As an undergraduate history major, Jeffrey R. Watt had plans to go to law school. That is until his interest in early modern European history was piqued by Professor David McKillop. And even though he still thought seriously about law school, he applied to Ohio University for a graduate assistantship in history. His interest in Reformation history and the interconnections between religion and society continued to grow and has influenced both his teaching and his studies.

The teaching influences are strong and the quality of the teaching has been excellent leading to his being chosen as the 2007 University of Mississippi winner of the Mississippi Humanities Teaching Award and earlier as the 1991 Cora Lee Graham Award for Outstanding Teaching of Freshmen. Because Dr. Watt frequently teaches History of Western Civilization, a large class, he has been asked if he gets bored. His answer is always, “The class is not at all boring for me to teach. Yes, I could probably do some of the lectures in my sleep, but the rewarding part of the course is to light a spark of interest in students. The material is not new to me but is to many of them.” And just as Dr. McKillop once lit a spark in Watt, Dr. Watt tries to light a spark in UM students. He builds ties to students by getting to know them and interesting them in a subject that he believes should in and of itself have considerable appeal.

Though some of Watt’s classes have up to 200 students, he prefers those that have no more than 40. He says, “The University of Mississippi has many good students, who are more open now than 20 years ago to studying something a bit removed from what they are accustomed to and from the region in which they grew up.”

Watt’s family history contributed to his interest in European history and culture. Because his maternal grandparents were from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, he was encouraged to study French in both high school and college for communication with relatives. Watt hopes to get students here to think critically about the historical roots of many institutions and ideas that they may take for granted. He says, “I’m less interested in turning students into professional historians than in widening their cultural horizons and in honing their skills in critical reading, writing, and reasoning which they will use regardless of the life they pursue.” For example, in his Western Civilization lectures, Watt makes comparisons between representative institutions initially founded in the 13th century and the United States Congress today. Although there are many differences, students can better appreciate today’s legislative world by understanding the history of these institutions.

While history is not the only tool that could be used to improve students’ abilities to think, read, and write effectively, its study and a look at the critical assessment that historians use, help students develop the skills of proving arguments and uncovering biases. Dr. Watt says, “I encourage students not simply to accept what I say as gospel truth. I want them to feel free to challenge me if they don’t buy my interpretations. I want them to provide constructive criticism both of me and, especially in seminars, of their classmates’ work, though I urge them to do so diplomatically; they are more likely to change someone’s opinion if they do it in a diplomatic way rather than in a pugnacious way.”

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Mossing Hired as Assistant Director of Center

Dr. Susan Mossing was recently hired as an Assistant Director for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Dr. Mossing came to the Center from the Academic Support Center, where she worked since its inception in 1999. In addition to serving as Academic Advisor, Dr. Mossing designed several programs to assist students having academic difficulties: EDLD 101, Study Skills for College; Academic Success Training (AST) Workshops; and EDLD 202, the University’s Contractual Readmission Program for students returning from academic suspension or dismissal. In the Center, Dr. Mossing will continue work with AST Workshops and the Contractual Readmission Program and develop other programs designed to improve student learning.

Dr. Mossing earned a B.S. in Psychology from the University of Wisconsin, a Masters in Business Administration from Boston University, a Masters of Education in Educational Psychology, and a Ph.D. in Counselor Education from the University of Mississippi. Learning is a pleasure for her and she wants to help others gain that same sense of pleasure in their learning.

Grants and Awards

Grants for International Faculty Development Seminars Now Available

The Office of the Provost announced up to three faculty grants for international professional development for summer 2008. Designed to assist faculty in expanding personal experiences and to bring new perspectives to UM courses, the grants are for International Faculty Development Seminars through the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Tenure-track and tenured faculty are encouraged to apply. To learn more about the seminars, see http://ciee.org/IFDS.aspx. On campus, contact Michael Metcalf, Associate Provost for International Education, at 915-5039 or mmetcalf@olemiss.edu. Application deadline is December 15, 2007.

Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant Award

A $1000 graduate instructor/teaching assistant award for exemplary instruction is planned to honor a student currently teaching at the University of Mississippi. The award has been established by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning with monetary support from the University of Mississippi Foundation to recognize that these students fill a much needed teaching role in an outstanding way. For information about the award and the nomination process, see www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl/GraduateInstructorAward.htm. The deadline for the 2008 award is March 1, 2008.

Thinking Resources

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning announces its new website at www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl.

Podcasts of the Office of the Provost Professional Development Workshop speakers beginning with the October speakers are found at www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl/special_events.html. Follow any necessary links.
Teaching Tips: Student Advice from Psychologists
by Susan Mossing

In an October 2007 presentation “Don’t make me shoot your momma: A wise guy’s guide to academic success,” at the University of Mississippi, Drs. Kelly Wilson and Ken Sufka described advice they give students for maximizing educational experiences. Faculty members everywhere can encourage use of the advice by carefully planning courses and incorporating thoughtful, learner-centered practices listed alongside the wise guys’ maxims. For a more complete discussion of these practices, see the references.

Don’t settle for a degree. In today’s world, students have instant access to information. The old concept of education by inoculation is outdated. It is the skills that students develop to understand and analyze readily accessible information that are important. As you help students learn content they need to gain a solid knowledge base, focus on the processes involved in learning in general and your learning outcomes in particular (Weimer, 2002).

Don’t settle for grades. Facilitate a deep approach to learning by carefully planning learning activities, not overloading students with material, and creating a warm environment in your classroom. When learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment techniques are aligned, deep learning is encouraged (Biggs, 2003).

Why are you sitting in the cheap seats after paying 50 yard-line prices? Help students become more motivated, confident, and enthused about learning by giving them a voice in the learning process. Consider sharing control over (1) required activities or assignments, (2) certain policies, (3) course content, and/or (4) assessment procedures. Granted, some of these changes are scarier than others, so start small (Weimer, 2002).

Be a boy scout. Explain to students the importance of coming to class prepared with a fundamental understanding of the material and hold them accountable. Use your time in class to build on the understanding by making connections within the material itself, between the material and what students already know, and to its value in everyday life (Biggs, 2003).

Sometimes it’s good to be spaced out. Biggs (2003) suggests a way to keep students mindful of their learning by requiring them to submit daily responses to three stems: (1) What I hope to learn in class today; (2) The most important point I learned; and (3) The biggest question that was left unanswered. Students write answers using the first stem prior to the start of class and the last two in the last five minutes of class.

This ain’t no John Grisham novel! Take some time at the beginning of the semester to go over a reading strategy such as the SQ4R reading method (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Relate, and Review) or concept mapping. Model its use in class to demonstrate how to focus on underlying concepts and main ideas (Biggs, 2003).

Do you know what a penny looks like? Be clear about your learning objectives and align them with your assessments (Weimer, 2002). Elaborate on the difference between surface learning and deep learning (Biggs, 2003).

If you don’t know where you’re going, the probability of getting there approaches randomness. Time management is a foreign concept to many students. Work with them to develop a plan for preparing for an upcoming exam, incorporating a timeline and your learning objectives (Weimer, 2002).

How do you know that you don’t know Jack! Help students prepare for exams and lessen test anxiety by giving them examples of test questions that you will use. If you are requiring students to use deep learning strategies, illustrate how surface learning strategies don’t work (Biggs, 2003).

Don’t make me shoot your mama. “Motivation’ is a product of good teaching, not its prerequisite” (Biggs, p. 13, 2003). Students are motivated when they see value in learning the material and believe they can be successful in accomplishing that learning.

REFERENCES

http://podcast.olemiss.edu/show-html.php?csecrm=NCP102607641 (a podcast of the Wilson/Sufka presentation)

http://www.wvup.edu/academics/learning_center/sq4r_reading_method.htm

In seminars, he nurtures in students the skills of writing and speaking both eloquently and persuasively. He requires them to critique each other’s reports, exchange papers, and play the role of teacher-grader. He adds, “It is not good enough to write so that your intended message might be understood. You must write in such a way that your intended message cannot be missed.”

Dr. Watt describes himself as somewhat a traditional teacher who relies less on today’s technology than on showing his passionate interest in his subject. In this regard, he is like McKillop who challenged him, made him think and write. He says that ultimately the content he teaches is less important than sharpening the mentioned skills in critical reasoning. “Had McKillop taught courses in, say, Latin American history, I might have wound up pursuing a doctorate in that area. Encouraging today’s students to think and to light a spark in them are my major goals. Teaching should be both stimulating and rewarding. If I were offered an endowed chair with no teaching responsibilities, I would say, ‘No, thank you.’ I enjoy teaching everyone from beginning students to doctoral candidates. Research is fascinating and informs teaching, but the life of an ivory-tower scholar is not the same as teaching students of these different levels.” How many other professors would say these things?