

# Teaching & Learning

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## Mentorship in the Classroom

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*Dr. Anne Marie Dalton is Saint Mary's Teaching Scholar for the 2011-12 academic year. She will explore the important role of mentoring as a part of the teaching profession.*

Libby hardly ever showed up. She was a registered student in a class of about forty-five; it was an elective for her and she didn't show much interest. Day after

day, the attendance sheet showed a blank space after her name. One day at lunch I came upon Libby sitting alone in the Atrium. I stopped by her table and spoke with her briefly. How was she doing? What major was she pursuing? How did she get to Saint Mary's? It took about five minutes. I made no mention of her bad attendance record. Libby didn't miss another class.

### In this issue:

- LEAP Continues to Support Student Success
- Students and the Pressure to Become Marketable
- Critical Eye on Learning Styles

Jason sat silently in most classes even during group discussions. He handed in his first written assignment, beautifully done; an "A" paper. I called him before the next group discussion and asked if he would mind reading a section of his paper to his group. He shyly agreed. He became a regular conversant, often dropping by my office or staying after class to discuss his ideas about the class.

Such stories are commonplace in our profession. We continue to be amazed at the power of simple acts of engagement with students. Of course, they don't always obviously work, but the surprise is that they often do. These are the situations that led me to an interest in mentorship. What exactly are those factors of mentorship that go beyond what we normally consider the teaching tasks? How might we practice some of the skills involved in mentorship in a classroom of students where it is often not possible to develop one-on-one relationships? Are there ways in which mentoring skills can be practiced more widely? The Teaching Scholar award will enable me to research, think about and test out possible responses to these questions.

continued on page 3



Photo: Courtesy of Anne Marie Dalton



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**How might we practice some of the skills involved in mentorship in a classroom of students where it is often not possible to develop one-on-one relationships?**

In the midst of pressures to be relevant and to meet the challenge of holding the interest of techno-savvy students, it is noteworthy that research in teaching is turning to what may be the oldest method of university teaching: establishing student-teacher relationships that make accessible to students the process of learning itself as modeled by the teacher. In an 1869 lecture on “The Future of England,” John Ruskin claimed, “you do not learn that you may live – you live that you may learn.” Ruskin was speaking from a view of education that is under attack in our time as we are ever more ruled by the market. Yet, more than ever, society needs engaged human citizens who seek not only to be successful in a career and to achieve a quality of material life, but also to view their life work as contributions to building and maintaining a healthy society. This requires more than a mastery of content and a prescribed set of technological skills. It requires a facility in thought, language, critique and judgment that engages in civil responsibility; that works (according to an overused, but under subscribed phrase!) to make the world a better place. Mentorship speaks to this larger sense of education while also addressing the more practical needs for a viable life.

Canadian philosopher and theologian, Bernard Lonergan, spoke of authenticity as the process of gaining facility with a set of interior operations – experience, understanding, judging, and deciding. The repeated and consistent application and re-application of these operations within society constituted a fully human engagement in the

advancement of justice and freedom in their deepest sense. Mentorship at its best has attempts to enable students to view their own processes of learning: to see their own attentiveness, to watch the emerging understanding, to listen to their deeper selves as they weigh their choices, judge and decide on courses of action. For the university professor, this is not a psychological counseling or even guidance role, but a partnership in learning. Mentorship is a professional teaching activity that makes transparent to the student the nature of investigation, experimentation, and discovery usually within specific disciplines.

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At a more practical level, research on mentorship investigates what works in the often daunting challenge of enabling students to become engaged with their own learning. The goal of my work is to

accumulate a set of best practices by instructors both here at Saint Mary’s and beyond. The research process will involve asking those of us who are interested to reflect on the stunning moments in teaching when “something really works.” On a broader scale, research and experimentation is already underway in some universities. We can benefit from these experiences. To borrow a metaphor from Diane Emerson (*Beyond Teaching to Mentoring*), mentoring reveals to students not merely that there is a rabbit in the hat and it is possible to get it out, but also how to do that. As the familiar stories at the top of this article show, revealing the how requires engaging the student at a personal level. Some factors being explored in the literature include non-judgmental listening, working for partnership within an acknowledged power differential, expertise and confidence in the history and methods of one’s discipline, and a general interest in the talents and life experience students bring to the classroom. In the year ahead, I will be in touch to hear how you are finding ways to practice mentorship in your classrooms and ways in which you may be interested in doing so. I am looking forward to the conversations.

## Saint Mary’s University Teaching Awards

### **Father William A. Stewart, S.J. Medal for Teaching**

This award recognizes a faculty member who has made significant contributions to the education of Saint Mary’s students through excellence in teaching and service. For award guidelines and nomination deadline, please visit the Alumni Association website: [www.smu.ca/alumni/window/FrStewartAward.html](http://www.smu.ca/alumni/window/FrStewartAward.html)

### **Dr. Geraldine Thomas Educational Leadership Award**

This award recognizes a faculty member who has provided leadership among colleagues in developing institutional structures and processes, and in pursuing activities that help create an environment at Saint Mary’s University in which teaching excellence is fostered and appreciated. For award guidelines and nomination deadline, please visit the CAID website: [www.smu.ca/administration/caid/dev\\_awards.html#smu](http://www.smu.ca/administration/caid/dev_awards.html#smu).