



# 'Pirate' captivates his students

ANDREW TROUNSON

WHEN James Arvanitakis's students go online for one of his lectures, they won't get a dull recording. They may find him wearing a motorbike helmet and sunglasses in a library as he discusses appearance and racism or doing a jig in front of the Eiffel Tower as part of a tutorial on globalisation.

For this sociology academic at the University of Western Sydney, it's about thinking like a "pirate" and plundering experiences to captivate students.

And it involves going where the students are: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

On Monday, Dr Arvanitakis was presented with the \$50,000 Prime Minister's Award for Australian University Teacher of the Year.

"We live in an environment where there are heaps of things going on for students and they need to see that we are keeping up with what is happening," he said.

A senior lecturer in humanities, Dr Arvanitakis was a banker, then a human rights activist in the Pacific, Indonesia and Europe before going into academia.

By bringing his own experiences into his teaching and making room for students to value their own experiences, he aims to make students

feel "safe" to participate without fear of being made to look stupid.

He says it is a message that is particularly important for first-year students, especially those that are first in their family to go to university.

Dr Arvanitakis himself was the first in his Greek migrant family to study at university, and on his first day his mother told him to carry his passport for identification. He was also counselled to take some leftover lamb from the previous night's celebratory family dinner to help him make friends.

He does not see an enemy in the rise of free online courses, but says traditional face-to-face teaching must adapt towards a blended model.

"Rather than putting a finger in a dam to stop it, you have to open the door and guide it through," he said. "There is room to do a really mixed model."

There would always be many students who needed the face-to-face experience — not just those lacking confidence but also the brightest, who thrived on the direct challenge of teachers and peers.

And what will he do with the money?

As nice as it may be to put it into his mortgage, he said it would go towards allowing him to accept invitations to lecture in South Africa and Canada.



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