From the University of Illinois to Columbia and then the Wall Street Journal and Newsday and finally to SUNY-Stony Brook and Stanford, it was not a direct route that brought Dr. Gregory Schirmer to The University of Mississippi. But it was a route that brought a wealth of experience to his eventual teaching here. Being very young and excited about the newspaper business led to restlessness and missing a purely intellectual life at a university. With a wife, two children, a car, and a boat, Dr. Schirmer needed a change in life and headed to Stanford University for a doctorate in literature. According to him, he has never looked back and totally enjoys being a researcher/teacher on this campus where he has been since 1984.

He claims to have become a university teacher without ever planning to do so. When he left journalism, he was looking for time to read and think and “wanted more than stories about fires and local politicians.” For this major change, he has no regrets because he loves the academic life and teaching with his associated research in Ireland.

When asked about good teachers and about good teaching, Dr. Schirmer claims that if you go to graduate school, you already know what a good teacher is. He talks about one of his great undergraduate teachers: Dr. Gary Altman. Dr. Altman was at the University of Illinois and when he began to develop an ultimately blinding eye disease proceeded to memorize everything. In the process Dr. Altman became a good role model who was very inspirational. After the class, he says that Dr. Altman likely did not know who he was and had little idea about the impact that he had on Schirmer. Similarly, Schirmer claims not to know what affect any faculty member may have on students but he is the first to talk about students from 20 years ago who come back and tell you that you made a difference to them and in their lives.

Schirmer thinks about teaching and describes Altman as a good teacher who was passionate about his discipline. He says, “Teaching literature is art; it is about feelings, emotions.” And he gives examples of colleagues on campus who are truly dedicated, some of whom like him, have won the Elsie M. Hood Teaching Award.

Schirmer, with a teaching style that he describes as unconventional in today’s educational climate, says that he talks to his classes. He says that anyone can interrupt him at any time because a teacher does not need to domi-

continued on Page 4
Adapting Instruction to Student Learning Styles
by Susan Mossing, Assistant Director

Students come to The University of Mississippi with a variety of abilities, interests, learning styles, and personalities. Trying to adapt instruction to the widest range of learners is often a difficult endeavor. In this article are a few simple techniques that could help student learning. The discussion is organized by general categories of learning styles and information processing styles.

Learning Style Differences

Learners take in information through their senses. The most common way of categorizing learning styles is according to these senses. Using this categorization, learning style preferences are described as visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic. Examples of teaching strategies that cater to these various learning styles follow:

**Visual learners** learn best when they see information. Instructors should use good quality visual aids and draw models of what is being described. Writing important terms, concepts, discussion questions and answers on the chalkboard, whiteboard, or overhead projector and referring students to websites for additional visual information are other important aids. For these learners, an instructor should deliver instruction talking clearly and at a normal pace. They should avoid covering their mouths or faces.

**Auditory learners** learn best when given clear verbal descriptions of visual materials. During class discussions, instructors should repeat students’ questions before responding, and repeat their answers or statements so that all students clearly hear them. Instructors should highlight key points throughout the lecture and discussion and both allow and encourage the use of recording devices in class.

**Tactile and kinesthetic learners** learn best when physically working with information. Tactile learners like to manipulate objects with their hands; kinesthetic learners use their entire body when learning. Typically these hands-on learners have a very hard time sitting still and focusing in large lecture halls where information comes to them in predominantly one form (either visual or auditory). Incorporating demonstrations in class keeps these students engaged and learning. Other techniques instructors could consider are discussions, group work, student presentations, online learning, and practical experiences such as building or drafting models. Tactile and kinesthetic learners need to actively engage with the information to learn.

**Information Processing Differences**

Students process information in different ways as well. Some learners focus on details and build their understanding “from the ground up.” They do best when given well-organized course and lecture outlines and prefer having large amounts of information broken down into smaller pieces. These students prefer that instructors give clear step-by-step directions and explain the practical application of the material. They have difficulty following long theoretical lectures and learn best by working problems.

Alternatively, some learners focus on the big picture first and then look at the details. These students are more creative than practical. They prefer inductive reasoning and more creative problem-solving exercises. They enjoy complexity and theoretical conceptualizations. Balancing the needs of these two types of students requires a balance in the type of learning activities instructors provide students.

**Further Considerations**

The concept of Universal Course Design takes the notion of individual differences in learning and processing styles even further. Designing a course that is accessible to all learners, regardless of their physical or learning disability or preference, is at the heart of this concept. Universal Course Design will be discussed in more detail in a future edition of *The Mantle*.

**References**


Universal Course Design: See http://www.washington.edu/doit/Faculty/Strategies/Universal/.
## Resources for Teaching

- Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) faculty grants through the Office of the Provost: Up to three grants will be awarded to assist faculty in expanding international experiences and bringing international perspectives to courses on campus. CIEE will operate 24 programs in 27 countries in the summer of 2009 in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Tenure-track and tenured members of the faculty may apply. See [http://ciee.org/IFDS.aspx](http://ciee.org/IFDS.aspx). For further information, please contact Michael Metcalf, Associate Provost for International Education, at 915-5039 or mmetcalf@olemiss.edu. Deadline for applications: December 15.

- The National Center for Academic Transformation has announced a deadline of January 15, 2009, for applications for its FIPSE-supported Colleagues Committed to Redesign (C2R) program. For a full description of the program, see [http://www.thencat.org/RedesignAlliance/DissemProgram.htm](http://www.thencat.org/RedesignAlliance/DissemProgram.htm).

- The National Science Foundation has established the MSP (Mathematics Science Partnership) website that was recently expanded to include higher education items. Use the library link at [http://hub.mspnet.org/entry.cfm/16077](http://hub.mspnet.org/entry.cfm/16077) to examine the site. The part of the site that could be of interest to higher education is the Teacher Domain College Edition.

- Newberry Library Long-Term Fellowships for Humanities Scholars—With a deadline of January 12, 2009, applicants could apply for up to $70,000 for grants that could support individual research or other activities. See [http://www.newberry.org/research/felshp/long-term.html](http://www.newberry.org/research/felshp/long-term.html).

## Teaching Tips

- Teacher immediacy has been defined as a communication behavior that enhances closeness to and nonverbal interaction with students. Could teacher immediacy enhance your class? See [http://www.etsca.com/tscjonline/1206-immediacy/](http://www.etsca.com/tscjonline/1206-immediacy/).

- Cooperative learning requires positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution), face-to-face promotive interaction, and processing in a class. Is cooperative learning for you and your students? Many resources are found at [http://www.co-operation.org/](http://www.co-operation.org/).

- Blended learning, consisting of both traditional and online components, is at least as effective as traditional learning. See [http://campustechnology.com/articles/67634/](http://campustechnology.com/articles/67634/).
nate a classroom, but teachers are the ones in the classroom who know the subject matter. Having an organic discussion is very productive in university classes. “I ask questions to people, but I’m an unabashed centered teacher. I may talk for 50 minutes unless someone interrupts me.”

The teachers that I remember and admired were those who did that. This style lets me show my passion for the subject. “You have to care about the subject, about Milton, and you must convey that. If not, then go make money; get a job. My impression is that students may think that it is odd to have lectures, but they rather like it. They don’t pay tuition to listen to each other.”

To be able to teach through lecturing, you have to have something to say. And to have something to say, a good teacher must be involved in research. “Research influences teaching. If I were not continually learning and doing research in Ireland in the summers, I would be teaching what I learned in graduate school. I would not know what is going on in the field.”

“When I was chair of the English Department, people sometimes said research gets in the way of teaching. I don’t believe that. From my point of view, if I quit teaching, my research would go down the tubes. Having to go into a classroom with 19-20 year olds demands that you be able to defend what you are doing. It forces you to defend yourself. Even teaching outside your research field helps in this regard.”

“I can’t really give advice to new teachers about teaching. Teaching is an art form and you can learn about it but it is highly individualized. What works for one will not necessarily work for another professor. One needs experience doing it. Because teaching is so individualized, it depends on the personality of the individual involved. Good teaching cannot be mandated.”

“The University of Mississippi is a research institution with teaching and research so intertwined that when the institution generously has supported my research, it has helped my teaching. If one creates an environment where research is encouraged, then good teaching will follow. The University here has done a good job in this regard. It has allowed me to research topics that I may never teach on campus, including works in the Irish language, but that research has kept my interest in the field.”