

How to light fires

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Focus of discussion

I recently came across a quotation by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

These few words summed up all of my frustrations and hopes as a university teacher. They helped me to make sense of what I have been trying to do for the last thirty-two years so I decided to use this as a focus for a TERNZ seminar.

Context and significance of focus

TERNZ participants are usually either academics or academic advisors. We all have a philosophy of education that is apparent in how we set about our work. This may or may not conflict with what we think the purpose of university education is or what we think it should be. In this seminar, I want to look at how participants answer the big question: what is the purpose of university education, through their actions. I also want to investigate what participants think the purpose of university education is and how they handle any conflict between their beliefs and actions. In my case, there is no conflict between what I think the purpose of university education is and how I teach, although I cannot claim to have an easy life at work.

Outline of process

I will start this seminar by giving examples of how I have tried to light fires and some of the pressures I have experienced pushing me to fill buckets. One instance in particular comes to mind: teaching 1,200 students in a first-year introduction to business course (with seven colleagues). And I did light 1,200 fires whereas my seven colleagues didn't even try (although they did try to make me fill buckets).

I would then like to explore with participants how they respond to this idea theoretically and practically: how they set about lighting fires, and how they overcome institutional, technological, collegial, and student pressure to fill buckets.