

Professor Focus

Dr. David Buck

The empires of antiquity were full of some wild and crazy guys, or so one would gather from Professor Buck's lectures. Dr. David Buck is Chairman of the UPEI Classics Department, and is embarking on his sixth year as a faculty member. Last week, "Professor Focus" interviewed this man, who once summed up the monarchy's approach to new ideas in the simple maxim, "If you can't refute, execute."

Q: Do you see yourself more as a teacher or as a research scholar?

A: I don't think there's really essentially a distinction between teaching and scholarship. Ideally you have senior scholars introducing younger scholars into this profession. My ideal is not to have students who are emotionally or intellectually dependent on the professor, which means I occasionally seem a bit harsh or uncaring. I'm not - but my ideal is to give each student the tools to fly on his or her own. It's your essay, here's a topic. It's the sort of topic that you have to define to some extent yourself - see what you can do with it. It's not "learn these five things and regurgitate." Students come and say, "How long should the essay be?", and I may say 500 or 5000 words, and I may also say "As long as it needs to be." They come and say things like "What do you want?", basically, "What's the right answer?" I want essays which are valid. They don't have to agree with me, but they have to make a valid case. I'm not prepared to say "Well, because there's 1500 words on this page, therefore, it's going to get through."

Q: Do you like to get to know your students personally? Does that matter?

A: I am as a person stand-offish. If I like the student and the student like me, we can become friends. In a sense, I usually prefer anonymity because when you start to get to know a student it becomes a bit harder to be objective. I always went to large universities where there's always, even in small departments, a certain amount of distance and objectivity in the relationship. I'm always willing to talk with students, but I'm not going to try to make their social lives part of my social life.

Q: Do you prefer small classes, or teaching to a full amphitheatre?

A: There's two entirely different kinds of teaching. With a large class you have an audience. You're a performer. One lectures, one can build up a rapport with the audience. They can get to know your style of humour. You can tell jokes, they will laugh. And it is a kind of high to be the performer in front of the audience. Equally, it can be very good with a small class of good students. A small class with bad stu-

dents or dull students or uninterested students is like the dentist's waiting room. What's really difficult is the class around ten or fifteen that doesn't gel because the students aren't prepared to engage in dialogue.

Q: What is your favourite course to teach? Do You have one?

A: No, I don't think I have one. I think one of the very nice things about being here at UPEI is that I am doing what I want to do. Being effectively a one-person department, I only teach what I enjoy teaching. I like Greek tragedy and Greek comedy, so I teach that. I'm a Roman historian, so I teach the Roman history courses, and Greek and Latin. So, in any given year, there may be a favourite course, but that's largely because that's going best with the students.

