TABLE TALK WITH RICHARD BRODHEAD

Getting students to regard talent as an obligation

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A MERICAN literary scholar Richard Brodhead will tell you that if you take 10 steps from the Fullerton Hotel towards Maybank Tower, you will find a plaque of writer Joseph Conrad, who visited Singapore eight times as a master mariner in the late 1800s.

Dr Brodhead, 64, says he first learnt of Singapore through the works of Conrad and Herman Melville, whom he studies. As he points out: “In Melville’s Moby Dick, a whale ship sails quite near Singapore.”

He has made his mark analysing 19th century English literature, including that of America’s South. On the latter, he says: “It has so much richness; you wouldn’t expect William Faulkner and Elvis Presley to have anything in common, but they were born within 10 miles (16km) of each other.”

The Yale alumnus taught and mentored undergraduates at his alma mater for 32 years before becoming the ninth president of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, which is in the heart of the American South.

Brodhead, who is married with one son, was in town earlier this month to grace the first commencement ceremony of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School – a five-year-old partnership between Duke and the National University of Singapore (NUS) to produce more medical researchers for Singapore. He spoke to me on what it takes to run a university today.

■ What do you think about the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School now it’s into its fifth year?

This school was a significant and ambitious step forward for Duke to have a major continuing institutional presence in another country. Five years on, we have achieved all the goals we hoped for and realised goals that never occurred to us.

■ Such as?

Well, it has evolved a new model of medical education that puts a major premium on individual research by students. What we found in Singapore was that Robert Fulghum, who’s the head of education in Duke-NUS’ medical programme, devised a system where students learn a great majority of things that can be memorised in advance before school starts. So instead of spending a year learning the nuts and bolts, students learn that already and then they and our faculty can spend class time thinking deeply about important problems. And so we have actually begun to bring what we call the Singapore model of medical education back to Duke.

■ Singapore will soon have a competing medical school at Nanyang Technological University and its pitch is that it will put caring back into the profession. What do you say to that?

It would be better to say that it would be complementary. It creates a different thing that’s also valuable so I don’t see any contradiction between research and caring in medicine.

■ The whole language of the profession is about care of our fellow mortals through the use of specialised medical knowledge.

■ I understand Duke-NUS aims to turn out more clinician scientists. What’s that about?

We need people to treat diseases when these break out, but at Duke-NUS, we’re training people who can also understand the underlying causes of diseases and devise the cures for, say, cancer or emerging infections. I admire Singapore for understanding that it was no insult to its existing medical school to develop a complementary one with research as well as care in its mission.

■ Speaking of care and mission, how do you grade students’ minds today when they think only they know what’s best for them?

Everywhere in the world, people at a certain age think they’re smarter than their elders, right? They don’t think they need any help. That’s a valuable trait – we call it independence. But even independent people actually do need help from others and be challenged, if only because challenge leads us to grow. We don’t want people whose independence only gives them the right to stay stuck where they are, right?

■ What are you yourself learning from your students?

At Duke, we want to educate our students so they take what they’ve learnt in the classroom and try to do something with it in the world. We have a programme called DukeEngage. Every time I meet a student who’s been on it, it’s transformed them. For one thing, students tend to be imprisoned in the world of very smart, successful people. But that’s only a small part of reality. We want students to recognise that the mark of their success is not getting a good grade but knowing something that can be used to solve a real problem. For example, this month I will be visiting engineering students at Duke’s tie-up in Tanzania who are creating clean water projects, teaching communities how to repair broken medical equipment and teaching health literacy. We have 400 students this summer engaged in such projects, all at Duke’s expense.

■ That’s some investment.

We also don’t think it’s right to treat our students as an elite by pampering or congratulating them. We’d like them to regard talent as an obligation, that is, to live up to their talent and to deliver the value of that to the world.

■ What do you think is your main task as an educator then?

To lead students to the point where they can ask hard questions, rather than have to have them answer questions that ‘I’ve given them, which is not impressive.

■ How would you best prepare them for a very uncertain future?

We can’t teach students the skills they need because two years later, they will need different skills. We can only try to give them the sort of deep attitudes and approaches that will enable them to participate constructively in change. That also means hands-on education, which leads to a much more versatile form of education than one that’s based on completing class exercises alone.