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Resource and Cultural Center

Interview of Dr. Chen, Associate Professor at St. John's University
Interviewed by Renz Buenavista, AAARCC Student Ambassador

5/15/2020

Edited for clarity

RB: Renz Buenavista

DC: Dr. Chen

RB:

Hello everyone! My name is Renz Buenavista. I am a rising senior majoring in Kinesiology with a concentration in Clinical Exercise Physiology and a minor in Asian American studies. I am also an undergraduate student ambassador at the AAARCC. Today is May 15, 2020 and I'll be having an interview with Dr. Chen, Associate Professor and incoming chair for the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the School of Education at St. John's University in New York. Could you please tell us a bit more information about yourself?

DC:

Thanks, Renz, and good afternoon everyone! I graduated from Purdue back in 2012. That was my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction. I have been at my job at St. John's University since. I have worked here since 2012, and Purdue has always been the most wonderful time of my life, reflecting back. So thank you for this wonderful opportunity to share with all of you some of my experiences back then.

RB:

Of course! And could you tell us how you ended up doing your PhD at Purdue?

DC:

So I graduated, it was my Master's in Communication/Education Technology in England, in the University of Manchester, before I started to pursue my PhD in the states. I applied to several schools, and fortunately Purdue was the first school that offered me the full scholarship. And that really was very vital at that time, and important, and was this support and the international offices and all that, it came so smoothly that it kind of became meant to be. I did get accepted

into other schools as well, but I decided to choose Purdue as my doctoral study and it would prove to be the correct decision, the right decision of my life.

RB:

That's wonderful to hear. What were you, for your research, teaching looking back during your PhD years?

DC:

So my major was in instructional design and technology. So with my background in language and education and communication, it's a very natural marriage of my research, teaching, and service opportunities at the LDT program in the Department of Curriculum Instruction in the College of Education. So I was fortunate to be able to be a teaching assistant since my day 1 at Purdue, for undergrad courses, which really provides me in depth training of how to teach college classrooms in the United States. Which prepares me for my job later on. And also through the years, while I was at Purdue, I was fortunate to be able to teach and co-teach graduate level and doctoral level courses with my professors back then. And it's a really rewarding learning experience from it as a PhD student. And so that teaching experience was remarkable and very much valuable, and not many institutions were able to have that kind of training provided for graduate students, so I'm very grateful for that. In terms of my research, I was also involved in very big grants like National Science Foundation supported grants, and working as a graduate research assistant. And also, I was able to, under the guidance of my professor, I was able to carry out my own line of research. And they're very supportive, which gave me very strong research training, and collaborating, and also carry on my own research lines. Which really was, give me a very solid foundation for what I am doing now.

RB:

And what were some of your favorite memories about Purdue and Greater Lafayette? Could you also talk about your extracurricular activities at Purdue, if you choose so.

DC:

So I was very involved in the student life, and so I worked here and also partnered with my peers. We had the student association for our program, also - of course, I can't not mention this - I met my husband at Purdue and we met in our church group and we had our wedding ceremonies at Lafayette and it is a home for us. And those times were really valuable and I was also very much involved with the Purdue Chinese Christian Student Fellowship and I was involved in the church as a musician, a church pianist. Those times were really valuable as balancing the graduate student life and also international students - to be able to root in the community - that feeling supportive and also contributing to the community.

RB:

That's amazing. And so how did Purdue prepare you for your aspirations to be a university professor?

DC:

So as I mentioned as we were talking earlier too - I fully understand the responsibilities for a university professor, while doing my times at Purdue. So the training - teaching, research, service - became the three pillars of the professorship that later on I was leading into. So the training about how to be an effective teacher, how to be an effective instructor, use the different kinds of pedagogy activities and also methods of delivering. That types of training at Purdue was really remarkable. As I mentioned, I was able to teach undergrad, grad, and doctoral level and design and co-teach with world class professors. That really gave me a great learning opportunity, and also later on now I can contribute to my students. And research-wise, it is starting from the foundational research methods opportunity, and also be involved in research projects, like grant projects. Since very early, my PhD program training also gave me a very good learning opportunity too, and to carry on what I was passionate about before I was admitted to my PhD program, to continue to be able to building that up. And now, after graduation, it continues to motivate me and also guide me to carry the lines of inquiry. And the service piece is so important - that we learn to serve. The department, learning to serve the community, and also contributing, taking on the social responsibility. Which really aligns with the mission of my current university, right now, because we are a very service oriented institution. We carry all academic service learning and we do very much community involvement and community building in the greater New York area. So overall, the experience I had at Purdue just lead me to this perfect position that I'm holding right now. When I came for interview on my last year of my PhD studies, I just knew when I first came to this campus in New York, I knew it was going to be a great match, and it turns out to be really well. So I really appreciate - I'm grateful for what Purdue has trained me and prepared me for.

RB:

That's wonderful to hear. Alright, what are some of your research projects that you are currently doing?

DC:

For now, I have three major lines of research. The first one involved with teacher education and I was involved in teacher education back at Purdue as well. I first was a teaching assistant and also a research assistant for a project involves pre-service teachers and I also was an assistant for the TaskStreaming E-Portfolio System , which is the e-learning management portfolio system at Purdue. I was the graduate coordinator for the College of Education. So right now, I still carry on the research line of how to support preservice teachers effectively and in-service teachers

effectively with technology, and the design aspect of it - and help them to incorporate and improve their students learning and also facilitate them in their teaching process. Another line of my research I love is the support of virtual technologies and the collaborative tools that we're using right now - especially in this pandemic time, everyone has to start learning online. And those research that I was involved in, while I was at Purdue, my second research continues to be leading to my current projects, and I just initiated an international partnership between my school and another international institution. We have preservice teachers working in virtual teams to collaborate and through platforms like this - zoom, Skype, any other communication tools - and collaborative whiteboards to design and executive K-12 lessons with technology embedded. We have wonderful students experiencing and having that cross-cultural experience without travelling abroad, and we've proven to be effective now with the international travel restrictions. I see great potential of such projects, to carry on. So that's one of my major research projects right now, and another area is the research about Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education - it's called STEM education - and some people add the Art aspect to it, it's STEAM education. How we can look into the cross disciplinary connections among these types of curriculums and how we design such integrative curriculums and lessons to help our young learners to be successful in our future society and really helping them to acquire a cross disciplinary mindset and international readiness, to be open and to be facing the challenge that we may face in the future or long term future.

RB:

That's amazing to hear. And so going off of that, what was your favorite project that you worked on?

DC:

So at Purdue, all the projects I was involved was amazing, and really enlightened me to look into the international aspect and also using a cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary collaborations. So any projects or any ideas that talk about the overlapping from multidisciplinary or multicultural really inspires me and I love to and am open for opportunities to collaborate and carry on this research, moving forward. And with the support of emerging technologies that we have theories to look at them and examine them, and also we have designed frameworks to support them to be incorporated in our teaching and learning, and any project that I have been involved in with those elements, I really treasure and still carry on.

RB:

So what are you currently teaching or will be teaching in the future?

DC:

So since I came to St. John's University in 2012, I have had the opportunity to teach undergrad, grad, and doctoral classes. And the majority of my teaching focus is on helping teachers or teacher candidates with technology integration and also instructional design. I also teach doctoral-level research course in community research. So I have worked with our first year PhD students and helping them to draft their research proposal, and going into the fields and have a community-rooted educational research practice established. So those are very wonderful courses that I have had the opportunity to teach, and I will continue to teach in the coming semesters and coming years.

RB:

What do you think is the most difficult problem in your project about integrating mobile technology into teaching processes?

DC:

So given my background in education and communication and also instructional design and integrating technology, I have been always incorporating the elements of mobile learning into my classes. Even way before the pandemic, we would incorporate apps, we would incorporate mobile learning into the different types of design projects that my students would need to carry on. This is actually one of the topics that we would discuss in our class.

DC:

Many teachers have this perception that not a lot of students or families would have access to mobile technology if we bestowed such initiatives into the classroom and I always ask my students to think about... are we doing a service or a disservice to our students if we know this is where the development of the society will be leaning into and we don't offer or we don't understand such innovations and its impact on our learning and teaching? Are we servicing them or disserving them? So I always have these types of conversations about new technology and with the lens of social justice and with the lens of equity and access, and actually surprising me after our discussion, my students will come back and tell me, "Dr. Chen, we realized after reading all of these articles and looking over the data and the reports and the surveys, it turns out many students would have access to the mobile technology, more than we thought, and they are very open and adaptive to the idea of using more and connecting more to their students, to their family members or parents, and the community through the use of mobile technology." And we have seen so many developments recently, and the cost of such technology has jumped dramatically... which is really giving us the opportunity as educators or researchers to look into the affordance of such technology and be used, and I'm very hopeful that even though we have many challenges ahead of us, I believe with the right mindset and resilience and also proper training, we would overcome some of the mindsets and barriers; that we bring in the level of

connectivity and also interactivity among students and teachers and the community and parents altogether.

RB:

That's great to hear! I've heard that you've won multiple awards for research, teaching, presentations, and more. What accomplishment are you most proud of?

DC:

To be honest, the one that I always thought about is the one that Purdue... I want to get the name right... my Graduate School Excellence in Teaching award that was given to me in 2012 from graduate school at Purdue. It was the highest honor for me after my training at Purdue and I was recognized as one of the best graduate instructors across the whole university, and to me that was such a rewarding experience because it's not just me. The process of leading up to getting that award is I have to be awarded at the department level, which I was, at the college level which later on, I was given the College Teaching award, and then I was nominated to be considered at the graduate level across the whole university. And the most amazing and touching moment for me is when I was nominated at my department level. I was told 13 students from the section I was teaching at wrote me a recommendation. I couldn't. I just couldn't. It still gives me thrill that I have such support and trust from the students that I had the opportunity and fortunate to work with. It really speaks up back to me that the impact, the training that Purdue was able to give me and to make me to make impact, to help me to make an impact to the students' lives and they are all undergrad students and working at Purdue and becoming teachers, so I hope that impact, speaking to my small group of students at that time really sparked me and encouraged me to carry on the Purdue legacy to become a successful university professor. Later on, I earned more and other teaching awards, but that one just really speaks to me and I credit it to be the most important award for me. And coming from international backgrounds studying in Asia and England and coming to the United States, I'm really understanding the United States college and higher education systems, and that award really speaks much and I was awarded, I was inducted to the Purdue teaching, I want to get the name right, the Purdue teaching academy and I was inducted as an associate member and being exposed to more fantastic college professors from different disciplines and being able to learn from them so that really inspires me till today even 8 years ago still feels like it's yesterday. My name was printed in the Exponent and getting the award is such a meaningful experience for me.

RB: That's really powerful to hear. Going through K-12 and going through undergrad and even maybe going to grad school, did you ever expect to be where you are now?

DC: It's a very interesting question to look back on my life. I would say yes and no. The yes part is I was born in an educator family so my father is a university professor, and he's the dean of a

music department at the university. So, I can see the life of an university professor from a very young age, but also I had my own exploratory journey I also had my own exploratory journey and I remember when I graduate from college I said myself I don't want to become my father, I don't want to be a teacher I don't want to be a professor. So I dyed away to explore and I appreciate and treasure the detours so much so much detour but the dot connected at the end. I did my own life-searching experience after my college years and after one of the major turning points in my life is my experiences in England when I was able to become a teacher in music, in schools, and expose to young children again and also learning and designing elements and using every element that I have training in to produce instructional materials, using the language benefit and also music training altogether, and I found it to be very rewarding and going through my grad school experience at Purdue, I knew very clear that this is the path going to academia, and I fully understand the three pillar of teaching, researching, and service going forward. So in grad school, I was very clear of leading to where I am right now, and Purdue really prepared me very well to be competent in this position that I am right now.

RB: As a professor, what message would you like to give to the educators like teachers and professors that are having a hard time with their classes because of COVID-19

DC: It is such a challenging time, but I believe having hope and faith is very important at this time. Be flexible to what will we be able to do, be compassionate to each other to show compassionate to you students, to your professors, everybody is working so hard to have a meaningful and wonderful learning experiences to carry forward, and I think it is to be able to acknowledge the challenges and working out a resilient plan, and one step at a time, and we need to not lose vision about what's good coming out of this pandemic, and I believe the system is going to be so much different and everybody will come out so much stronger after this whole global experience and crisis, but opportunities arise in such times. So, my words will be: be faithful, be hopeful, be flexible, and be resilient. And be ready to adapt and change. And learn from your students, and learn from one another

RB:

And what are some words of encouragement you would like to give to current and future students of Purdue?

DC:

Purdue is a wonderful place to be. Learn as much as you can, collaborate with everybody, anybody, that you can find, and you will learn so much. And it's such a beautiful learning community that we have at Purdue and I haven't met anyone that I wasn't able to have a conversation and learn something new from. Collaborate with your colleague, collaborate with your peers, carry your own line of research at undergrad level, at grad level, doctor level,

whatever. Start where you are and cherish that lifelong friendship and relationship that you will have. Of course, you will learn so much from your professors, but volunteer, speak up, and seize opportunities that you can contribute and help your professors without even asking for any type of reward, because life is going to reward you itself. and all these years that he's been at Purdue, time is limited, and you reflect back and see it's gone so quickly. But seize everyday to learn and you will have such wonderful, meaningful, and valuable lessons to learn from one another.

RB:

Thank you for the encouraging words, and what are some of your favorite things to do when you're not working on classes or research?

DC:

I love to read, I love to play the piano, I like to spend time with my children and I have two young daughters, one is six and one just turned four. I like spending time with them and having conversations with them and having laughters with them. It's just so rewarding and I also love to keep them, we do our own music show. It does take a lot of time and courage and they both love to talk about the time that I had at Purdue and they were curious about everything that we did. They said "How did you and dad meet at Purdue? What did you do at Purdue? Where is Purdue? I know it's in Indiana but where is it?" So it's very interesting. They've had a Purdue shirt ever since they were babies and we plan to take them back to Purdue and to visit, given such an important role of Purdue for me and my husband. Also I serve in the community and I do music in my local church and I'm also involved in community services at my institution. We serve underserved populations in the inner city in Queens Borough, in Manhattan. We have different types of service learning projects that I have many students involved with, so those also take some of my time when I'm not thinking about teaching and research.

RB:

Can you tell us more about your passion for music?

DC:

So music is... Ever since I remember anything, music stays with me, and my dad has this hope for me to become maybe inspired by and music and maybe carry on as a professional musician. It stopped in my middle school years because I know I love language and love humanities, and I know that's something I would love to explore and study in college. I never left music. It became part of me and since I was in... starting my high school years, I started teaching piano and music together with my father, so he would give me some of his students and I'd cover for him for his private classes and I developed the love of teaching at a very early stage of my life. The experience that I had in England where I served as a church musician and also a music teacher in southeast of London really brought me to develop more of my research interests in designing

learning, designing for learning, and design learning for a better future. Music inspires me and I still play music sometimes and practice an hour or so a day. I will totally put myself into it and really appreciate what music can do for me and what I can do for others through music.

RB:

Thank you for your insightful responses! That's about it for all the questions I've got for you. Thank you so much for taking the time to tell us about your experiences, but for doing just sharing your knowledge to us.

DC:

Thank you so much! It's a wonderful opportunity for me to be able to spend time with you and share my memories at Purdue.

RB:

Take care!