

Forum Insights

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A TEACHING HERO?

Exploring students' perceptions and experiences of impactful, transformative teaching in Irish Higher Education

Introduction

This Forum insight paper summarises the key findings from the testimonials provided as part of The National Forum's Teaching Heroes campaign. The Teaching Heroes campaign is a national, student-led initiative that empowers students to identify and recognise teachers in all higher education institutions who have had a transformative impact on their learning. Through the leadership of students unions, and focusing on criteria relating to teaching effectiveness, we gathered over a thousand testimonials from higher education students all over the country. This brief document summarises the findings of an analysis of those testimonials. A more detailed paper will follow.

Rationale for a National, Student-Led Teaching Heroes Campaign

The National Forum's consultations with students and academics across the sector highlighted that a lot of excellent practice by teachers happens under the radar – appreciated by students, impactful on their learning but not always recognised or learned from by others. Students want to have their voices heard and are keen to help identify those teachers in higher education who have made a difference in their lives and to their learning. Student organisers and participants welcomed the opportunity to lead the Heroes campaign to identify impactful teachers in their contexts.

The aims of the Teaching Heroes Campaign

Inclusive of all higher education institutions, some of the key aims of the Heroes campaign were:

- a) to help students to take the lead in analysing and highlighting what good teaching means to them.
- b) to identify those teachers who have had a transformative impact on their students' learning but whose achievements may not have been identified through other routes.
- c) to gather student-generated data on definitions of effective, transformative teaching.
- d) to learn from examples of excellent teaching practice across the sector.
- e) to celebrate, recognise and showcase excellent teaching in all higher education institutions in Ireland.

Main insights: COURAGE, CARE, CREATIVITY, COMMUNICATION, COMMITMENT

The data shows that students who participated in the nomination process value their teachers for certain kinds of characteristics and behaviour. Typical of these included: generosity with time, approachability, helpfulness, passion for their subject, encouraging of student learning, and skilled communication. Five key constructs can be identified that summarise most of the testimonials provided by students:

Courage – Teaching heroes help their students to gain courage and confidence in the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills in the learning of their subjects. They sometimes push them outside their comfort zones, often challenge them but never in a way that makes them feel abandoned. Teaching heroes help students to build on what they already know in order to discover and acquire new skills and new levels of knowledge.

Care – Teaching heroes behave in a way that shows they care about their students. They often work hard for example to ensure they remember students' names (even in very large class settings), they follow up on issues that students have raised and respond to concerns that students express. They make every student feel important and work to forge positive learning relationships.

Creativity – Teaching heroes are keen to be creative in the interests of learning. They will try new methodologies, develop new materials, use resources in new and interesting ways in order to ensure that learning is effective and motivating. A creative orientation to curriculum provision, assessment and learning is something that distinguishes teaching heroes.

Communication – Teaching heroes place a strong priority on effective communication within their teaching contexts. This is not simply a matter of ensuring that their own lectures, tutorials or seminars are well communicated – and good communication does not relate only to didactic elements of teaching. Teaching heroes maximise the opportunities that students have to interact, to question, to contribute and to develop ideas – often using technology to facilitate that communicative process – but also ensuring that their own communication style is open and engaging.

Commitment – Teaching heroes show strong commitment both to their students and to their subjects. They are often described as passionate and enthusiastic, demonstrating dedication to their roles as teachers. This palpable dedication is something that responding students clearly valued.

