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Sound Mind, Sound Body

Laura Davis
Linfield College

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Sound mind,

The pedaling professor views life through a philosophical lens

They wait anxiously as graded papers are handed back, the more red marks the better for philosophy students in Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza's class. No one wants a clean page.

"I give lots of comments, lots and lots," says Ilundáin, assistant professor of philosophy. "The better the paper, the more comments. I engage with them like a sparring match."

Ilundáin thrives on the exchange. Like many of the ancient Greek philosophers he studies, Ilundáin is full of curiosity – particularly where sports are concerned. He juggles interests in cycling, swordsmanship, soccer and more, often working into the night in his Melrose office.

"When he's teaching something, it's because he wants to teach it," said Cem Kuleli '10, who shares Ilundáin's passion for soccer and assisted him with research for a chapter on the subject. "He's easy to talk with and he gets really excited about subjects."

"Research informs my teaching in a very genuine way," Ilundáin says. "The best way to serve my students is to research the things I'm passionate about and bring that to the class."

And Ilundáin is passionate about many things.

His excitement and creativity carry into the classroom, where he leads lively discussions with hands-on teaching. As he moves around the room, his ideas tumble out through a melodic Spanish accent. Eyes dancing, he is quick to smile as he calls students by name, even in the second week, pulling them into the conversation.

"Make sure I can hear you. Don't be bashful," he encourages.

In his classes, he connects complex ideas with everyday life. Students ponder whether Dutch philosopher Spinoza would buy an iPod. They snack on macarons to understand how Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher, perceived the world.

Even his syllabi, traditionally dry documents handed out on the first day of class, are conversational, peppered with humor and cartoons to introduce the semester ahead.

"We learn best with things we enjoy most," he says. "You can look at difficult topics in a way that's appealing."

Tessa Romine '13, a nursing major, likes that Ilundáin uses humor to put the class at ease.

"He wants us to be active learners," says Romine, who

is taking the Philosophy of Sport class. "He wants to keep us involved instead of just listening to him lecture. We spend a lot of time talking and debating, voicing our own opinions. I enjoy that aspect."

In his writing, Ilundáin translates abstract philosophy to concrete examples. He uses soccer to illustrate Aristotle's notion of courage, incorporates Greek tragedy into a chapter on the Olympics and explores the notion of hunting.

"I can't even kill a fly, but all my family are hunters," he explains. "This is my way to come to terms with my personal values and understand hunting as a philosopher."



Growing up in Spain, Ilundáin tackled subjects with zest – from marine biology to language to swimming. He recalls giving a grade school report on sharks that stretched into the afternoon.

"Whatever I got into, I was very intense," he recalls. A swimmer, he always wanted just 10 more minutes in the water. He threw himself into English when his peers studied French. In college, he took heavy course loads simply to fit in all his interests, eventually earning a master's in the sociology of sport and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"I wanted to take that and that and that, and this too," he says with a laugh. "It was so hard to choose."

An avid cyclist, he rarely drives a car and has raced competitively for more than 17 years. The Greek ideal of "a sound mind in a sound body" resonates with Ilundáin, who does a lot of thinking on his bike, a bright orange Las Cruces.

"It helps me to untangle knots," he says. "I bring an issue in my head, and usually it works out while I'm riding. It helps my creativity as well."

On one bike ride, he came up with the idea to incorporate swordsmanship into a Philosophy of Mind class to show how the mind and the body work together. "Students were making all kinds of connections between their sword practice and the insights they got from that," he said.

In addition to writing traditional essays, Ilundáin encourages students to express their understanding of con-

sound body

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cepts in ways that are meaningful to them – with drawings, cartoons, paintings, cooking, sculpture and theatre. One student designed a computer game for the class to play, questioning whether a game could be artistic.

He has embraced the liberal arts concept, and says philosophy fits hand in glove with critical thinking.

“The students who come through philosophy classes become critical in different ways and we expose them to different possibilities,” he says. “We train future scientists, mathematicians and artists by making them philosophers. A liberal arts education is the best tool I’ve seen to help

people succeed in a genuine sense of flourishing.”

Ilundáin is an academic force of nature, according to Vicki McGillin, former vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. “In his years at Linfield, he has set the mark for teaching and scholarly excellence,” she added. “The sheer volume of ideas that flows from him is most impressive.”

“I have this urge to think,” Ilundáin says. “And that’s what I like about philosophy – it is a matter of thinking out loud. My goal is to find truth I can live with, but it’s mostly about trying to understand things.” 🍀

– Laura Davis



Since joining the Linfield faculty in 2006, Jesús Ilundáin-Agurriza has published a book, three peer-reviewed articles, seven book chapters and has three more writing projects in the works. See a video at www.youtube.com/linfieldcollege.