

## **Find Your Educator.....Fresh, Young and Enthusiastic.**

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Abstract:

*Institutions are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of structural and social factors in their new students' introduction to University, and to their credit, most are strongly committed to improving this experience. However, one unavoidable facet of the whole tertiary experience is teaching; students and teachers need each other. Good teaching will not guarantee good students; but nobody would realistically expect "bad" [inexperienced or just plain lazy] teaching to produce a "quality product"; why then is first year teaching considered infra dig for a "quality" teacher? Surely most of us would agree that novice learners need [and deserve] experienced and excellent teachers. How we convince our institutions – and perhaps more importantly our colleagues – of this, while doing our best to encourage and equip those novice teachers to whose lot first year classes often fall, would seem to form the basis of a fruitful discussion.*

The role of the teacher in determining the quality [and indeed the length] of a new student's experience cannot be underestimated. As is well known, first impressions count, and one bad experience can negatively colour numerous subsequent good ones.

There are many variables important in making transition to higher education a positive and rewarding one; these may be environmental, social, emotional or just plain personality. It is unfortunate, although perhaps not unsurprising, that teaching first year classes is regarded in many quarters as something that should be "palmed off" to post-grad students or new staff – they should, after all, "start at the bottom like all of us had to, and it's better to put them where they can do the least damage". True quality teaching should be kept for where it will truly be appreciated; later years of the course or, preferably, post-graduates. It is in teaching such classes that we have reached the pinnacle of our success

Now, it would be preaching to the converted to mount an argument to this "logic"; no doubt we have all had to do so at some stage in our professional lives. Maybe we even thought that way in our past; it would be surprising if we didn't, really, given the prevailing milieu in which we all exist – the only shame is in having seen the light, turning away from it!

Take it as read, then, that first year classes deserve excellent, experienced teachers. Can we also take it that in most cases the people so often charged with the care and formation of these fresh and impressionable minds [which they are, as this experience is by definition new to them, no matter how much other life experience they may or may not bring] are themselves young and inexperienced?

Many of them may still indeed be students themselves, or have so recently left that life that they feel themselves to be frauds when they take charge of classes which will almost certainly include people they see as chronological or social elders.

At any year level, but particularly in the first semester of a new course, students can become uncertain about their subject or course choices, or even of the validity of higher education itself: the quality of the teaching experience [the student's perception as much as the measurable reality] may be the straw that tips the balance in favour of staying in a course or leaving it. It behoves us to ensure that we provide both students and teachers with a positive, rewarding and fulfilling learning experience.

We must pay careful attention to how we help, support and advise those who teach in first year subjects. It is my contention that we need to spend a serious amount of time and effort on preparing our first year teachers, and in helping those of our more experienced colleagues who are nonetheless first-year-class novices, to approach the task with skills and confidence.

There are many ways in which this can be done; we all have ideas about what may or may not work in our own environments, or lessons from our own experience. The difficulty often lies in the fact that many of these staff are sessional teachers, only engaged late in the piece, unable to take advantage of any in-house programmes: and further, if they complete this assignment feeling battered and bruised, we may lose them to the profession. New staff, and even those who have been around the traps for some years, may be thrown in the deep end, and the consequent struggle may only reinforce the notion that first year is a waste of time for "real teachers". True cultural change occurs from the ground up. To realise that we are not alone in this endeavour is the first step – then comes the groundswell of commitment to change and the tools to effect such.

In a spirit of animated discussion, it should be possible to create a portfolio of creative and workable ways of overcoming these fundamental difficulties that we can all take away and modify for our own particular needs. It would be marvellous if we can begin to insinuate such practices into the fabric of our institutions; to be known as a University that values and encourages novice teachers and students alike is a badge any institution should wear with pride in an increasingly competitive marketplace.