



The last word World Teachers' Day Good, better, best

WHAT TURNS A SUPERB TEACHER INTO AN EXTRAORDINARY ONE? STEVE HOLDEN HAS ONE ANSWER.

I was late to my first English class as a new student at Rosny College in Hobart back in 1978, because the teacher had for some reason managed to find a classroom in which to hole up in the Music Department of all places. God knows why she wanted to teach English in the most remote corner of the labyrinth that was Rosny College. She cut short my grumbling quick smart.

It was not an auspicious beginning, considering that she was probably the best teacher I ever had.

I've been taught by many good, some excellent and a few superb teachers, and I've worked with them, too, but there was something extraordinary going on in my 1978 English class. What made her such a great teacher? I think it was because she assumed that to be a whole teacher she had to trust her whole person to her students. I'm not even sure she assumed it. I suspect that's just the way she was.

I was lucky enough some years later to work with her, and I realised then that she related in the same way to any student, or our head of department, or principal or superintendent, with respect and interest, but without distinction.

There was, in this, I eventually realised, a tremendous amount of courage. I remember a behavioural management workshop where teachers were debating the proposition that teaching is necessarily a role, that teachers cannot teach unless they hold something of themselves back. I suspect that many of us do hold something of ourselves back, but I'm not sure that supports the proposition that teaching is a role. I think good teaching is a way of being, and at the best of times that's exhilarating. It's also why, at the worst of times, it can be so debilitating.

At Rosny College, L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go Between*, was on the course, alongside Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of*

Courage, Richard Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the poetry of John Donne – this was 1978, remember – and Les Murray, and some other titles. *The Go Between* and *Macbeth* I remember best. I thought it was just because they were really good books.

In my own teaching, and I was an English teacher, I used to think that a good text acted like a catalyst that caused a positive reaction in the teacher-student relationship. Good texts enabled good learning. These days, I think a good teacher acts like a catalyst that causes a positive reaction in the relationship between the student and the content and skills that are, hopefully, at the heart of the course. Good teachers enable good learning. That's why, of all of Shakespeare's great tragedies, *Macbeth* sticks the hardest in me. It's because one teacher assumed with respect and interest, but without distinction, that this was something we should all get our teeth into – and we trusted her.

This is what happened for me when we happened to study *The Go Between*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The School for Scandal*, *Macbeth*, the poetry of Donne and Murray. The texts mattered, but they mattered because the teaching made them matter. I'd studied *Macbeth* – or should say *Macbeth* was on the course – the previous year, but it was mere gibberish then.

There were two mature-age students in the class when I moved the following year to Rosny College and this probably had a substantial influence on the dynamics of the group, but I think it had most to do with the teacher.

Her name is Ginny Jackson, and she isn't a teacher any more, at least, I don't think so, but I thank her for teaching me so much. **T**

This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and the 2008 highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word.

Photo by Barun Patro courtesy of stock.xchng