

# Educational experiences

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## 1

I'm an undergraduate in my fourth and final Honours year, 1978, English Literature at Glasgow University, taking a Special Paper on W.B. Yeats. I've written a 2,000 word essay on Yeats' *Autobiographies*, and its relation to his poetry and Irish nationalism. I'm the only student taking the class, in a solo seminar with the professor. He starts as he always does, by asking me to summarise the essay. I do so, stating the main ideas. I stop. He thinks for a moment, leans back in his chair, picks out Yeats' *Autobiographies* off the shelf behind, finds and reads out a passage. It directly contradicts what I've been saying in the essay. He looks at me over his half-moons. It's such a direct contradiction that I can think of nothing to say. I feel my face burning. I should have picked it up but didn't. He moves on to discuss details of the essay. We don't talk of it again. I leave.

## 2

I'm a postgraduate student at Edinburgh U, 1978-81. My supervisor is a major figure in late nineteenth century English literature. Every supervision is broadly the same. I go to discuss my latest work, there's a little comment from him and replies from me, then he veers off on other related literary critical subjects and talks for two hours or so, with wee tag questions ('... don't you think?') and launches into another sentence before I can reply.

Half way through the first year I'm beginning to feel anxious and desperate because I have no structure to my work. A Visiting Prof arrives from Yale, J. Hillis Miller, trailing a reputation as a strong deconstructivist critic. His seminars on parable though are fascinating, and he's seeing postgrads, so before he returns to the US, I knock on his door. He is grave and courteous, asks what he can help with. I set out my stall of ideas. He listens intently, makes notes, gives suggestions, takes me through some of them in more detail, asks where I'm going next with others, is looking for an argument. We're both looking for an argument, and for the first time since I arrived at Edinburgh I feel like I have someone who's helping me find it. I leave the room 30 minutes later a different student. We don't see each other again.

# 3

Most of my law degree at Glasgow University, 1990-92, consisted largely of lecture courses and closed book exams. A few courses were exceptional – Jim Murdoch’s Public Law comes to mind. Some courses were adequate; most of them were rather dull, uninspiring; some barely competent. Having done an Education degree and taught adults for six years, I’m feeling frustrated at the educational waste of it all, anxious and depressed. One lecturer stands out from the rest – Joe Thomson, Regius Professor. He is inspiring, highly structured but conversational, interactive, full of narrative. In his first-year Contracts course we think hard as well as scribble. The difficulty of his exam though is a shock to many of us.

In second year I get it touch with him – would he like to collaborate in a computer program using something called Guide Hypertext. He would provide brief exam essay questions and answers, I would provide comment on essay structure and other content, and code it up. He is intrigued, agrees, we put it together, and it is in use for eight years at GU Law School. It’s a first for any law school in the UK. I put conference papers together on it, publish on it with his permission.

Sixteen years later we meet at a conference panel on legal education. I am supposed to be stating the case against lectures, he making the case for them. It’s slightly knockabout stuff, but Joe, ever congruent, says something that stays with me. The best lecturers in his experience, he says, are those who in their lectures make themselves *intellectually vulnerable*.