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Professor Profile - Maureen Cech

The social worker-turned-instructor on the importance of online learning

When Maureen Cech became a contract instructor at Carleton, her course, Working with Children and Youth, consisted of 15 students—less than a high school classroom. Eight years later, Cech expects that number to grow to more than 120 students this semester, and Cech says her attendance is up because her class went online.

“It’s changed the course radically,” says Cech, a former social worker, describing the way out-of-town students would brave snowstorms and treacherous driving conditions to make it in for class. “Now, they don’t ever have to put a foot on our campus. I think it’s so much better for students to thrive in this environment.”

And it’s not just the technology that has helped the class evolve from its humble beginnings into a hot commodity on course selection day. Cech is a tremendously passionate teacher who is always on the hunt for ways to update and improve her course.

“I’m a huge proponent of online learning,” she says. “You change things constantly, always upgrading, making things absolutely current.”

The nature of her craft is to study youth in real-time, evolving her curriculum to reflect what’s happening with today’s youth rather than waiting for events to be preserved in a book. She’s seen the same thing happen in her classrooms, with her students changing as rapidly as the children they study.

When Cech analyzed how her students were interacting with online tools, as opposed to just passive lecture-watching or tuned out altogether, she found that her students were the brightest at 2AM. The online model allows them to capitalize on the blocks of time when they’re most alert instead of being confined to a set learning schedule.

“They teach me so much,” says Cech. “Many of our students are juggling family responsibilities, jobs, volunteer work and work practice in the field. They’re very busy in a way that undergraduates 20 years ago were not.”

This has made the three-hour, in-person lecture a problem for some students—getting to class and staying for a set period of time once a week can seem impossible. When they can watch a video lecture on their own schedule wherever they happen to be, it can help unload some of those pressures.

It’s part of the reason why Cech is a staunch supporter of e-education and its ever-evolving technologies. On top of her online classroom tools, she has also started using Carleton’s state-of-the-art studios to record videos.

“Believe me, technically, it’s amazing—HD, different backgrounds, and they get the wrinkles out of your face,” she says with a laugh. “[The result] looks like something you’d see on HBO.”

Cech’s latest addition to her course is Lisa Davis, a 35-year-old teaching assistant who had taken Cech’s class during her undergraduate degree. Davis speaks her students’ language, says Cech, helping to further connect with students online and encouraging them to go beyond their textbooks.

“I think we’re enriched by having online discussions,” says Cech. “When they’re engaged, they’re really, truly engaged.”

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Maureen Cech
Social Works
The relationship between a professor and their teaching assistant is a fine balance. Get it wrong, and a course can feel disjointed. But get it right, and it can enrich and evolve the curriculum.

When contract instructor Maureen Cech was on the hunt for a TA, she wanted someone who not only could liaise between her and her students, but who could interact comfortably with them on a peer-to-peer level and understand their lingo.

“Enter Lisa Davis.”

“The way she speaks to students is not the way I speak to students,” says Cech, who teaches CUOL course Working with Children and Youth. “Lisa speaks their language.”

Their generation gap may have left them with dialect differences, but what Cech and Davis share is a genuine passion for online learning, both recognizing the enormous potential in e-education. This year, they were committed to bringing in-class intimacy to their remote classrooms.

“The personal touch that exists in face-to-face learning needs to somehow be captured,” says Davis, an upper-year student pursuing a Master’s in Social Work at Carleton. “When students are asked about their experiences and what can be done to make these experiences better helps to sustain involvement.”

It’s difficult to replicate the act of putting a hand up in class and joining a conversation for an online audience, and Davis notes that using discussion boards can help students better engage with the material.

“Technology is integral to connecting with youth,” says Davis. “When input by each person is valued, it helps students to deepen their understanding of different modes of communication.”

Davis knows what it’s like to be in her students’ position, having taken Cech’s class herself in her undergrad and worked alongside her at the Child Welfare League of Canada. When it came time to choose a TA, Cech specifically requested Davis, knowing that not only was she the right pick to help propel the course forward, but that their views on the subject matter were aligned.

Children and youth tend to be undervalued and overlooked in our society,” says Davis. “Youth have always been a population of interest for me and an area where I’ve honed my skills through academic learning, work and volunteer experience.”

One of the obstacles they aimed to overcome as a team was the high numbers of students dropping out in the early stages of their online courses.

“It’s a good idea to focus on student engagement,” says Davis. “Connection helps to reduce stress and anxiety in students who participate in this type of learning, reducing dropout rates.”

Davis’ top traits to look for finding the right fit with a TA? Reliability, compassion, availability and accessibility. And, of course, it helps to have a professor who’s on the same page.

“Maureen is a pleasure to work with,” says Davis. “She recognizes the intrinsic value of contributions made by students and teaching team members.”
Cheung, who was profiled in the February issue of the CUOL newsletter, uses gamification processes and a YouTube channel to help students like Pokrandt get a better grasp of concepts and enrich his Linear Algebra course’s curriculum.

“He was to-the-point and always gave examples after explaining something,” says Pokrandt, who was a first-year representative for Earth Sciences. “Going into the course, I thought it would be kind of iffy to manage my own time with all of the lectures. But in the end, I kept up.”

Pokrandt, who hopes to study exploration geology after graduation, has a few words of advice for those new to CUOL. For students who haven’t yet done an exam for an online course, preparing for them can be a little different from the in-class structure.

“It’s harder to figure out what it is you need to learn for the exam,” says Pokrandt, who is currently settling in back home in British Columbia for the summer.

Here are a few of his study tips for new CUOLers.

1. Actually do the mock final (if one is provided).

Yes, it can be a hassle to switch off your phone and block out a few distraction-free hours, but it can help put you in a test-taking mindset. Mock finals are especially helpful for lower-level students who may not have had much experience with post-secondary exams. It’ll give you a better idea of the exact style of verbiage, types of questions to expect, and proper time management. Which leads to Pokrandt’s second tip.

2. Practice other questions.

It’s one thing to go over the questions you’ve already done in-class, but professors like Cheung will provide ample supporting materials and new practice questions to go over before the exam. You don’t have to do all of it, but at least look these over to make sure you’re on the right track with your studies.

3. Re-watch your lectures.

One of the biggest advantages of taking a CUOL course is having all of the lectures at your disposal—take advantage of them! It may seem obvious, but rewatching a segment of a lecture from earlier on in the semester can help you better understand a concept than simply reading it in a textbook. “It’s a good way to revisit what you’ve already learned,” says Pokrandt.

4. Go over new material.

Chances are there are at least a few chapters or concepts you’re still unfamiliar with come exam time. Look back on the lectures you may have skimmed through (or listened to with a little less than your full attention) and make a note of lessons that feel a little more foreign—otherwise, it’s easy to get stuck practicing and perfecting the concepts that already come naturally to you.
Richard Carson
An Algonquin-turned-Carleton student reviews his first online course.

After completing a three-year Computer Science Engineering program at Algonquin College, Richard Carson came to Carleton for the software engineering program, drawn to the faculty’s reputation. He was also a student in Professor Kevin Cheung’s Linear Algebra course, and found there were many advantages to taking the class online.

“The online course was a much more convenient way to re-take the course,” says Carson. “It was a time-saving measure.”

For students new to CUOL, Carson recommends making a personal schedule to follow when doing coursework, as well as setting aside hours in advance to watch, as he puts it, “avoid last-minute algebra marathons.”

While there are some common misconceptions about online courses—that they’re easier than their traditional counterparts, that your learning is completely independent, and that it’s harder to get help when and if you don’t understand a concept, for instance—Carson says his first experience with online learning at Carleton was the opposite.

“[Professor Cheung’s] videos were well put together, and made studying far easier,” he says. “It might seem more impersonal at first, but you can still email questions to the prof!”

And—the thing he found most advantageous about CUOL? Turning back time.

 “[I enjoyed] the ease with which I could go back and see any part of any lecture in the course,” says Carson.

While his first year of university was different to his experience at Algonquin, Carson says he is looking forward to his next few years, when courses will start to become more tailored to his degree. He recommends that first-year students who may not know about CUOL or whether an online version of a course is available go check out Carleton’s e-learning offerings.

“They should be advertised when selecting courses,” says Carson. “I’m sure there are many students who could benefit from CUOL who aren’t even aware of it.”

CUOL RENOVATION – IN D299 LOEB BLDG.

The CUOL Student Centre in D299 Loeb is now closed for renovation. Since the CUOL Viewing Room will not be accessible during the renovation, students can view their CUOL lectures at no charge at any computer in the Maxwell MacOdrum Library. Customer service for CUOL Students and those writing examinations at CU TESTING CENTRE will be available in D283 Loeb from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, Monday to Friday. CUOL staff can still be reached in D299 Loeb via D283 Loeb, or by phone or email. For more information, see www.carleton.ca/cuol.
Tech Corner

Fast2Eat

An app for faster food developed by a Carleton business student.

We’ve all been there—a day of back-to-back classes, barely enough time to get from one lecture hall to the next, and as luck would have it, you’ve forgotten your lunch.

Fourth-year business student Myles Foster devised a plan to help cut the middleman out of the food-ordering equation using an app called Fast2eat. It’s takeout technology Carleton students can use to order and pay for their food court meals using their smart phones, then pick it up hassle—and lineup—free. Just pre-order, pre-pay and choose a pick-up time on your phone or computer, then head to the Fast2eat food court station.

“I was constantly experiencing long lineups, and I was busy,” says Foster. “I knew there were a whole bunch of people in my situation, so I thought, how can I tell the food court ahead of time that I’m coming?”

That’s when he dreamed up Fast2eat. The idea was pitched at Start Up Weekend Ottawa in April 2012, and Fast2eat partnered with Carleton University Dining Services early this year.

After its January launch, Foster reported more than 2,000 unique visits from hungry students. The main feedback they got from users? Expand the menu to include more on-campus franchises as well as independent Ottawa-based vendors. Foster says he’s looking to expand into other Canadian schools as well, and is in serious talks with the University of Toronto. They’re also testing tools like student timetable integration, so they can send users an email 45 minutes before class ends—right when stomachs start growling—to remind them to skip the line.

While the platform won’t be operational for most of the summer, Foster says the team will be testing their new Subway implementation in July and August, and hopes to see Fast2eat’s on-the-go orders spread come September.

“Our next steps for Carleton are to launch smoothly with Subway,” says Foster. “And of course, to use the feedback we are receiving to make the app better and better for students.”
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**Full Credit Course MIDTERM EXAM SCHEDULE**

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