# Richard Doyle – Teaching Philosophy

It really is such good fun to teach. I play the prankster, the fool, the scholar, the sage, the delinquent and the curmudgedon, all in equal measure. I do not pretend (nor do I want to be) the peer of my students, but nor do I want to play the role of sovereign teacher instructing those ready to “consume” knowledge, as if it were something I could serve to them on the end of a long spoon rather than something they must, at all costs, discover within themselves. In support of this self discovery, on the road to learning to learn, teaching emerges for me as a rigorous play. I deploy comical, compassionate and always supportive but uncompromising guerrilla tactics of pedagogy that shift as student needs mutate. The stakes are very high indeed for this rigorous play. I treat each student’s life as the precious opportunity for self reflection and growth that it is. Very often, students take me up on this opportunity to rethink who and what they are. I stay in touch with many of them.

Often, at first, some students are disconcerted by my teaching. The fact that a conversation, grounded in a particular text or writing assignment, might literally go anywhere, can induce equal parts of freedom and vertigo. The fact that they are now responsible participants in high velocity, high level, always serious and sometimes zany investigations into what and how we think about topics ranging from alien abduction to the King James Bible, excites students, thrills them, and, at times, shocks them. They are expected to learn about Everything. Practicing intensive Socrates dialogue rather than lounging as passive recipients of carefully prepared PowerPoint slides can indeed take them off guard. But because this insistence that “everybody get in the pool” is paired with the unmistaken sense that their Professor cares deeply about them and their future, the vertigo gives way to gratitude and a sense of responsibility for learning. A veteran returning from overseas service breathed a sigh of relief because, he said, what goes on in my classrooms and online is “real.” Everyone is at stake, everyone is supported, and all of the work must get done. The main part of the work is learning to learn.

By participating in dialogues with the teacher as well as each other, students learn to let go of their desire for a simple overarching solution to problems of complexity, and instead become adepts of not-knowing the answer. They discover that what they think they know gets in the way of actually learning, and that becoming comfortable with what a 14th century mystic called the “Cloud of Unknowing” can, paradoxically enough, help them learn. Outside of the classroom, they work together in spaces where decentralized peer to peer teaching can make at least as much difference as classroom dialogue. Wikis-free web platforms that may be edited by and registered user – are exemplary in this regard, and I have come to depend upon secured wikis to help create a zone of participation outside the classroom as well as within it. This sense that the true promise of digital education can be found only through participatory and open ended spaces of dialogue lead me to teach free online webinars sponsored by Penn State devoted to the digital humanities project, Zebrapedia.psu.edu. Zebrapedia and the webinars draws users from all over the world collectively transcribing and interpreting the massive and mostly hand written opus of perhaps America’s greatest science fiction writer, Philip K. Dick. In this planetary community, peer to peer learning and scholarship go hand in hand: PSU undergraduates, working with Zebrapedia, made many of the selections from the print volume, The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick, published by Houghton Mifflin in 2011. It’s all such good, serious, fun: Free non denominational meditation classes at Pasquerilla Spiritual Center, Skype sessions with correspondents who contact me online, online webinars, and overload classes that focus on social and ethical implications of nanotech sponsored by the NSF. I’d love the opportunity to share this passion. Some of us feel that teaching is a chore, but in fact it is life itself. Everybody get in the pool.