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## **Highest honour for distinguished UCT teacher**



Dr Marlon Swai

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

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Dr Marlon Swai's responsibility as a teacher is not to win students' favour but to get them to learn at all costs. And if this means adopting an in-classroom rap cypher culture to foster participatory and ongoing learning, then so be it.

The social anthropology lecturer's student-centric classroom environment is both inclusive and stimulating. This creates a lively and energetic atmosphere, which means that students are comfortable and inspired to participate 100% of the time.

"It's important to create an in-classroom environment where students can thrive, and I've found that the best way to do that is to change things up and adopt teaching methodologies that they can relate to," Swai said.

For his creative approach to teaching and learning and his commitment to his students, the University of Cape Town (UCT) has honoured Swai with a Distinguished Teacher Award – the university’s highest teaching accolade. He is one of two recipients to receive this award, the other being Dr Bodhisattva Kar from the Department of Historical Studies.

### **Teaching snapshot**

Reflecting on his career, Swai admits that teaching wasn’t always part of his plan. But that changed when he participated in a hip-hop workshop series at Bush Radio in Cape Town in 2004. The programme included a valuable mentorship component, and he witnessed first-hand the true value of the profession.

“The workshop first switched me on to the idea that teaching and learning is a civic duty that necessitates drawing on knowledge from everywhere,” he said. “It’s a gravitation towards a search for ethics that self-interrogates power because being a teacher is to be endowed with a form of power.”

Although the radio station planted the teaching seed, teaching at university level had never crossed his mind. However, he started to see things differently when he met his life partner in a Caribbean literature classroom at New York University while completing his PhD. The class, headed by the “towering” Barbadian poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite, proved to be a life-altering moment for Swai’s career.

### **Meant to be**

After 15 years in the profession and five years in UCT’s Faculty of Humanities, Swai believes he is exactly where he’s meant to be.

“I find it difficult to commit to one thing. Teaching allows me to be part of different amazing projects led by my students’ research and that brings a level of contentment,” he said.

About the career he has come to understand and love, Swai doesn’t mince his words. Teaching is an arduous task, but certain qualities make the load lighter: Skill and sound knowledge of your subject matter are of utmost importance. But so are responsiveness, sensitivity and a deep commitment to your students.

Being a creative, out-of-the-box thinker and having an adaptable personality are other character traits that go hand in hand with the profession.

He also described the profession as multifaceted, and stressed that it’s not just about delivering content. Instead, it’s about transferring critical skills in exchange for learning. And because each student is vastly different, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach. So, he believes in creating a versatile and flexible classroom environment, tailored towards students’ needs.

### **The highs and lows**

For this curious personality who thrives on creativity, there’s no better place to be than in a classroom, teaching a bunch of young inquisitive minds.

“There’s nothing better than having a constant stream of young minds to challenge you. My students keep me on my toes intellectually and pedagogically. There are always new knowledges pulsating the classroom and new challenges when it comes to teaching old and contemporary material,” he said.

But with successes come challenges. Swai said disillusionment among students and academics has been one of the biggest stumbling blocks he has experienced at UCT to date.

“The university is under enormous pressure to transform, and students play a big role in this process. But the majority of our students are dealing with massive pressures – economic exclusion at registration, personal trauma and many other factors,” he said.

“It is very difficult to maintain the enchantment for the knowledge we are able to spark in the first year throughout students’ degrees. So, students and teachers deal with fatigue. This sometimes brings out the best in a teacher and other times you’re just trying to keep your head above water.”

*Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News*

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