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Case Study: When it goes wrong, how do I know I am an excellent teacher, (just having a bad day)?

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Case Study: When it goes wrong, how do I know I am an excellent teacher, (just having a bad day)?

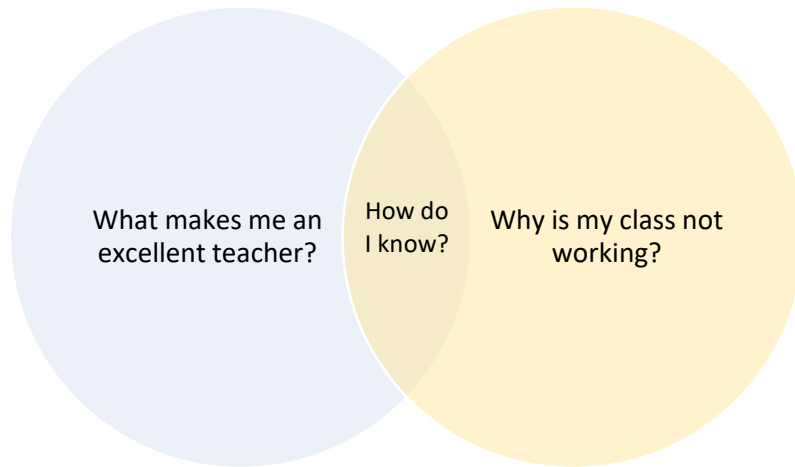
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We all doubt ourselves at times, and we all have bad days in the classroom! Being an excellent teacher is a challenge to achieve consistently, made more difficult by trying to measure how we as teachers make decisions in the classroom, and what impact those decisions have on what and how our students learn. This case study is offered from the perspective of an academic developer, working as a 'third space' professional (Whitchurch, 2008), and as a facilitator of discussions about excellent teaching in higher education on DIT's teaching qualification – the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level learning and Teaching.

Exploring indicators that focus these teachers' effort on what works and what doesn't for their context can enhance their classroom practices and students learning. Asking any of the (mostly early career) academic staff who are undertaking this teaching qualification what makes them excellent in their teaching role, generally begets the response: "*it's many things, working in tandem*", and they can list the main characteristics of an excellent teacher fairly easily. Their responses generally echo those from the study by Su & Wood (2012) who report it's a combination of the lecturer's willingness to help students and inspirational teaching methods that help make a good university teacher; being humorous and able to provide speedy feedback are an added bonus. In pursuing their teaching qualification, these diploma participants report that thinking about what is effective as well as what isn't can help them clarify how to improve professional teaching practice (Figure 1). Looking at what has not worked for them, and why (were they just having a bad day?) makes for interesting conversations! And asking them to delve deeper to consider how all this can be measured adds a richness to their teaching portfolios.

To secure this teaching qualification, these teachers are finding ways to plan their lessons, assess their students in a variety of authentic ways, listen to and collaborate with their students, and network with colleagues. They tweet, use technology, and try to inspire (creative and critical) thinking. Asking them to try to measure how they make decisions in and out of the classroom about all this, and more, and what impact those decisions have on what their students learn, is a pivotal part of their learning on the programme. Their discussions on what signifies excellent teaching seems to have less to do with their subject knowledge and skills than with their attitude toward their students, their subject, and their approach to how they work. Arguably, such teaching does not have templates or boundaries. Having an open attitude, a willingness to 'give it a go' and be flexible is what they draw upon when a class isn't working: I've tried new things, I shift-gears and evaluate my teaching throughout the class; I find new ways to present material to make sure that every student understands the key concepts; all my students are asking questions, not just giving answers, and feel comfortable doing so. I have listened as often as I have lectured. When I do all this, I know I've made an impact.



References

Su, F., & Wood, M. (2012). What makes a good university lecturer? Students' perceptions of teaching excellence. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 4(2), 142-155.

Whitchurch, C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377-396.