



Sustained Excellence  
in Tertiary Teaching  
General Category

## Professor Tim Cooper

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**“I am always seeking for my students the kind of opportunity that I was given: to fall in love with History, and to discover how studying the past can bring innumerable riches in the present that really are nothing short of life-changing.”**

Tim connects his teaching today with his early life experience. His father died when he was eight years old. As the youngest child in the family, he spent his teenage years living alone with his mother who had suffered childhood trauma of her own. Her alcoholism and depression at the time made this a very difficult season in his life. But it was during those years that his love of history came to life. It wasn't that his teacher was inspiring – his first History teacher's approach was solely to write notes on the blackboard to be copied down. But it was history itself that compelled him. He found that history gave meaning and perspective to his own condition. He felt he was not alone, that suffering was part of the human story across time – and he found his place in that story. Just as history altered the course of his life, he wants to give his students the same opportunity. He encourages students to take charge of their own learning and discern what that means for their own particular contexts. He believes this transformative understanding of the past equips them to reassess the present. And, in particular, he finds that a student encountering the history of Christianity helps them to see their own faith position, of any faith or none, with new eyes.

Tim's students come from all walks of life and from across the whole country to learn the history of Christianity. They range from top Year 13 students taking his 100-level survey paper to gain a head-start at university to mature students who are busy with the demands of employment, Christian ministry, or voluntary service in their local communities. For many of those mature students, this is their first chance to sit as students and gain a sense of wonder at Christianity through the ages and across the world. Around a third of Tim's students live in Dunedin, attending lectures on campus, while others live and study at a distance. They vary in their understanding of Christianity – from those with a comprehensive knowledge to those with no background at all. He says some are wrestling with faith issues, while others come with a deep hunger for more knowledge about a faith they have come to live and breathe. He believes in cultivating an environment where every student feels safe, confident, engaged, and in control so they can see their world from another point of view – and be all the richer for it.

As Tim understands, it can feel threatening for his students to open their prior assumptions to the risk of being challenged, so he offers them time and attention. He encourages and affirms them even while he is pushing them to think in deeper ways. His experience as a teenager gave him an empathy for others, especially those who have come through some sort of disadvantage. He is a strong advocate for both Māori and Pacific student success as many of these have overcome systemic challenges to enter university. Once a safe and supportive environment has been created, his students can take their learning into their own hands. A key

to this is the coursebook, which generally contains all the content students are expected to learn in the form of the lecturer's introductory notes and large numbers of photocopied book chapters or articles. Tim's coursebooks are unique, in that he converts selected portions of the readings he wants into editable text and embeds these within his introductory notes so that the reading experience is a seamless whole; everything is in the same font and style, and nothing gets in the way of student comprehension and engagement.

The content of Tim's papers is also innovative. He creates moments where something 'clicks' for his students, when the world is never quite the same again for them. For instance, the standard Church History curriculum focuses only on the western story but in Tim's 100-level survey paper he brings in the non-western story, which challenges students with some disturbing implications. His 400-level students are presented with a different challenge - to master not just a complex, foreign topic that is completely new to them, but the fundamentals of a new discipline as well. As students of Theology, Ministry, or Chaplaincy, they have generally done little or no History. He throws them into the depths of his own research area of seventeenth-century English religious history, which is daunting for them. Then, starting with a blank slate, he builds their knowledge from the ground up.

Tim has had to redesign courses because the curriculum he inherited confined him to old frameworks of learning. Now, half of the 510-page coursebook for his new paper on the Reformation contains long extracts from primary documents and an entire lecture is dedicated to each of these documents. This is based on the premise that historians need to work with evidence. A 300-level student will make a presentation on one of these documents, then lead a brief discussion in order to develop their oral and leadership skills. At other times, groups of students will discuss a document and feed back to the class, with Tim coaching them in the practice and discipline of History. Across five weeks of the Reformation paper, 200-level students collaborate online to write a story called *The Journey of Hans and Jacob* about two fictional German Lutherans who travel through the five main geographical contexts of the Reformation. The assessment, worth 25%, is a fun, creative way of understanding the worldview of those who lived in the past as the students have to speak authentically in each character's voice.

In 2011 Tim designed and piloted a new blended-learning model for the Theology Programme that introduced online discussion and a day of face-to-face teaching in Auckland, Wellington, and Dunedin early in the semester. In 2012 the Distance Education Association of New Zealand presented him with a Merit Award in recognition of his leadership and design. Examples of this innovative model were included in Australian academic Rod Sims' 2014 book *Design Alchemy* and Tim's leadership in the Theology Programme was an important component in his winning a University of Otago Teaching Excellence Award in 2014. In 2017 Tim's Pro-Vice-Chancellor invited him to take on a 0.6 FTE leadership role in the Division of Humanities. Whereas academic staff had tended to view this role as merely bureaucratic and obstructive, Tim reconceived the Committee as a team. They continued to maintain quality-assurance, but added in positive, strategic initiatives that staff could value and appreciate. They introduced teaching excellence awards and a Teaching and Learning Symposium which has been replicated every year since 2017. To promote peer review, Tim introduced Teaching and Learning Circles, where teams of three or four lecturers observe each other in the classroom to gain fresh ideas. In his current role as Head of the School of Arts, comprising over seventy academic staff in six programmes from Classics to Theology, Tim is working on several fronts to enhance the learning environment within the School, such as School-wide communications sharing his values for teaching excellence.

*"I teach in the tension between genuine faith (in some) and intellectual interest (in others), helping each to understand the perspective of the other. Cultivating a learning environment in which this splendid diversity of people can succeed is the challenge that endlessly animates and inspires my teaching."*