A GOOD QUESTION

EDUCATION \ This teacher has a philosophical approach to life, writes CHERYL CRITCHLEY

They moved to Sydney so McCarthy could work for Sony, but eight weeks before Robinson-McCarthy was due to start a master of teaching at the University of Sydney she had a life-threatening motorbike accident. Facing lengthy rehabilitation, they returned to Melbourne and Robinson-McCarthy completed a diploma of education at the University of Melbourne. Before then, she had flirted with teaching, applying several times before pulling out.

"Each time I got the acceptance letter I went, 'No I'm not cut out to be a teacher. I'm not the right personality, it's not going to suit me'," she says. "Once, this confident and intelligent young woman was wrong."

Robinson-McCarthy loved teaching rounds and knew immediately that she could do it. She had a natural affinity for working in front of a class and relished the challenge of engaging teenagers. After applying for a literature teaching job at Preshil, she won the job but was instead asked to teach the new VCE philosophy subject, which started in 2001. Despite pushing up on the subject over summer, that first year was "incredibly difficult" because teachers largely drove the course.

"But Robinson-McCarthy took the bull by the horns, developing an engaging and fun philosophy course that engaged students," says former student and current teacher Farah Naficy. "She had a natural affinity for working in front of a class and relished the challenge of engaging teenagers."

"Philosophy shouldn’t be a dry subject," she explains. "Questions like, 'What is right?' and 'What is wrong?' and 'What is the nature of reality?' and 'How should we live our lives?' are still fascinating questions."

Robinson-McCarthy says she has a natural affinity for teaching. "I sometimes say to students in philosophy, 'You might find that the best answer is actually not the one you agree with', and actually being able to recognise that is the beginnings of students doing philosophy."

Preshil students have embraced the challenge, with half of last year’s year 12 class scoring over 40. It has also produced two Premier’s Prize-winners in the subject. "Philosophy should be compulsory in my opinion … it teaches young people or teaches anybody how to think, and knowing how to think is so important for how we live our lives personally," Robinson-McCarthy says. "It allows us to clearly look at the information that we are given in different parts of our lives."

"There’s nothing more exciting than when a group of students walk out of your classroom and they’re still talking about it when they walk out. They’re still debating and they’re questioning and you can see that they’re on fire with the question, agreeing or disagreeing or just trying to work it out in their heads and that’s when I know I’m teaching really well."

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