As a former student of Rena’s, I am honoured to be delivering this citation. In order to adequately pay tribute, I shall call upon the words and ideas of two groups – the education graduands of 2009, and the early Greek scientists – separated by some two and a half thousand years, but joined by a common pursuit of shared knowledge.

Rena Heap has been an inspiration and a revelation to her students. The National Education Monitoring Project reports that students’ dislike of science has more than doubled in recent years. University of Otago Professor of Education Dr Terry Crooks said that children tended to get ‘talked to’ about science but didn’t get to ‘do much science’. The solution to this problem is simple; expose as many student teachers to the pedagogy of Rena as possible. Many students feel they learn more about science in the brief time they have with her than they have in the entirety of their preceding education.

She has outstanding science subject knowledge, but she models good pedagogy by willingly admitting when she is unsure of something. Her innovation is absolutely delightful.

Rena is responsive to student feedback, a practice acknowledged by her students as invaluable. How often do we see reflective teaching in practice? Rena epitomizes it. How rarely do we see lecturers taking real risks? Rena did weekly – and that had more of an impact on our views about teaching than anything else in the course.

Rena taught us that ‘wisdom begins in wonder’. Her lessons were vivid, dynamic, alive. The first sensation was always wonder. Wonder gave way to questions. Questions to exploration. Exploration to discovery. Fully engaged, we accompanied Rena on voyages of enlightenment. We heard the ‘music in the spacing of the spheres’ as the arrangement of the solar system was revealed to us in a collection of assorted balls and lollies.

When Socrates said ‘I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think’, he surely had in mind this co-constructivist approach of giving the learner ownership over their knowledge – epitomised by Rena. She exemplifies theory in action.

Rena is as genuinely caring and supportive towards her students as she is knowledgeable about science. She epitomises passion, humility, humour and joy within learning. Her enthusiasm is infectious. Her innovation and risk taking is absolutely inspirational. In Rena’s classes her students learn not only about science but about teaching and learning, and about themselves as teachers and learners.

To sum up in a student’s words:

“You teach as if you’ve glitter in your veins! You have inspired me to teach. You have reminded me of why I want to teach. You’ve enriched and equipped us all and challenged us to be true life-long learners.”

Rena is a richly deserving recipient of this teaching excellence award.

Rena – thank you.