



My moments...

Award-winning English teacher **Cathy McGowan** shares some memorable classroom episodes

THE MOMENT I...

... first felt 'in charge' in a classroom

I've desperately tried to remember that "Eureka" moment when it suddenly all came together in the classroom, but that is not really how it worked for me. The very boring truth, I'm afraid, is that I just worked very hard at preparing lessons I thought would interest and challenge the pupils in various ways. I am quite strict, but with the odd bit of humour thrown in, and that seems to have sustained a strong rapport with the pupils I have taught.

...knew I'd reached a previously unreachable pupil

When news broke of my nomination for the teaching awards, one past pupil got in touch with the school to say he had many regrets about not staying in school to complete his A levels, but that if he could come back to my classes and do it all again he gladly would. That is a good example of how, even when you think you didn't quite manage to 'reach' a pupil, they listened a lot more than you originally thought.

...first got positive feedback from a student/group of students

I find it really humbling when pupils take the time to express their gratitude to you. It is always lovely to get the generous gifts from your form class at Christmas or from your sixth form when they are leaving to start their exams in May, but it is the thoughtfulness of many pupils expressed in letters and cards

FACT FILE

NAME: CATHY MCGOWAN
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JOB TITLE: TEACHER OF ENGLISH
SCHOOL: DOMINICAN COLLEGE PORTSTEWART

THE BEST BIT:

I GET TO TALK TO (MOSTLY) INTERESTING YOUNG PEOPLE EVERY DAY ABOUT BOOKS. THAT NEVER FEELS LIKE A CHORE TO ME.

THE WORST BIT:

I'M SURE I'M NOT THE ONLY TEACHER IN THE WORLD WHO WOULD TELL YOU THAT IT IS OFTEN THE PAPERWORK AND POLITICS THAT PROVIDE MOST STRESS.

CATHY MCGOWAN WAS NAMED N. IRELAND TEACHER OF THE YEAR IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL AT THE 2012 TEACHING AWARDS. FIND OUT MORE AT TEACHINGAWARDS.COM

that always moves me the most. I have every card/letter I've been given on the wall of my classroom. When I got married, when I had my babies, when I received the teaching award, my classes went to incredible trouble to mark those occasions. I had a pupil last year who wrote me a poem based on all the texts we had studied during GCSE. Things like that never cease to amaze me!

...got so lost in a lesson that time ceased to exist

I think this is better asked of the pupils than me – I suppose the nature of English Literature is that it presents so many opportunities to discuss the most random of subjects. The sixth form normally have unusual and interesting perspectives to offer. For example, a couple of years ago we started a Year 14 lesson discussing the dynamic between Tess and Alec in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and ended up comparing them to Dastardly, Mutley and the pigeon from the *Wacky Races*. They even sung the song to accompany the discussion! This was the same group that had some colourful debates about the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.

...will always especially cherish

Despite the bad press that teenagers often get, sometimes well deserved, I find their honesty, humour and perspective a real joy to work with. They have provided me with so many memorable moments I honestly can't think of a stand out incident. I suppose my personal career turning point, though, was returning to teach in my old school Dominican College, which really felt like coming home. It is a school with a uniqueness and culture that nurtured me as a pupil, and now also as a member of staff. Although it has to be said that walking into the staff room on the first day was certainly a daunting experience!