

Teaching & Learning

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Mentorship in the Classroom

Anne Marie Dalton, Religious Studies

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.

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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.

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Photo: Courtesy of Anne Marie Dalton



One University. One World. Yours.



LEAP Continues to Support First-Year Student Success

J. Leigh Gillis, LEAP Coordinator

Leigh is a graduate of the M.Ed. program at the University of New Brunswick. She has a unique blend of experience that combines several years as a senior administrator in residence life with current work as an independent consultant in the field of workplace education and essential skills development.

After four years in high school students knew the ropes, but now they're heading to university, where they'll be taking new courses in unfamiliar classrooms from professors they don't know. And if they aren't leaving home and moving to a new city, they're at least going across town to an unknown territory. It's exciting – and sometimes downright scary.

The stresses faced by first year students have prompted many universities to introduce programs and services to smooth the transition from high school. At Saint Mary's we are continuing to help first year students to meet the challenges of their new environment with LEAP (Learning, Engagement, Achievement and Peer Mentors). Now entering its second year, LEAP uses a learning community approach to support three key factors essential to student success: academic competencies, learning strategies, and engagement in campus life.

LEAP consists of 150 first year students enrolled into five, discipline-based learning communities, each comprised of 30 students. Students in a learning community take selected courses together. One of these courses is limited to the 30 students in that learning community, which guarantees them a small class experience and the opportunity to get know at least one professor well. Each community also has peer mentors, successful senior students, who join first year students in learning strategy workshops that focus on building life and academic skills such as money matters, library resources, time management, career planning, etc.

As the coordinator for this year's LEAP program, I am excited about

what's to come. We have excellent faculty teaching the core and linked courses, and impressive facilitators from across campus presenting the line-up of learning strategies workshops. Presenters include professionals from within Student Services, Student Health and the academic community. I am also looking forward to working with this year's group of peer mentors. I believe that it is the peer mentors who give LEAP its edge; they're smart, they're keen and they connect with first year students – with their energy, I know the program will be a success and I'd like to recognize them in advance for their work.

When students connect early and feel at ease, they engage. Research indicates that students in learning communities are more likely to succeed both academically and socially because students see each other in their common courses, workshops, and activities with peer mentors. LEAP students share their learning experience with a small group. This allows them to make new friends almost immediately and to feel comfortable more quickly in their new environment. LEAP is a great compliment to other programs in place at the university. We look forward to another year of supporting student success.

Quality of Teaching Committee Grants

The Quality of Teaching Committee is currently reworking the Instructional Development Grants program that is supported by the Office of the Vice-President, Academic and Research, and administered by the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development.

The grant program will now have an explicit focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning, consistent with the recognition of the scholarship of teaching and learning in Saint Mary's Collective Agreement.

Stay tuned for the launch of these awards later this fall.

Teaching and Learning at Saint Mary's

A forum on teaching and learning sponsored by the Quality of Teaching Committee and edited and produced by the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development. Articles and responses by faculty, students and staff are welcome.

Quality of Teaching Committee Members 2011/12

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Editor: Carol Roderick

Design / Layout:

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Photography this issue (except where indicated):

Mary Kendall Brooks
Centre for Academic and Instructional Development

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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.

Mentorship is a professional teaching activity that makes transparent to the student the nature of investigation, experimentation, and discovery usually within specific disciplines.

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

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.

Graduating Students and the Pressure to Become Marketable

Carol Roderick, Centre for Academic and Instructional Development



Ideally, the graduating year should be a time of integration and reflection on the undergraduate experience, as well as preparing for life after graduation. In reality however, the transition out of university is stressful and anxiety-filled. Many graduating students are confronted with career decisions, student debt, and reduced support networks. Given that graduation represents a major transition for students, it is surprising that few studies directly examine these students' experiences. Through my PhD research, I attempted to address this gap. The result is a theory of how students respond to the pressure to become marketable, to 'the pressure to commodify self.'

The Pressure to Commodify Self

As young people prepare to transition from undergraduate study they are under enormous pressure, pressure to transform themselves into marketable products capable of high levels of economic productivity and the acquisition of social status and material goods. This can be perceived as pressure to excel academically, to have well-formed career goals and post-graduation plans, to be oriented towards material career achievement, and to fulfil parental and societal expectations. This pressure seems

to be everywhere. Students are frequently pushed by their parents to pursue further education. The media and government echo the importance of a university education for jobs of the future. In the end, a university education is perceived as an economic necessity and the exclusive path to success.

Responding to the Pressure

Through this work I was able to uncover three responses to the pressure to commodify self: complying with commodification, resisting commodification, and humanizing commodification. While a student may use any of these responses in a given situation, their future planning tends to reflect one predominant response.

Complying with commodification

"I'm basically consciously or not, following the pattern that I was told to follow. Maybe the next step is non-verbal. They don't tell you what to do, but you've been sort of trained from birth to follow what they want you to do."

Complying with commodification is exactly that, complying with the pressure to transform oneself into a marketable product. Students do this by strategizing to gain a competitive edge, sacrificing their own interests, and internalizing this pressure. Students who comply may be seen attempting to develop a competitive edge by enrolling in courses that are perceived to be 'easy', plagiarizing, or cheating to boost their grades. Some students cultivate relationships with professors by asking questions in class when they know the answer, requesting assistance when it is not needed, and e-mailing faculty to create the impression of being a hard-working and dedicated student. Unfortunately, much of this is done to facilitate favourable reference letters for graduate school or employment.

Students sacrifice their own interests and passions to pursue the expectations of others, as well as areas they perceive to be economically advantageous. Students promise themselves that they will pursue their own interests later. Students often internalize this pressure, as one student in this study explains: "I have kind of adopted my parents' expectations to a degree and made them my own. I am putting the exact same pressure on myself. It is not like they are pushing me in a direction I don't want to go in, because that is what I want too."

Complying can be dehumanizing, impacting both personal relationships and well-being. Little time is left for authentic interpersonal relationships and social activities, negatively impacting relationships with family and friends. Students are likely to feel lonely and their health and well-being may suffer. Students may fear disappointing others, as well as slowing down to get to know themselves and their interests. Responding by complying with commodification, students increasingly see themselves only through their work and academic roles. Their identities become associated primarily with the education and employment they attain.

Resisting commodification

"You don't have to do what everybody else is doing, you don't have to go home or get a real job right away. I'm doing what I want to do right now, I need that."

Resisting commodification involves seeking happiness and self-fulfilment, often without considering the economic implications. Students are often motivated by a desire to develop self-awareness and to explore their interests. They may delay making career choices by extending their undergraduate degree through one more course, another year of study, or switching programs before

graduation. Students may take a year off from school or pursue another program to keep 'living the student life,' or even fail out as an act of defiance. They may avoid or refuse to discuss graduation or their future with friends and family and rebel through excessive partying or not completing coursework despite the consequences.

Resisting commodification may result in students feeling stuck, having low self-worth, or feeling excluded while their peers are moving forward with their careers. Students may feel alone in their career indecision, depressed, or guilty because their choices are counter to what one is 'supposed' to be doing. At the same time, resisting can facilitate the exploration of personal interests and self-knowledge. It may also temporarily relieve the stress of planning for the future, thereby increasing students' abilities to focus on the present.

Humanizing commodification

"Does it really matter so much if I don't love my day job if everything else is just oozing happiness?"
(Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 152)"

Humanizing commodification is deliberately attempting to pursue one's interests and maintain a sense of self, while attaining a certain level of financial prosperity. When planning their futures, students consider their interests, personality, goals, support network, and economic outcomes. Career is seen as one part of a multi-faceted life. Students who are humanizing commodification think carefully about their future plans to ensure personal alignment despite scholarship or lucrative employment offers. These students pursue courses that reflect their interests and complete assignments to reflect their own thoughts rather than what they anticipate their professor might expect. Relationships formed with peers and faculty members are based on care and respect, rather as a source of competitive advantage.

Students who employ this response seem to be energized and confident

about academic tasks as well as their futures. Students who were using this response seemed to have a higher level of intrinsic academic motivation and sense of agency than other students. This response also seemed to be linked with a fear of being unable to obtain both economic well-being and employment that align with their interests.

Factors that influence students' responses

Through this work, I was able to uncover several factors that influence the use of these responses to the pressure to commodify self, including: how the pressure is communicated, students past experience responding to the pressure, their awareness of the pressure, career planning assistance, availability of finances, degree of self-knowledge, and the availability of time. These factors are interrelated. For example, students who have limited financial resources may be holding one or more part-time jobs and may be less able to adjust their hours of employment when their academic workload fluctuates. This may reduce the time they have to complete academic work, which negatively influences their academic performance. Being pulled in many directions, they may not be aware of career oriented assistance available or have time to access this help.

Having insufficient time may also limit their self-knowledge, and their ability to respond to the pressure to commodify self in a thoughtful way.

Discussion

Student participants and others with whom I've discussed this research indicate that the pressure to transform themselves into marketable products resonates with their experience. Being able to articulate and talk about the pressure to commodify self seems to have given many of these students a sense of empowerment and a platform from which to talk about their experiences. They recognize that they are not alone, that others feel the same pressure, and that they have choices about how to respond. Students are better able to make sense of their undergraduate experiences and prepare for life after graduation.

I'm hoping that elements of my research may also resonate with you and be relevant for your work with graduating students. With a greater understanding of the challenges that students encounter as they approach graduation, we are better positioned to help them respond effectively. If you are interested in further reading, this study is published in *The Grounded Theory Review* (2010, 9(1), 41-64).

AAU Teaching Showcase Mount Saint Vincent University

Saturday, October 29, 2011

Each year the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) teaching showcase offers an excellent opportunity to meet faculty members from universities across the region and to exchange ideas and effective teaching practices. The theme of this year's showcase

will explore "connections" in different teaching and learning contexts: connections around the globe, connections in our communities, connections in our classrooms, and the tools and resources that enable and enhance our connections.

To learn more and to register visit: www.msvu.ca/tlc/showcase2011



A Critical Eye on Learning Styles

Heather Sanderson, Librarian, Information Literacy



Heather's research on learning styles, "Using learning styles in information literacy: Critical considerations for librarians," will be published in The Journal of Academic Librarianship later this year.

Last year, while doing sabbatical research into online learning, I noticed how often learning styles were invoked in discussions of good pedagogy. It seemed that instructors were universally exhorted to take their students' learning styles into account and to adjust their teaching to appeal to the diversity of learners in their classes. Once I started paying attention to the representation of learning styles, I realized that this advice was often the extent of the discussion.

Learning styles, it seemed, were being raised mostly as a given: individuals have learning styles, which can be defined and measured. Tailoring the learning situation to best fit students' individual learning styles helps teachers teach more effectively and students learn more efficiently. Yet, where different theoretical models were introduced, generally there was little or no evaluation of conceptual differences between them, which implied that they were interchangeable. The teaching advice that went with these overviews

was often similarly broad and generic. Individual studies were usually done within a class or a course and provided little critical discussion of the model used, its concepts, or instrument, and the conclusions often glossed over their limitations. I wanted to know more about this area of teaching and learning theory to get below the taken-for-granted surface of learning styles.

The learning styles landscape is far more complex than the view presented in much of the literature that is directed to instructors. The field is fragmented, with multiple, competing models, many of which are also commercial products. Differing concepts, definitions, and tests obscure how much overlap there may be between models. What is meant by learning styles varies widely. For example, environmentally-based theories argue for the influence of the environment and the senses on taking in and understanding information, such as with visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic learners. Personality-based theories focus on the influence of personality types (e.g., introvert, extrovert) on how individuals respond to learning situations. Information-processing theories focus on the individual's characteristic ways of taking in and processing information, such as how they organize and remember it. Some models go further to theorize the roles played by the right and left brain hemispheres in students' learning. In fact, some theories define learning styles as biologically-based, and therefore as fixed and stable over time, while others see learning styles as preferences and habitual behaviors, and thus, as more flexible than fixed.

These theoretical differences are important in an instructional context. The range of what is meant by learning styles leads to different prescriptions for what can or should be done by instructors in their teaching. For example, if learning styles are fixed,

should teachers simply accommodate them, matching instruction to their students' learning styles? Or if they are preferences, aspects of behavior that are susceptible to influence, should teachers in that case also accommodate them, or can they help students to adapt and become more flexible in their learning styles? The answer varies.

Given the confusion of models, it wasn't hard for me to find current critical commentary about learning styles. External reviews have examined the research behind numerous well-known models and their instruments, including Dunn and Dunn's and Kolb's, and the consensus is that the evidence is mixed. Reviews point to fundamental and widespread problems, begging the question of why the mainstream treatment of these theories is so quiet on the subject. The most common criticisms are that the field is empirically weak. There have been persistent problems with the reliability and validity of the data measured by the various tests.

Parenting and Academia

For many faculty members creating work-life balance is an ongoing project. This can be particularly challenging for faculty members who are also parents. Rohini Bannerjee, with the support of the CAID, will be leading an informal discussion series this fall on parenting and academia.

Faculty members are invited to come and share their strategies, skills, and ideas to be effective, happy, and balanced in their complex lives. Discussion topics will arise out of participants' interests and may include: mothering / fathering and academia, time management, multi-tasking, priorities and parenting.

Dates: Sept. 16th, Oct. 21 & Nov. 18th

Time: 2:00pm – 3:00pm

Location: Atrium 212

For more information and to register email caid@smu.ca

A reliance on small studies and self-reported learning styles contributes to these problems. Also troubling, critics assert that the claims for teaching interventions such as matching are not based on strong evidence of their effectiveness. Furthermore, there is the danger that students may become labelled by their learning styles, limiting both their own and the instructor's responsiveness to the learning situation. Including such critical considerations would present learning styles in a more balanced fashion in the many articles and books that introduce them as a useful tool for educators.

My research has contributed to a healthy degree of skepticism regarding learning styles and strengthened my critical eye for other theories that may be propounded with greater fervour than substance in the literature. Learning styles are attractive, in that they appear to explain why some students are more successful academically than others. They raise awareness about the different ways people learn, increase sensitivity to diversity, and offer strategies for appealing to and engaging diverse learners. And, finally, many of the descriptions of learning styles seem recognizable and appeal to common sense. But, when it comes to my teaching, I feel that I have a responsibility to be critical and to require evidence of effectiveness in order to evaluate for myself the claims being made.

Useful readings:

Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E., & Ecclestone, K. (2004). *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: A systematic and critical review*. London: Learning and Skills Research Centre. Retrieved from: <https://crm.lsnlearning.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=041543>

Paschler, H., McDaniel, M., Rohrer, D., & Bjork, R. (2010). "Learning styles: Concepts and evidence." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9, 3, 105-119.

Riener, C., & Willingham, D. (2010). "The myth of learning styles." *Change* 42, 5, 32-35.

Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking A faculty learning community

This fall, the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development (CAID) is pleased to offer a faculty learning community on critical thinking and critical thinking pedagogy. The learning community will be led by Dr. Shelagh Crooks, Saint Mary's Philosophy Department. Dr. Crooks has taught critical thinking to first-year students for over 20 years, and has published and presented extensively on the topic. In 2009, she was recognized with the Award for Teaching Excellence by the Association of Atlantic Universities.

The learning community is intended to provide an opportunity for Saint Mary's faculty to think (critically) about critical thinking, and to engage in a cross-disciplinary discussion of how it might be fostered in different content environments across the curriculum.

Discussion will focus on the following topics in four Friday meetings (10:30am-12N, AT 212):

Sept. 23: Defining critical thinking

Oct. 14: Social and psychological obstacles to critical thinking for our students

Nov. 4: Creating 'critical' classroom environments

Nov. 25: Teaching strategically for critical thinking

For further information contact Shelagh at shelagh.crooks@smu.ca.

To register email: caid@smu.ca.

Making the Most Out of Multiple-Choice Questions

Multiple-choice tests are the most widely used form of objective assessment in college and university settings, but using them effectively is not always a simple matter. Critics point out that multiple choice questions are often poorly written, and moreover that they tend to focus on memorization at the expense of higher-level thinking. It is important to realize that these shortcomings can be avoided. Writing structurally sound, high-quality items requires some training and expertise.

Monday, September 19, 2011

Dr. David DiBattista, from Brock University, will lead a session on guidelines for writing multiple choice questions and how to write multiple-choice items that assess students' higher-level thinking.

To learn more and to register email caid@smu.ca.



The Center for Academic and Instructional Development and the Quality of Teaching Committee are pleased to provide online subscriptions to two highly informative newsletters for all Saint Mary's faculty and staff.

The Teaching Professor is a lively, informative newsletter that provides ideas and insight for educators who are passionate about teaching.

Online Classroom explores the challenges and opportunities presented by this dynamic, fast-growing teaching medium, and helps educators to stay current with the latest trends in online learning.

To subscribe, please contact the CAID, by phoning 420-5088, or e-mailing caid@smu.ca.

ONLINE CL@SSROOM
IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

2010-11 Community of Practice

This is the third year that Saint Mary's has had a community of practice supported by the Quality of Teaching Committee and the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development (CAID). This year's community, organized by Howard Donohoe, Paul Muir and Roxanne Richardson, was a huge success. Faculty members from across campus came together to discuss teaching, and to learn from each other through the informal exchange of ideas and experiences. The community met five times over the academic year, exploring topics such as the tyranny of content, motivating student learning, learning outside the classroom, and assessment and evaluation.



Photo: Courtesy of Howard Donohoe

Back L-R: Roxanne Richardson, Philip Giles, Jennifer Grabove
Front L-R: Margaret McKee, Heather Sceles, Clive Grogono

Community of practice members:

Carol Roderick, CAID
Charles Beaupre, Asian Studies
Christa Brosseau, Chemistry
Clive Grogono, Mathematics and Computing Science
Daphne Rixon, Accounting
Dave Bourgeois, Psychology
David Sable, Religious Studies
Diane Crocker, Sociology and Criminology
Ed Yao, Mathematics and Computing Science
Heather Sceles, Accounting
Howard Donohoe, Geology
Jacob Hanley, Geology
Jennifer Grabove, History
Karen Grandy, Marketing
Kathy Singfield, Chemistry
Marcia Ozier, Psychology
Margaret McKee, Management
Marie DeYoung, Library
Mei-Ling Wei, Marketing
Nicole Neatby, History
Paul Muir, Mathematics and Computing Science
Philip Giles, Geography
Roby Austin, Physics
Roxanne Richardson, Biology and Environmental Studies
Shelagh Crooks, Philosophy
Trudy Sable, Gorsebrook Research Institute

The organizers were asked to reflect on their experiences with the community of practice. Here is what they had to say:

“By the measure of interaction with one’s peers, the practice of university teaching is often a solitary experience; even if a professor thinks critically about her or his teaching and considers innovative approaches in attempting to investigate and improve the teaching process, this is mostly done in the ‘isolation’ of one’s classroom. As an organizer of the community of practice, my primary goal was to create a space where university teachers would be able to bring forth and share ideas about teaching in a critical but respectful environment. I think we created a space where it was safe (and even exciting!) to explore teaching as an academic discipline.”
– Paul Muir

“Three years ago I joined my first community of practice. I was not sure what to expect, but I was excited. Over the past three years, I have learned from my colleagues that teaching effectiveness is not merely a product of techniques, personal charm, enthusiasm, and time spent interacting with students. It’s all about how we can kindle student curiosity so that they ‘want’ to learn. I am not sure that I have figured out how to do this effectively yet – but I will say that my efforts are a work in progress.”
– Roxanne Richardson

“This community of practice shows you that many people experience the same challenges and emotions in their quest for good teaching. Communities of practice offer strategies, guidance and solutions for improving teaching and learning.”
– Howard Donohoe

Produced by the Centre for Academic and Instructional Development
We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and future issues of Teaching & Learning.

Tel: 420.5088
Email: caid@smu.ca

Please visit our offices, Atrium suites 106 and 107
or online at www.smu.ca/administration/caid