

Teaching Portfolio Extract

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Teaching Philosophy

I am a selfish teacher.

I appreciate that that is an unusual way to define the basis of one's teaching philosophy but it is at the root of mine. I pursue excellence in my teaching because it is in my own personal interest to do so.

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I am a selfish teacher because I believe that people create their own reality. I do not mean in minor details of day to day happenstance, but in broad sweeps. So if I pursue excellence through innovation in my own teaching, and seek to contribute to developing the nations intellectual infrastructure by producing intelligent, professional graduates, then I am making the world a better place. Since I have to live here, improving the place is in my interest. Promoting positive values in both the conduct and outcomes of my teaching is in my own, personal, self-interest.

To put it another way, what goes around, comes around. Like many others who seek to improve their teaching by a process of reflective innovation, I have from time to time been exposed to poor teaching. Sometimes, that has been very direct and personal, and unpleasant. On other occasions, I have been able to view it more dispassionately, and have seen, and shared, the contempt that students have for lecturers who recycle old notes drawn mainly from one book in a dry monotone. I have seen the low regard in which poor teachers are held, and I share with many colleagues a desire not to end up like that.

In my teaching, I respect my students as individuals. I believe that each person is a unique individual, with a distinct blend of abilities and skills who walks a personal path through life. This affect my teaching in a number of ways. Firstly, it means that I seek to nurture each students individual strengths, and to discover their weaknesses, and to suggest how they can develop their abilities and fulfill their potential. This does not always fit with the logistics of university education in the 21st Century, but it is an area in which we can and should do better. Secondly, it means that I educate in the classical sense – I seek to 'lead out' the student rather than to patronise them. I do not

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presume that I have any monopoly of genius – I am good at certain things (in fact I am very good at some things) but not so great at others. I don't therefore have the right to presume that they are privileged to be in my class. Experience carries some weight, but I do need to deliver a good performance and demonstrate to my students that I deserve their respect.

That belief in the unique value of the individual informs many of the choices I make in my teaching. I prefer small group teaching to large lectures, and prefer seminar style reading and discussion to lecturing in any size of class. I actively seek to use ICT as a means to a more interactive, personalised educational experience. Since I prize individual diversity, I seek out and experiment with alternative ways to teach in order to actively challenge the normal, passive, linear, transcription style of learning that still dominates our university system. And since I have to work with what I have got, and live with my colleagues, I do try not to leap too far beyond the limits of student expectations or the requirements of the book of modules, but, as someone unflatteringly said of Napoleon III, I am a 'restless agent of change'

I pursue the novel not for the sake of change itself, but because I do believe in pushing out the edge of the envelope; to be human is to struggle against your limitations, and to seek to overcome them. As Bob Dylan said: 'He not busy being born is busy dying.' (although I am sure someone said it long before Dylan)

I happen to be especially fortunate in that I do this in the best discipline in the world. Unlike many other subjects, which operate within the bounds of an artificially constrained rationality, history is one of the few subjects which deals with the totality of human experience and action in the past. The historian seeks to discover, from fragmentary and contradictory evidence, what actually happened in the past, and to present it in a clear, intelligible narrative. History teaches skills of research, analysis, critical thinking, writing and presentation in a way that many other disciplines fail to do. In my teaching, I seek to convey the totality of the historians craft to my students, to equip them with the skills of the professional historian which they will be able to apply to general problems no matter what career they follow after they leave UCC. Historians use documents, statistics, diaries, letters, state papers, maps, buildings, monuments, art – every aspect of the past to shed light on particular problems. For the Historian, Gandons' Four Courts is as much a document as the Registry of Deeds or Wills is. The historian is the supreme generalist, and in an age with more and more specialisation, we need to fight the corner for the generalist, able to keep a grip of the big picture and see the wood as well as the trees. I seek therefore in my teaching to use as wide a range of real primary sources as possible, and to present the big picture as a broad context in

which detailed cases are located. Many of my lectures explicitly break 'out of the box' of conventional tidy single issue questions and confront students with issues in their broader context.

And I do all this because, as I said, I benefit from it. In a general way, I stand to gain if the world has more good honours graduates in it. I can make the world I live in a better place, and reduce the number of stupid people I have to deal with, by doing my job better. But in a more personal way, I enjoy doing my job well. If I can say, at the end of the year, that Joe or Jane Student got a better grade because of something I did, then they may be happy and more self-actualised, but I feel good. If I deliver an excellent lecture, and hold the attention of 200 students (apart from the pair playing Xs and Os in the third row from the back) then, while they probably got something of value out of it, I carry a great deal of personal satisfaction out of it. Selfishness is its own reward, and a great virtue.