

Dr. Shannon Murray: Making the Leap from Learning Needs to Teaching Innovation

by Joel MEGGS

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Shannon Murray's office door is open — likely a policy. Inside she is hard at work, but not too busy to invite me in to talk about the 3M Fellowship she was recently awarded.

The awards, handed out in collaboration with the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), recognize excellence in teaching as well as academic leadership at the post-graduate level.

A quick glance around Dr. Murray's office gives one some idea of her approach to teaching; rows upon rows of books are interspersed with rows of videotapes, a TV, a VCR, and a computer. Dr. Murray bridges the schism of old-style teaching and new technologies in her attempt to actively engage her students in the learning process.

Perhaps no one in the Arts department is as self-conscious of his or her teaching methods as Dr. Murray. She confides that she goes to great lengths to be evaluated by students and peers, even though she readily admits that the criticism that might come out of such evaluations makes her cringe.

"You have to pay really close attention to your students and what they say about you. The student evaluations of teaching help. This summer, for example, at a workshop, I had a small snippet of class videotaped. And then the group of other teachers talked about my teaching, and I had to evaluate my teaching as well. You need that

chance to look at yourself from the outside."

Active Learning is a term that Dr. Murray employs a great deal to describe her approach to teaching; one which avoids the traditional lecturing format, where professors talk and students furiously scribble down copious notes.

"I think it's just part of my nature that I get bored easily, so I could never stand being in a classroom in which I was doing the same thing all the time. I like variety."

Dr. Murray routinely employs team learning, movies, WebCT discus-

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sion boards, quickwrites, and cue-script readings to break up the monotony of classroom learning.

"I try to develop a repertoire of techniques. Not all techniques will work for all students all the time, but the more techniques you have in your bag of tricks, the better the chance you'll engage most of the students most of the time.

"I have a file, and ... if I try something and it really works, I write a note to myself and put it in that file. And if I try something and it really bombs, I write a note to myself and put it in that file. So when I have a chance to take a breath ... I review the file."

Dr. Murray also takes every possible opportunity to extend the learning process beyond the confines of the classroom, be it through public readings, trips to local theatre produc-

tions, over to Halifax to the Neptune Theatre, or her penultimate extra-curricular experience, a theatre tour of London, England, which took place several years ago.

"I like anything that suggests that the work of the classroom doesn't happen just in the classroom. There is a connection between that fifty minutes or that seventy-five minutes and the rest of the world."

I asked her what impact her own undergraduate experience (Dr. Murray attended Dalhousie University for her undergraduate degree) had upon her philosophy towards teaching.

"I'm sad to say that I'm pretty sure that most of my teachers didn't give a lot of thought to how they were teaching."

Dr. Murray does cite one notable exception, Dr. John Baxter, who she says had a profound influence on how his students read poetry, but for the most part she draws her inspiration from her colleagues:

"I think this is a really rare dynamic here [at UPEI].

"I'm also a really good thief. I have a lot of really good teachers to steal from. So I get my team learning techniques from Brent MacLaine, I get workshop techniques from Richard Lemm, I get my marking sheets from Jane Magrath, and I get WAC writing techniques from Wendy Shilton, I get TEA [Topic, Example, Analysis — a writing system] from Geoff Lindsay."

I ask Dr. Murray if all these Active Learning techniques cut too much into her lecture time, whether she has to sacrifice content in order to integrate them. She admits that, yes, they do eat up a lot of time that could be used to cover more material, but in her mind it is all about striking a delicate balance between quantity of material covered and quality of learning:

"The hardest thing about trying to promote an Active Learning environment is giving stuff up as a teacher. It's giving up some of the

chances to talk so that you can let other people talk. It's giving up showing the students stuff in order to let them find it themselves.

"You sacrifice some things so that you can get things that you think are more important [i.e. independent thought/learning].

"Giving the students the chance to read closely, carefully, and critically is something that the student's will carry with them throughout their lives. That's the idea behind life-long learning."

Aside from Dr. Murray's classroom performance, the 3M Fellowship also recognizes the other work she has been involved in on campus. This work includes the organization of panels, roundtables, and her involvement in the development of the First Year Advantage Program (FYA).

FYA, originally the brainchild of Dean of Arts Phillip Smith, is something Dr. Murray believes quite fervently in.

"Last year, Professor Catherine Innis-Parker and I respond-

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ed to [Dr. Phillip Smith's] suggestion by linking three courses: two English 101 [Composition] courses and English 195 [Introduction to Drama] ... the idea being, every student that was in those two 101 courses was also in that Drama class. And it made it possible for us to do all kinds of things. We made some assignments crossover between the classes. So the