

PORTRAIT

Fighting for academic freedom

Denis Rancourt's quest to foster independent thinking could cost the professor his job



Wanda O'Brien

Denis Rancourt says he made a deal with the devil 36 years ago.

"I made a conscious decision that I would stop my own personal, intellectual development and I would perform academically in order to get scholarships, in order to get a good life for myself. That was the deal I made."

This was around the time, at 15, that he moved from North Bay to Ottawa with his working class family. He decided he needed to survive and he needed security.

He sold his independent thought in exchange for a bachelor of science, a master of science and a PhD, he says.

He is now a tenured physics professor at the University of Ottawa, with 22 years of teaching.

But just as he made the decision to sacrifice his independence, five years ago he decided to take it back.

It was 2004, the year preceding the "academic squatting" of Rancourt's first-year physics and the environment course. "It's when I decided that I would not compromise education any more – that I would not do what is expected, but instead I would try to do what is best for the students and for the sake of justice," he smiles, "and sanity."

In an article he wrote in 2007, *Academic Squatting – A Democratic Method of Curriculum Development*, Rancourt describes his method as openly taking an existing course and doing something different with it.

Rancourt decided to only give students a pass or fail, no actual marks, in the fall 2005 course. He wanted to put students in charge of their own learning.

"Something just said, okay, that's enough. I'm tired of compromises."

The physics professor sits in a black leather rocking chair in the front room of his east Ottawa home, one leg tucked underneath the other as he sways back and forth. He's surrounded by books, DVDs, and newspapers piled high on coffee tables and stacked in the bookshelves.

"I think the purpose of a university education is to allow independent thinkers to develop and flourish," says Rancourt. "And the only way you can hope to categorize independent thinkers is to give them freedom."

His unconventional teaching method continued with a course

he and his students lobbied for – science in society or "the activism course" – in the fall of 2006. In a winter 2007 course almost all the students received an A or A+ from Rancourt and in a graduate course in fall 2007 all the students received an A+.

In winter 2008, the last time Rancourt was allowed to teach, he told every student they were receiving an A+ on the first day in two courses.

Not everyone agrees with Rancourt's approach to teaching.

Rancourt started butting heads with the university in 2005 over the physics and the environment course. The dean of science interrupted the second class to announce the class had been shut down. The decision was reversed for the third week, but Rancourt grieved the university's actions and won arbitration. Rancourt says the university has tried to discipline him from that point on.

Last Dec. 10, the university administration gave Rancourt two letters. One suspended him from all his teaching duties and barred him from campus and the second informed him of a recommendation by the dean of the faculty of science to the board of governors to dismiss Rancourt from the university.

A thick, yellow legal-sized envelope is delivered to Rancourt's door while he is being interviewed. More documents that add to the legal haze of determining the rights of a professor's academic freedom.

Rancourt says he is trying to create independent thinkers in the classroom who question their choices. He wants his students to learn what they want to learn, understanding the equations as well as the concepts.

"The system's indoctrination would have us believe that we have to confine ourselves simply to our discipline. That in a physics course you can only talk about physics. In fact, that's not true at all."

Rancourt, a self-proclaimed anarchist, says if students are restrained to a specific technical discipline the moral and ethical questions are left to others. He does not think science should be separated from its social or political ramifications.

"This whole exercise of regurgitating on command and trying to guess the professor's mind and being evaluated with grades as a carrot stick approach – to me that is anti-educational," says Rancourt.

Independent thinking, Rancourt says, means people will be able to judge and evaluate the ethics of

what they're doing and separate it from what their employer wants. He says responsible citizens need to have the capacity to think independently. But is independent thought taught in university? "Absolutely not," says Rancourt.

Federico Carvajal was an undergrad student in the 2005 Physics and the Environment course. He says the response from students was "overwhelmingly positive" and due to that course Carvajal chose to be a teaching assistant in Rancourt's activism class. He has also taken a graduate course under Rancourt. Currently in the second year of his master of science degree, he says the courses engaged students and they became more active on campus because of it.

"You do the work that you need to get the grades that you want," says Carvajal. "Once that was removed students saw a new side of education."

Carvajal says the course material particularly impacted students in the sciences because they normally lack exposure to topics that question their discipline.

Rancourt says he doesn't recommend sacrificing your independence to get a degree. Rather, he says people should read Jeff Schmidt's book, *Disciplined Minds*, which played a large role in Rancourt's transformation as a



Natalie Zakrzewski, Centretown News

Denis Rancourt's teaching approach has put the physics professor in hot water.

sionals.

Schmidt has a PhD in physics from the University of California. He was on the editorial staff of *Physics Today* magazine for 19 years when he was fired because of the content of his book.

He was reinstated after a public campaign was launched and promptly resigned a few hours later.

He took legal action and received monetary compensation. He is currently trying to improve physics and math instruction in grade schools in the United States.

"Denis is one of the very few professors who actually uses academic freedom," says Schmidt.

He says Rancourt realized he has been hired to train people to be obedient employees in high tech corporations. "Most professors would say I've just been hired to teach physics. But, Denis Rancourt looked at the larger picture and he couldn't in good conscience ignore that."

The larger picture, Schmidt says, is the social role of physics and its educators.

It's rare, says Schmidt, to have someone like Rancourt who becomes a radical after he has tenure. Schmidt says he does not know why Rancourt started pushing the academic boundaries when he did, but adds "he has a conscience that wouldn't let him ignore his role in history."

"I've always felt that I cheated myself," Rancourt says in reference to the years he spent following the standard academic course. "I've always been torn and unhappy and I didn't really understand why and I think now I've come to understand that it's because I had accepted to give up my political dimension."

Says Carvajal: "I think of him four years ago and he's a different person now." He adds that Rancourt started hopeful and hesitant, with no idea how the university would react to the changes he was making in his courses.

"His views of science and of teaching have evolved. I think he's learned as much as he's taught."

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That book explains, says Rancourt, how students can survive graduate school with dignity intact. "I wish I read that book when I was going through it."

The book's author travelled to Ottawa from his home in Washington to speak to Rancourt's activism class in November 2006. The two have developed a friendship, through a shared interest in physics and the politics of profes-