprehensively as possible while easing your exam preparation. More importantly, I hope this can best guarantee that students who keep making sufficient efforts will end up with sufficient grades.

So, these have been some "behind-the-scenes" glimpses of teaching CMPT 300. Why am I sharing them with you? Why do you care? If you think it helps for me to check upon your progress now and then, it may help for you to know how I work on teaching as well.

If you don't walk out, you will think that this is the whole world.

4. CMPT 300, make it our moment

With your continued support and cooperation, CMPT 300 in the 2018 Summer semester is reaching the end.

Sometimes I still get asked the following questions:

Why do you want to teach at a foreign university?

Why do you teach a course that you never taught before?

Why do you create the lecture slides by yourself?

Why do you cover that many topics in the slides?

Why do you spend that much time on teaching?

I think I may or may not have logical answers to these questions.

What I keep telling myself is that, only teaching CMPT 300 well at SFU can make me more deserving of all the great moments I have enjoyed here:

Overlooking the seashore before landing in YVR;

Eating Cantonese cuisine in Richmond after arrival;

Touring SFU's [Burnaby](#), [Vancouver](#), and [Surrey](#) campuses;

Having dinner with Janice and her husband, Russell, and listening to Russell introducing his Sci-Fi [book](#);

Receiving positive feedback of the lecture slides from students;

Joining the happy crowd at convocation, listening to student representatives singing O, Canada;

Catching up a paper due with several undergraduate students till midnight while listening to [Everdream](#), grabbing some food at Tim Horton's, spending a night on a cozy sofa at the campus, eating pancakes at A&W the next morning, and then walking along the Seawall in [Stanley Park](#);

Immersing in the nature of some other parks such as Burnaby Mountain Park, Barnet Marine Park, and Burnaby Lake Regional Park;

Thrill-seeking upon seeing Bear Sightings warnings but still taking the adventure along some trails;

Visiting Microsoft and A Thinking Ape with Danyu and several DDP students;

Celebrating Canada Day at Canada Place with the largest crowd I have seen in Vancouver, having great chats, and watching fireworks;

Watching the breathtaking [Flyover Canada](#), and definitely looking forward to watching it again;

Stargazing at the [Trottier Observatory](#), and literally seeing the ring around Saturn;

Writing this post at different places across the campus, and discussing with Mitchell how to polish it;

And, lecturing, discussing, and chatting with you in and after CMPT 300 classes;

I really enjoy all these moments and hopefully many more to come, like cycling

around the [Stanley Park](#), walking over the [Suspension Bridge](#), [having coffee with the highest-scoring student](#) and possibly beer with the lowest-scoring one, and, of course, the moment when you finish reading this post and start devoting more time to CMPT 300.

As an SFU student, you have years of opportunities or even a lifetime to explore and experience what I [LOVE](#) about SFU and [Vancouver](#).

Among all of your good memories, I hope CMPT 300 would be one of those we can share.

And that surely takes mutual efforts.

So, dear CMPT 300'ers, I am encouraging you to concentrate more on CMPT 300;
Make our remaining lectures more interactive and interesting;
Keep up with the assignment schedules;
Start preparing for the final exam early;
Perhaps at least, come to the review session or read the review slides;
And together, let's make that "I don't want to fail anyone" joke a reality.

For the students who dropped this class (I am sorry, I'll get over it), if by any chance you happen to see this post, I'm also encouraging you to do the same with your next and hopefully unaccented CMPT 300 Professor.

[Be in the moment.](#)

Make the most of your moments at the GREAT and ENGAGING [SFU](#).

[Some people wait a lifetime for a moment like this.](#)