

## **Title: Requiem for the Classroom?**

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## **Requiem for the Classroom?**

Even a cursory appraisal of the available literature suggests that methods of teaching and engaging students in higher education has become a major topic for debate in recent years. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC the Greek philosopher Socrates said ‘I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think’ underlining that interest in methods of education has a long history. Socrates invented a practice of philosophical interrogation, in responding to that challenge, which became known as Socratic dialogue, a method which is still used to engage students. Cicero, the Roman philosopher, lawyer and orator described Socrates as the first to ‘call philosophy down from the sky and put her in cities and bring her even into homes and compel her to inquire about life’ (Saunders 1987, 15). Like most lecturers today, the ancient teacher and philosopher was similarly preoccupied with devising ways that encouraged students to think independently. Socrates was fortunate to have inherited money from his father, the sculptor Sophroniscus, which provided him with the independence and intellectual freedom to think. Socrates through his ‘dialogue’ challenged the aristocratic young male citizens of Athens over their ‘unwarranted confidence in the truth of popular opinions’ (Saunders 1987, 15).

Today we are told we live in a “risk society” (Watts 2001) a system where individuals must construct work and identity ‘as part of a reflexive process connecting personal and social change’ (Watts 2001, 211). If the old order was ‘based on a medical model, with the expert diagnosing the individual’s characteristics and prescribing appropriate actions, the new model represents a “careerquake” (Watts 2001, 210 ). In other words, our approach has to be redefined in terms of the ‘individual’s lifelong progression in learning and in work’ (Watts 2001, 211).

This new model as described by Watts has led to a transformation in the way we teach and lecture as a burgeoning body of published academic work suggests. This process reflects the fact that the academy has not remained immune from the impact of globalisation. New programmes have emerged aimed at helping students to find work and fulfilling careers in a world that is rapidly changing, not least through the pervasive and growing impact of technology. In other words the once hallowed halls of academia and institutes of higher education have had to become ‘business like and more accountable’ (Ramsden 2003, 3). Graduates are under increasing pressure to find work in an environment that demands they change jobs more regularly and in a workplace that is becoming ‘more compact, fluid and more flexible’, while employers have become ‘less and less prepared to make long-term commitments to individuals (Watts 2001, 210). While we must accept that change is inevitable, our economic survival now requires that we make a commitment to lifelong learning. Against such a background a lecturer in post compulsory education is confronted by what has been described as an ‘audit society’ (Ramsden 2003, 3) which demands more innovative and creative approaches. Designing a course module now requires a familiarity with the leading theoretical works of scholars such as Biggs (2007), Reece and Walker (2006), Fink (2003), and Coate and Bartnett (2005) Bryson (2007) Ramsden (2001) and what are described as the new ‘learning taxonomies.’ Ramsden describes these changes as a ‘mindfield’ (Ramsden 2003, 3) even for the most committed of lecturers. Against that background ‘accountability, quality assurance, league tables, and performance indicators have become permanent entries in the higher education lexicon’ (Ramsden 2003,4).

These changes have occurred through recognition that the old lecture format favoured

by institution as “cost effective where one lecturer teaches many students” (Higgs and McCarthy 2005) are increasingly redundant against a background of growing demand for higher education, students of varying learning abilities, and language skills. Best practice now requires that lecturers change their approach from one of passive to active learning, in other words, teachers have to engage students and embrace new ‘methods and techniques’ (Higgs and McCarthy 2005).

Fink describes teaching as a ‘complex human action,’ made up of four general components - ‘knowledge,’ ‘decisions,’ ‘interactions’ and ‘management’ that require a ‘learning-centered approach to course design; this approach means deciding what students can and should learn and then how that learning can be facilitated’ (Fink 2005). Reece and Walker advocate that learning should be ‘personalized to suit individual requirements and abilities’ as the teacher’s role becomes that of a ‘facilitator who assists students to learn for themselves’ (Reece and Walker 2006, 3). A leading global sound consultant Julian Treasure highlights challenges faced by students and workers which a decade ago would have seemed an irrelevance. Treasure talks about the ‘sonic assault’ in an ‘increasingly noisy world which is gnawing away at our mental health -- even costing lives.’

All of this is a far cry from Rene Descarte the 'father of modern philosophy' (Gaukroger 1997, 3) whose work has exerted such a powerful influence on traditional university learning. Even a cursory glance at our university syllabi and one can see his legacy with its emphasis on the cerebral, such as ‘logical mathematical intelligence and abstract reasoning’ (Gardner, 1983). However, since 1999 because of the Bologna Process, higher education has been gradually transformed with an emphasis on practical training and research. Bologna has

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fundamentally altered traditional classroom practice in higher education replacing it with a myriad of approaches not least because of ‘the range of ability within a class’ (Biggs and Tang 2007, 2). Biggs (2007), Bryson (2007), but particularly Barnett and Coate (2005) have provided me with the conceptual schema of ‘knowing, acting and being’ which I used as the theoretical foundation for my work on *Griff Fm*. Using this methodology which might have been directly inspired by Paulo Freire, Barnett and Coate have sought to examine the ‘character of courses in higher education, urging practitioners to ask what place have practical skills in a university curriculum. Indeed they argue that the humanity of students cannot be isolated from the curriculum, arguing that students have to be treated as human beings as distinct from ‘enquirers after knowledge’ (Barnett and Coate 2005). I used their three theoretical domains of ‘knowing, acting and being’ as a methodological approach to consider the use of the radio studio as the lecture theatre. Bryson’s approach, in that context, was equally relevant because he urged lecturers to examine diversity between and within learners, including the importance of ‘the individuality of the student’ (Bryson 2007). I identified with Dunn (2002) who argues that we need to look at ‘traditional sensory stimulation’ given that the vast majority of knowledge held by adults (75%) is learned through seeing while hearing is the next most effective at (13%). Because we were already practicing by ‘doing’ in that sense we were already adapting our teaching approach by using the radio studio as the lecture theatre (Barnett and Coate 2006). In the studio our students are encouraged to become more ‘self-sufficient’ and to develop with ‘less dependency on the teacher’ (Ramsden, 2003). Our pedagogical approach is based on narrative and storytelling, and is not just about equipping students with the skills and knowledge to become broadcasters.

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We used a narrative approach to build students self confidence, and to enhance oral, aural and listening skills. We encourage students to value their own narrative or story, as an important learning experience. We found this approach facilitates deep learning, especially in preparing students for the “global shift to a new way of creating and using knowledge” (Ramsden 2003, 3). Crucial to the building of these skills is the relationship between the lecturer and the students. As Freire suggests ‘authentic thinking’ concerned with reality does not take place in ‘ivory tower isolation, but only in communication’ (Freire 1970,71). An applied course such as broadcast journalism is about more than showing students how to use recording and editing equipment. Students must be enabled to discover their own voice, which is essential to critical journalism. Our approach is practical, which means ‘there has to be a balance between theory and theoretical application, and real work experience and engagement with society. During the 2010 transmission of *Griff fm* we saw the emergence of a type of broadcasting which could be described as ‘civic journalism’ (Bosch 2010) as students became journalists engaging and producing material which reflected in some cases a profound engagement with the real world. As Bosch argues ‘teaching responsible ethical broadcast journalism is about helping students to cast a critical and analytic look at their communities. Radio journalism is more than the mechanical production of audio, it involves an ability to think critically about global news events and their relevance’ (Bosch 2010, 33). At a time when the marketisation of education, and the role of lecturers is the subject of ongoing debate, it is worth considering the comments of two of Irelands leading poets, Professor Michael Longley and Professor Harry Clifton. As outgoing Professor of Poetry Michael Longley said the ‘teacher has to look very carefully at the faces

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of the students because they come in and work out fairly quickly how much they can take of the truth.’ Describing teaching as a ‘sacred activity,’ Professor Clifton urged scholars to protect what he called the ‘sanctity of the poets mythical teaching room’ (Gartland 2010). Freire appeared to take a similar approach when he developed the concept of the ‘banking’ system of education which deals with power, knowledge and the relationship between teacher and student (Freire 2000). Do the views of these eminent scholars suggest a growing detachment by the academy from the reality of the everyday life of the working lecturer? As Smyth (2008) noted lecturers today have been reduced to ‘cabaret’ teachers in their efforts to hold students attention. In the same week that Clifden and Longley’s comments were published, the incoming President of Harvard, Dr. Drew Faust, in a paper to the Royal Irish Academy asked if the university was about economic growth or about the fostering of what she described as a ‘restless scepticism and unbounded curiosity from which our profoundest understandings so often emerge’ (Gartland 2010).

For nearly two decades academics have been writing about the need for new pedagogical approaches that encourage reflection and student engagement. A variety of innovative approaches have been developed such as ‘Active Learning’ (Higgs & McCarthy 2005); ‘Student Centred Learning’ (O’Neill & McMahon 2005); and ‘Collaborative Learning’ (Donnelly&Fitzmaurice 2005). Ironically as higher education has come to be seen as a commodity driven by ‘market needs’ (Biggs and Tang 2007, 3) the process of innovation has received greater impetus as lecturers are forced to accept that their students have become customers who

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must be satisfied. The latter is a much more compelling reality in the private sector managed third level colleges. Growing up in a culture of ‘staying connected, and a customer focus in many businesses based on 24 hour, 7 day per week service, why should a university education be any different’ argues Ramsden, who suggests that undergraduates are harder to teach and less indulgent to indifferent teachers (Ramsden 2003,4). The ‘lecturer’s role of expert, and the student, that of passive note-taker,’ (Higgs and McCarthy, 2005) is no longer regarded as best practice. Ramsden argues that ‘the good teachers listen and learn from their students as part of the process of instructing’ (Ramsden, 2003, 152). Even technology as a teaching tool is being questioned with Hart suggesting that becoming rich in information, but poor in knowledge, leads to student insecurity rather than confidence and self assurance (Ramsden 2003, 151). As Masters (2009) argues ‘one reason students fail or are disinterested is because they don’t see the connection between today’s lesson and what they really want to do someday’; therefore Masters argues that lecturers have to close the gap and illustrate classroom relevance to the students world. David Putnam, Chancellor of the Open University, in a lecture to the IIEA (Institute for International and European Affairs), said while ‘technology has handed us the opportunity to actively engage learners to finally escape from the passive world of *chalk and talk*’ he said the future of our society during the next 10 or 20 years was entirely dependent on the quality of teaching.’

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## **CASE STUDY – *Griff Fm***

Some of the students participating in the Radio Module have some broadcasting experience. *Griff fm* has a specific aim in training students to be effective broadcasters. Students run the station by themselves with direct intervention from the college tutors only where deemed necessary to fulfil contractual, legal or other requirements. *Griff fm* emphasizes the importance of teamwork and hard work, and provides back up support and advice. Students are enthusiastic, eager and determined to make a success of the station. Obviously, many of the students have little direct broadcasting experience, though there is a reservoir of experience among students through work experience and salaried employment with existing radio stations. All students receive tuition in operating Digital recorders and other equipment in the radio studios. Most students have experience in researching through extensive radio projects undertaken in previous years. These and other projects have enabled students to obtain interviewing experience and skills. In addition, all students have undertaken extensive study in courses devoted to Media Law. The syllabus of courses provided by Griffith College, demands that students obtain a minimum amount of practical experience during their studies of radio broadcasting. A large number of students have a keen interest in radio broadcasting and would hope to enter this industry on graduation. The experience gained from an exercise such as *Griff fm* will provide students with a skill, which they can take with them into the workforce after graduation. The News and Current Affairs policy on *Griff fm* is in keeping with the aims and objectives of the classroom environment. Emphasis is placed on producing high quality accurate, relevant and informative news reports. The production of hourly bulletins with extended news programmes in the middle of the day and in the

evenings, form an integral part of the radio production agenda. Live reports form an integral part of any news schedule. Apart from providing information of relevance, the aim is to give the newsgathers of tomorrow practical experience in compiling and presenting news bulletins and reports. Live and pre-recorded discussion and analysis shows also form part of the Radio Module agenda. This classroom format allows students interact not only with each other but engage with the world outside of the classroom. It helps students to clarify opinions and validate their ideas. This works particularly well with students whose first language may not be English and as a result may feel slightly marginalised. It affords them the opportunity to get their opinion across and makes other students aware of the wider world surrounding them. In the practical classroom situation students are discouraged from using web sites such as *facebook* and *youtube* in order to gather information and sound bites. The best radio programmes contain strong actuality or sound recorded on location. In a practical classroom environment students are encouraged to listen for background sound that will help set the scene, record and use that sound and using their writing skills, describe what they see. There is no substitute for actuality when recording reports or documentaries. Editing is the process of selecting information for broadcast. It means leaving out unwanted material and choosing what best tells the story. Sound editing software presents sound as a wave form. Students are encouraged to get used to the idea of actually seeing their sound. When editing, students are asked firstly to edit using their brain then the ears and finally the eyes. Combining all of the skills necessary to produce quality radio programming entails making the move from the more formalised classroom to a practical classroom environment. Learning to use all the equipment associated with producing good quality radio is essential. From the broadcast mixing desk, portable recorders and playback machines to editing using

specialised software the process of seeing and doing and engaging with the equipment as opposed to taking notes is the way forward for the modern journalism classroom.

The case study presented here, on how *Griff FM* is helping to learn and engage in a relatively profound and successful way, is not based on formal empirical research. However, the views reflected in this work are those of our students, together with my observations, and those of my colleagues, as lecturers in broadcast journalism. In our opinion the radio studio has become a safe space where deep learning takes place, as student feedback suggests. My teaching philosophy is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, and is one which respects all learners. The latter was Freire's approach with the poor and marginalized of Brazil, because he recognised that they possess a rich heritage of lived experience. At lectures and sessions in the radio station we use storytelling and narrative to help students overcome language and cultural barriers. This is important as many of them come from different social and cultural backgrounds. Freire underlined the importance of appreciating the human narrative or story, that can connect and engage students to their own individual learning process. Using storytelling as a methodology we have encouraged our students to examine the narrative genre to ask questions about the role of the media and its influence on the lives of young people, especially in terms of the value system it inculcates or transmits through a heavy emphasis on celebrity news and gossip. We use the radio studio to discuss the issues raised in selected readings that the students are asked to consider. In the studio environment students are encouraged to make eye contact with each other, as this helps to facilitate critical engagement - a pivotal skill when they are doing live broadcasts. Prior to the studio discussions, students are given a topic to research which is supported by a tutorial, lecture notes, journal articles, and electronic references including You Tube, Facebook and WWB. In

addition enhancing technical and editorial confidence and expertise is a key priority, and the importance of research skills to help them understand that without good preparation students might run out of things to say on air – and risk being left with ‘dead air,’ the fear of all broadcast journalists. Using the studio, and a powerpoint slide presentation, we have examined sexism and ageism in the media by drawing on the work of feminists such as Ann Oakley (2007) and the philosopher Susan Bordo, (1993) who have written extensively on women’s relationships with their bodies - a topic which we have found powerfully engages many students. The work of these feminist writers is used to provoke a debate among students to examine the stereotyping of women, and the role played by the media and the advertising industry. In the power-point presentation students were shown the bodies of women young and old, black and white, able bodied and “disabled” as a trigger for a ‘reflection in action’ (Cowan 2006, 50). They were asked to look critically at the media, and advertising, and why the perfect body is portrayed as ‘that of a young woman with slender hips, flawless skin and silky hair’ (Oakley 1999, 65), and usually white and from a Western background. Students were asked to consider the implications of accepting uncritically ‘ideal beauty,’ as implicitly, and explicitly promoted by the media, and especially the advertising industry. Our studio discussions were passionate, revealing and provocative with both male and female students expressing strong opinions. Smyth (2008) wrote that ‘the modern student lives in a world with CDs, mobile phones, PCs, the internet, social networking, MP3 players and 24 hour multi channel TV’ (Smyth, 2008). Because students are comfortable and safe in the radio studio environment, and have told us so, we as lecturers get to know them collectively, and individually, as people who often hold strong views but lack the confidence to express them. Stories serve multiple functions in the classroom, they

spark or incite discussion and analysis, and make material and ideas memorable. The story as a concept helps students to overcome resistance or even anxiety in talking about themselves. Stories can be used to help build a rapport between the lecturer and student, or among students themselves. However, to help students appreciate the power of the story, illustrations are crucial. One example I use is the development of the Story Corp movement in the United States to demonstrate how and why simple narratives can be extraordinarily powerful. The Story Corp concept was developed by a radio documentary maker David Islay who in 2003, opened a recording booth at Grand Central Station in New York City and then invited people to use it to record their stories. Since then tens of thousands of citizens have used the booth to interview a friend or loved one. Isay says the goal of Story Corp is to find new ways to ‘inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important.... because everybody’s story matters and every life counts.’ Since 2003 over 50,000 stories have been recorded which makes Story Corps ‘one of the largest oral history projects of its kind’ and shows students just how powerful ‘ordinary stories’ can be. In reality it is the so-called “ordinariness” of peoples’ stories that has made Story Corp so successful. A conversations between two people who are important to each other is a good example: a son asking his mother about her childhood; an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America; or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary (Isay 2007,3). By helping people to connect, and to talk about things that matter to them, the Story Corp experience is powerful and sometimes even life changing. I use Story Corp, as part of my pedagogy, to encourage my students to examine what makes a story memorable, and to give them the confidence to appreciate the value and importance of their own narratives, as an antidote to the preoccupation with stories about celebrities. Isay is clear that his goal is to ‘find new

ways to inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important.... because everybody's story matters and every life counts.' Isay's approach and philosophy has influenced the way we sought to facilitate student involvement in *Griff fm*, in 2010. In applying the concept of 'learning by being' (Barnett and Coate 2004) as more than just creating work experience, the broadcast lecturers were actively engaged, on an equal basis with the students as a facilitators, to ensure that what the student experienced became a true learning opportunity. To make the studio experience work requires strong editorial support from the lecturers to help students take control, of 'practice by doing.' Something, it should be stressed, required a very significant commitment from lecturers many who work part-time. That commitment involved long hours, well over and above our contracts. However, the experience of 'practice by doing' was personally rewarding, as we saw students from first year to post graduate level collaborate together to produce excellent broadcast material that resulted in four nominations for the final of the National Student Media Awards. During the two weeks of *Griff fm*, I observed otherwise shy students being transformed into fully functioning broadcast journalists producing programme across several genres. Students found working on live radio exhausting but very rewarding as their many texts and emails showed. From our experience, therefore, we believe that the students who participated and actively engaged enjoyed enormous benefits in professional and personal terms.

Technology is transforming our traditional media landscape, which poses major challenges for journalism lecturers, who are increasingly seeing students who admit they do not read newspapers or listen to radio news and current affairs on the main radio and television channels as distinct from on line news sources. At the same time many of these students have considerable technical ability and upload video on to

YouTube on a regular basis. In the past I might have said, out of frustration, they were lacking ‘vital learning abilities’ because of their lack of appreciation of traditional media. However, now I am inclined to ask are ‘they being taught by methods that fit poorly with their pattern of abilities’ which means they ‘are not learning or they are learning at minimal levels’ (Sternberg et al.1998, 4). Indeed, as Sternberg et al argues many of these students ‘have impressive learning abilities but not the kind that are used in the methods of teaching to which they are exposed. As a result, they never reach the high levels of learning that are possible for them’ (Sternberg et al.1998).

As Masters (2009) says the words ‘check out this Web site’ will probably elicit a more positive response than the infamous ‘take one and pass it down’ he equally urges lecturers to accept that the ‘Internet is the virtual home of this generation because they have never lived without it.’ However while the job of an educator is to educate and not to entertain we all remember the inspirational teacher who did more than just teach which is what we are striving to do using the college radio station.

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