Reflections
A look back at some of the best stories, tips and blogs of the 2015-16 academic year with Carleton University’s Teaching and Learning Services.

Chalkboard teaching in the age of technology

By: Cassandra Hendry, TLS Staff Writer
December 2015

In education and beyond, technology is always adapting and progressing. Students are often seen totting laptops to class to take notes, or pulling out their smartphones to take a picture of a friend’s handwritten notes for later perusal. PowerPoint has made its way into almost every classroom, and some classes even exist without walls in an online format.

To be a proponent of teaching with simple chalk and blackboard may seem old-fashioned to some, but to others, it’s what’s saving education. A small but growing number of professors are speaking out about the benefits that chalkboard teaching—and its slightly more advanced technological equivalent—has, not only for their teaching, but also for their students’ learning.

Simon Power, a professor of economics at Carleton, is a staunch supporter of what he calls ‘chalk and talk.’

“In the past 40 or 50 years, a number of people in education have argued against the use of chalk and talk, urging other methods of instruction, perhaps more informal methods,” Power says. “I’m arguing in favour of the traditional old-fashioned approach. In some ways I think it’s more effective.”

As a professor who teaches a subject involving numbers and logic, he says chalkboard teaching meshes well due to the subject matter’s organized and analytical approach. Power finds it’s easier to organize his thoughts and he’s able to stray from prepared les-

“If I’m showing my students information that has been pre-printed on a slide, it’s like I’m handing them information down from on high. If I’m writing and talking and inviting them to talk about it, then it’s something we developed together.”

-Pam Wolff
sons to further explain a concept if he’s using a piece of chalk.

“There’s a huge advantage of chalk and talk if you’re teaching math or economics. You can look around the class and if you see confusion or people not being happy, it’s easy if you have a blackboard to explain a rule of calculus,” he says.

“If you’re using a PowerPoint slide, it’s not easy to go sideways. That’s why I always ask to have three blackboards in the classrooms in which I teach.”

For chemistry and environmental studies professor Pam Wolff, she felt the same way—at least until two years ago, when she had to teach in rooms that did not have chalkboards or ones that were too small.

Instead of abandoning chalkboard teaching altogether, she turned to a technological upgrade that allowed her to continue her method, but with a slight twist.

Wolff uses a tablet and pen-like stylus connected to a large screen at the front of her classroom. Before class, she prepares roughed-out slides with minimal words—an equation or fact here and there—and writes directly on the slides in class to work out problems or explain further. To her, transitioning to full PowerPoint lectures just wouldn’t work for her teaching style.

“If I’m showing my students information that has been pre-printed on a slide, it’s like I’m handing them information down from on high. If I’m writing and talking and inviting them to talk about it, then it’s something we developed together,” Wolff says.

Unlike a traditional chalkboard, Wolff’s tablet has some advantages, such as being able to use colours, pre-write equations or facts, or include the answer to a problem they’re working on on the slide itself, hidden from view in a light color.

But while Wolff appreciates the convenience that the tablet has brought, she says sometimes she feels disconnected from her students without a real chalkboard.

“I make eye contact with my class far more with a chalkboard. When I’m using my tablet, I find I’m focused on it for the whole class and after class I find I don’t really know who was there. Unlike with the board, I spend 90 per cent of my time with a desk between me and my students,” Wolff says.

Power agrees that technology can sometimes have a distancing effect on teaching.

“Students as humans are social animals. If you try to take education out of context it begins to become alienating,” he says.

Wolff says that disconnect of relying too heavily on technology for pedagogical purposes can have a definite effect on student learning, one that she strives to avoid.

“I don’t think you overcome the psychological difference of me hitting a button and the next line appears. It just doesn’t feel as inclusive . . . You can’t trick your brain into really thinking about something if you know that at a push of a button it’s already there.”
Her students watch attentively as Prof. Collett Tracey sits on the desk at the front of the class and opens a book to the poem they’re studying. *Thinking With the Heart* by Bronwen Wallace.

One student begins reading. Tracey leans in to listen with care. “…I wish I could show you what a man’s anger makes of a woman’s face…”

The young woman reading begins to cry. She can’t continue. Before Tracey can intervene another student gently speaks up, “I’ll help.” She finishes the poem on domestic abuse. Silence. There are few dry eyes in the room.

The woman who read the ending breaks the silence by turning to the young woman who started, “It’s okay. I’ve never been able to get through it by myself.”

Tracey, an English literature professor at Carleton, says her classes often deal with difficult subject matter like abuse or depression that bring up real struggles for students.

“One of the things that’s very important to me is that the classroom be a safe space for students and that they feel comfortable and know that I’m accessible to them regardless of whatever issues they are having,” says Tracey.

But not all students experience this type of atmosphere during their time at Carleton.

Scott Zakaib is an engineering student with obsessive-compulsive disorder and a generalized anxiety disorder. He says the attitude in some of his classes tends to be: “You’re suffering? Good. Everybody suffers.”

What’s missing is the understanding that the level of suffering caused by mental illness is much more serious than normal university stress, says Zakaib, now the president of the Student Alliance for Mental Health (SAMH).

University students are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems. Youth ages 15-24 are the most likely demographic in Canada to suffer from anxiety, personality disorders, schizophrenia, mood disorders, substance dependency and suicidal behaviours, according to Statistics Canada. The Council of Ontario Universities’ (COU) Canada Campus Survey also reported that students are more susceptible to developing these problems than the general youth population.

Identifying this as a growing concern, the Carleton University Student Mental Health Advisory Committee produced a Student Mental Health Framework in 2009. In it they acknowledge that, “the transition to adulthood can be an especially exciting but also a complex time... for some the road to independence, identity and employment can lead to... mental health problems.”

The purpose of the framework is to “facilitate a consistent and integrated approach to responding to Carleton students who are in distress.” It covers a wide-range of issues from non-urgent to urgent, and how to assist students who are not formally registered at Carleton. It is currently undergoing a review.

While the task of dealing with students in distress may seem daunting to instructors, there are many resources available. Maureen Murdock, director of Carleton’s Health and Counselling Services, says instructors are welcome to reach out when facing a challenging situation.

“A lot of faculty will call if they need help, if they’re dealing with somebody who is experiencing difficulty in class. We’re pretty open to that,” says
Murdock.

Letting students know about the resources available to them is also important. Tracey says so many students approach her wanting or needing counselling. She knows to direct them to Health and Counselling Services and will even call for them if they need her to.

Another resource is the From Intention to Action (FIT: Action) program. It is designed to help students manage stress. Staff members trained in counselling and learning strategies meet with students one-on-one for one hour a week for the entire semester.

The Paul Menton Centre (PMC) is also available for students with mental health problems who need academic accommodations (later deadlines, different exam location, etc.). Zakaib encourages instructors to find creative ways to encourage students in need to access these resources.

“Take five minutes and talk about [mental health]...make people aware that you care about it,” Zakaib says.

He suggests professors take time in the first lecture to let students know that they understand mental health problems are common and they are available to talk about it.

Zakaib also suggests posting mental health resources on the cuLearn course page and including a section on mental health in the syllabus (in addition to pregnancy, religious obligations and illness). All of this will help contribute to a “culture of awareness and understanding” surrounding mental health in the classroom.

He says this open environment is important because “if [students] are afraid to identify themselves, they won’t.”

Zakaib says professors should fight against the idea that university must be difficult and stress-filled.

“Obviously intellectually [university] should be challenging but personally and professionally it should be doable,” he says.

Murdock is encouraged by the way the campus culture surrounding mental health has been improving.

“My impression of the faculty that I’ve encountered is that they’ve been very open to hearing about mental health,” she says.

As the stigma is lowered, it’s important to provide resources to help those who now have the courage to say “I need help,” says Zakaib.

The key is that students don’t feel alone in their struggles. Like the woman reading the poem, we’ve never been able to get through it by ourselves. And there’s no shame in that.

For more information on the policies for dealing with students in distress, please visit the Office of the Vice-President (Students and Enrolment) website. Here you’ll find the policies and protocols that are outlined in the Student Mental Health Framework, including the general protocol for identifying and assisting students in distress.

“Obviously intellectually [university] should be challenging but personally and professionally it should be doable.”

-Scott Zakaib
Lessons learned from teaching evaluations

By: Kim Hellemans, Undergraduate Chair, Department of Neuroscience
February 2016

For the Fall 2014 semester, I received the lowest teaching evaluations in my 10-year career in university teaching. In a way, I expected them. I had come back to work in Fall 2014 after a 10-month maternity leave with my youngest daughter. To say I struggled with the return to a demanding job with two young children at home is an understatement. My kids were sick seemingly every two weeks; many lectures I delivered after only a few hours sleep; I felt stretched thin, completely and utterly unable to focus on even the most mundane of tasks. I knew I wasn’t performing at my best.

So, when the actual numeric scores came in, I was disappointed, but got over it relatively quickly. Alas, it wasn’t until a couple weeks later, when I unwittingly opened up the PDF file with the written comments, that I realized the true depth of what ‘not performing at my best’ actually felt like to the students.

Let me be clear: I have received negative comments before - it is part and parcel of being a teacher. Not everyone is going to drink the Kim Kool-Aid; I get it. But this was different. The depth and volume of these comments were unparalleled. In some cases, students had written entire paragraphs of vitriol, eloquently written dialogue outlining (sometimes in an itemized list) all my failings. Two major themes emerged: 1) I’m too hard (and I enjoy being hard); and 2) I am not adequately prepared. One student wrote that I was a “below-average professor.” Another, that I was “a better student than professor.”

It’s probably no surprise that in the ensuing weeks, I travelled through all the stages of grief: I bypassed the denial phase altogether, quickly spent a moment in anger (“Those ungrateful students! Don’t they know I gave up two months of my maternity leave for them!”), bargaining (“If I could only know who wrote those comments... maybe we could talk about what went wrong and why...I could make it better!”), and then straight into a downward spiral of depression.

None of the positive comments stayed with me – rather, the negative ones came into sharp focus, penetrating my cognitive space. Over and over again I recounted the comments in my mind, turning them this way and that, trying to figure out “why.” My friends and family were exasperated (“You’re amazing! You’ve won all those awards! Why are you paying attention to this?”); I felt shamed by...
feeling so badly.

Truthfully, I had a hard time listening to the ‘oh, but you’re awesome, don’t worry about it,’ line of reasoning. Sure, I know in my heart that I am actually an ‘above-average professor,’ but I don’t think dismissing negative feedback simply because it is non-normative is productive. As a scientist, I am trained to listen to the data. Everything is meaningful in some way, even if it goes against your preconceived notions.

This is not to say I should have believed the students, and admitted with them that I was actually a ‘below-average professor’ (although I would be lying if I said I didn’t sometimes veer into that territory), but it was clear there was something that was not working, and I needed to pay attention. After a few very meaningful conversations with some cherished colleagues, I finally was able to step away from my bruised ego and objectively take stock of the “facts.”

The first major epiphany in my path to acceptance was the realization that I have a compassion threshold, and that being compassionate was clearly part of the complex equation that amounted to “Amazing Professor Kim.” Allow me to unpack this.

First of all, what is probably obvious is that parenting takes a great deal of compassion. However, along the same vein, students also require some compassion. Every semester, I see numerous students who, for one reason or another (usually related to outside stressors), request extensions, grace periods, re-weighting of exams, or simply want a friendly face to explain their poor performance in my course. Upon reflection, I realized that my response to these students in the past year was often harsher than I normally would be…frankly, I felt overburdened and underappreciated. Ultimately, the perception of me being a “tough and demanding professor,” coupled with low compassion outside of the classroom, was a toxic mix.

Secondly, with regard to students indicating I was often unprepared, or unable to answer questions, I came to the realization that they were right. But that was ok. For now. For this moment in time when I was running a marathon race on fumes, it was ok. I had to forgive myself and move on.

As Henry Ford famously said, “Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” I truly believe that in this case, receiving the negative evaluations allowed me to really take stock of what was working for me in the classroom, and what wasn’t.

In this way, failure is one of many mechanisms in my toolbox for me to use to fine-tune my teaching. After a bit of re-tooling and self-reflection, I’m happy to report that the Winter 2015 semester returned to it’s normal levels of “mostly satisfied” students with a few haters. Onwards! 🎉
Pushing the envelope: Controversial issues in class

By: Emma Brown,
TLS Staff Writer
March 2016

It was the last day of class. The students had questions. They wanted to know what their animal rights professor, Craig McFarlane, personally thought about the issues he had been presenting to them for the last 12 weeks. Before he answered their questions, he made them guess what they thought he would say.

They were mostly wrong. Getting wrong answers from students is not usually a good thing but McFarlane took it as proof of success. "It seems that I’m good at hiding my own personal views and I think it’s kind of important to do that with these sorts of classes because [students] might feel that they’re being forced into adopting a particular position if they knew what my position was," he says.

Many courses at Carleton deal with controversial subjects where students are asked to grapple with polarizing views. Managing discussion around these issues and encouraging critical thinking is a challenge for professors. McFarlane says letting students participate in open discussion is the best way for them to engage with the material. He tries to talk as little as possible, only to facilitate turn-taking or clarify technical points. The students are also asked to respond to the readings in weekly papers.

The topic of animal rights can bring up intense feelings and personal struggles for students, says McFarlane. "A lot of them take it quite personally to begin with because it touches upon parts of their identity: what they eat, what they wear, what they do... It bumps up against how they see themselves," he says.

Religion classes often “bump up”
against students in a similar way. Zeba Crook, professor of religious studies at Carleton, says students sometimes struggle at first because, “they tend to think of their religious truths as self-evident and obvious... religious studies asks them to think about religion in a different way.”

Rather than run away from the uncomfortable and controversial side of religion, Crook leans into it.

While teaching a class on Islam, he included pictures of Muhammad on his slides. Depicting Muhammad is forbidden in Islam. As a result, three students began yelling at Crook during class. He quieted the students and pointed out that the images were produced by Muslims in the 13th century. He wanted to teach the class that depictions of Muhammad were not always forbidden in Islam.

“I can be more strident in my demand that students think about [religion] in a way that they’re not comfortable with, because that’s what university is for. It is for pushing that envelope, pushing students to re-evaluate things that they thought were obvious and clear,” he says.

However, he’s careful not to let students poke fun or disrespect one another. He doesn’t have an online discussion board for this reason. After all, he says, “The Internet brings out the worst in people.”

Vida Panitch, who teaches bioethics, says she’s been pleasantly surprised with how respectful students are in classroom discussions. Her class deals with controversial topics such as abortion and doctor-assisted suicide.

“I’ve been really impressed since I’ve been teaching at Carleton with how the students are trying to take each other’s views seriously,” she says.

The key to facilitating respectful discussion around these divisive issues is centering it on a particular author’s argument in an article. This way, she says, students can examine the specific premises and discuss whether the conclusion is valid. If classroom discussion becomes “uncivilized” Panitch reminds her students to bring it back to the article.

As for her role in the classroom, she says, “I try to disagree with everybody...I’m not going to defend it for them. That’s what they have to learn how to do.”

Panitch, McFarlane and Crook agree that professors must challenge students to think critically, especially about their own views and assumptions.

“If they leave the class with the same positions as they entered the class with that’s fine,” says Panitch, “but the hope is that now they have good arguments for them and that they can defend them to others who challenge them rather than just yelling at other people.”
Why I’ve given up on final exams

By: Mira Sucharov, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science
December 2015

I have mixed memories of final exams as an undergraduate. There was anxiety around memorizing the material, of course; there was camaraderie in forming late-night study groups; there was satisfaction in nailing an answer; there was relief after walking out of the examination room. Now, as a professor, I have chosen to forego exams altogether. It’s not specifically to save my students stress — all assignments naturally have their own stressful elements — but rather to protect the classroom environment as a learning space.

Giving up exams in my courses has meant liberating myself from the feeling that I must present a litany of facts and figures which my students will dutifully write down for the purposes of reproducing said facts and figures on the exam. It also means that I have jettisoned my PowerPoint presentations, since I had also designed those around the expectation that I must supply detailed material which students will later reproduce (I admit that the “death by PowerPoint” comment I once received on a course evaluation humbled me).

But most importantly, not holding exams has meant that my classroom space is now one of active inquiry. “Course material” is provided through weekly readings; students come to class prepared to be engaged in a guided conversation. Neither are we bound to unquestioningly follow the readings. If our conversation takes us in another direction as a result of me prompting students to pose questions that they extract from the week’s themes, we go with it. (To ensure that there is sufficient incentive for students to complete the readings and to attend class, I award a grade for attendance and for the submission of weekly analytical reading write-ups).

There are some risks to creating a less-structured class environment than one that has been tightly scripted from detailed lecture notes. Students can raise tough questions; a less relevant tangent might be followed. But there are also rich rewards. Students look at me and at each other rather than at their notebooks. We get to chart the how-to-answer-a-question journey so integral to higher order learning as much as identifying the hard and fast answers. We have created a learning community together, one which I get to be a part of too.

Facilitating learning from mistakes

By: Kevin Cheung, Associate Professor, School of Mathematics and Statistics
October 2015

“You learn from your mistakes.” The wisdom contained in these words is rarely under dispute. However, how one goes about setting up an environment that facilitates learning from mistakes is readily up for discussion.

Students can only learn from their mistakes if they go through the effort of reviewing their work and correcting the errors. To facilitate learning from mistakes, mechanisms that motivate students to engage in such undertakings need to be in place. Certainly, some students will take the initiative to figure out what they have done wrong as soon as their work is returned to them. However, many students I have taught would simply ignore their mistakes and move on. I know because they would make the same mistakes on tests and final exams for the very same questions!

It is a fact of life that not all students take a course for the love of the subject. Even if they liked the course material, they often have competing priorities in life. Furthermore, students don’t necessarily do what is best for themselves. Human nature and habits are hard to fight. So if we truly want our students to learn from their mistakes, incentives are necessary.

In the context of a course, a viable incentive would be a chance for students to improve their marks through repeated attempts or revisions. For example, I have set up my online quizzes with multiple attempts and I count only the highest score for each quiz. After five terms, I have seen this incentive to be very effective: students do try to exhaust all attempts until they reach 100 per cent or run out of time. What is perhaps surprising (in a pleasant way) is that some students would make further attempts even after having obtained 100 per cent!

Some might argue that such incentives would lead to grade inflation. That is hard to deny as far as the term mark goes. But with a final exam worth 50 per cent or more of the final grade, having higher term marks is not a major cause for concern. The improvements in term marks don’t come for free because students have to put in extra work. And if students do manage to improve their marks, they are demonstrating that they are having a better command at the material. Who doesn’t want to see students work harder and know more?
In one classroom, a group of undergraduate engineering students design a sustainable architecture plan for an aging heritage building in Gatineau, preparing a report to present to the building’s owner next week. In another room, a third-year student creates a computerized model to improve the way doctors see and treat concussion head trauma. These scenes aren’t out of the ordinary on Carleton’s campus. In many programs, undergraduate students embrace both their logical and creative sides and experiment, conducting revolutionary research. Inside Carleton’s Interactive Multimedia and Design program for example, students are doing just that.

Ali Arya, an associate professor with Carleton’s School of Information Technology, has his students create multimedia projects, such as websites, computer games and animated film, throughout the year. “Most of the skills we’re covering in our courses require creating something. The essay-type coursework just doesn’t work in our program. They have to make things,” Arya says.

This approach to learning also happens in associate professor Chris Joslin’s classes. One of his undergraduate courses covers backend server...
development to create dynamic web applications and experiences for users. His other two courses tackle 3D graphics and creating images from algorithms, in addition to more creative animation.

Unlike courses that are purely theoretical, where students don’t have the ability to research and develop new things, IMD courses thrive on experimentation. Arya notes that students learn and grow through their studies while producing products of value, such as when students collaborate with companies or community groups for projects, or if faculty invite students to take part in extra-curricular advanced research.

Through NSERC’s Undergraduate Student Research Awards that Joslin facilitates through Carleton, he has been able to supervise a number of students in their research pursuits, many with outstanding results.

“Most of the students come out and publish a paper on their work. It’s fairly rare for an undergraduate student to publish before they graduate. It’s a great opportunity for them to do something fun and interesting at the same time,” Joslin says.

One student researched the measurement of how we capture light for endoscopic surgeries, to create better medical simulations for doctors. Another simulated how cartilage in the hip region compresses, providing doctors with more information during surgeries. These research projects have been presented at some of the top computer graphic conferences in the field Joslin says, an impressive feat for young students.

Some students have even commercialized their projects, including apps and computer games, once the learning objectives of the course are met, Arya says.

With all of these opportunities both in the classroom and out, Arya and Joslin agree that their students are exceptionally engaged in the course content.

“The practice shows them what they’re learning is of practical use,” Arya says. “They can see they’re gaining skills they can actually use, which gives students more encouragement and motivation, and makes them more prepared for what they’re expected to do afterwards.”

Joslin sees this unique style of learning as a positive.

“They’re able to sit down and can make mistakes. They go in, try it out, see what works or doesn’t . . . our students go through that whole process. It doesn’t work for every program, but for us it’s so important.”
Accessible chemistry: It’s not just a myth

By: Emily Cook, TLS Staff Writer
August 2015

If you’re not a fan of chemistry yet, Professor Maria DeRosa is here to change that.

DeRosa helps her students develop an understanding not only of fundamental material, but the broader impact chemistry has in the world.

“I love chemistry, so I want to show how these concepts are important to them in their everyday lives,” she says.

DeRosa has been teaching in Carleton’s chemistry department for 10 years. This year she was recognized with a Capital Educators’ Award for her ability to connect classroom learning to the real world.

“My first goal is to really break down those initial barriers that many people have when they think about chemistry,” she says.

DeRosa says she instills an appreciation for chemistry in her students by asking them to find applications of it in the media. She says this activity increases student engagement in her classes because they see why it matters.

“We know literacy’s important, but what about science literacy? I think everyone should have a basic understanding of chemistry,” she says.

DeRosa says she wants to focus now on applying these concepts to larger classrooms. She says she’s considering a flipped classroom, where class time is for working through problems and lectures happen at home.

“I’m always trying to investigate how we do a better job in teaching these large groups,” DeRosa says.

“That’s what I’m going to be doing for the next few years, really focusing on that.”

DeRosa says she’s also always been an early adopter of new software to engage students, including online office hours, and she incorporates her own research whenever she can into her classes to teach students the role research plays in moving science forward. All these teaching methods work towards her ultimate goal, she says, to extend students’ views of chemistry to the real world.

“My biggest goal, if they don’t love chemistry at the end, is at least they respect and appreciate chemistry.”

“We know literacy’s important, but what about science literacy? I think everyone should have a basic understanding of chemistry.”

-Maria DeRosa
For Hossein Raeesi, a criminal and human rights lawyer from Iran, the fight to end injustice and guarantee human rights for the oppressed is just a part of his daily job.

After working for 20 years in Shiraz, Raeesi moved to Canada in 2012 to escape undue detention and legal actions from the Iranian government. Thanks to a new program at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, he is now able to teach and learn in Ottawa free from prosecution.

As public interest and scrutiny into international human rights increases, Carleton and uOttawa have joined Scholars at Risk (SAR), an international network of higher education institutions dedicated to protecting threatened scholars, preventing attacks on higher education communities and promoting academic freedom worldwide.

As part of the program, Carleton and uOttawa have pledged to co-host a number of the world’s brightest scholars for one-year appointments – the first being Raeesi.

“In Iran as a human rights lawyer, and a very active one at that, who trained law students and legal apprentices, the Iranian judiciary system and some governmental organizations became very sensitive to my career and activities,” says Raeesi.

While in Iran, Raeesi says the government monitored his career and coerced some of his clients to drop him as their lawyer, telling them that they would receive more charges if they continued with Raeesi.

For a lawyer who specializes in human rights—supporting women, children, minority groups, LGBTQ citizens, political activists and more—working in the Iranian judiciary system that uses Sharia law was often a challenge.

“Not everything in Sharia law is against human rights, but honestly it has conflicts with international human rights principles. Because the Iranian system follows Sharia law, it creates real problems for human rights activists and for lawyers like myself,” he says.

Thanks to the Scholars at Risk program, Raeesi will be taking courses at uOttawa toward professional accreditation as a lawyer in Ontario, in addition to helping Canadian law students learn more about his passion – international legal systems. The fourth year Carleton course he currently teaches, Human Rights, Sharia Law and Islamic Legal System, draws directly from his personal experiences.

His course centers on research and discussion, allowing a handful of students per class to share their own research about the course’s main topics. Raeesi says he also integrates his own law cases into the course, allowing students to get a glimpse of real-world Iranian legal issues.

“I love teaching and I’m so happy to be involved with these young students. All of them are actively looking for new ideas about Sharia law and the connection to human rights, and I’m glad that they follow it well and enjoy it,” he says.

“Sharing these experiences with my students and colleagues creates a common ground and helps remove misconceptions about Muslim societies, which is something we all need.”
Preparing and defending a thesis, from the beginning to the end, can be one of the most challenging aspects of a student’s academic career. From the long nights to inevitable snags that come along the way, students often need guidance to see their thesis to the end. That’s when the role of faculty mentor takes on greater significance.

Professors Sarah Todd (School of Social Work) and Gerald Grant (Sprott School of Business) have dedicated themselves to being that guiding force in a grad student’s career. From their combined 30 years mentoring grad students, they’ve seen both the triumphs and challenges of this process and know how to be of assistance.

“The first part of the work is to orient students to the process and what their thesis defence is going to be like. Thesis writing is very self-directed, so I do a lot of working with students early on,” Todd says.

From there, as a mentor she needs to guide students through the various stages of research, such as ethics, setting up research questions, and interviewing participants. Then comes draft reading and preparing them for the defence.

But rarely does a thesis get finished without changes and revisions, she says, due to the very different structure from a traditional university paper.

“Thesis writing is different than an essay... it isn’t finished until it’s defensible,” Todd says.

For Grant, he says his students are passionate and drawn to his area of expertise, but often fall into the trap of viewing a thesis like a problem to be solved.

“I supervise many mature students who have lots of work experience and tend to come from a practice, so doing research is new to them and somewhat against their orientation. The big thing you have to do is teach them how to think like a researcher rather than a manager or consultant,” he says.

His remedy? Putting time in with the student is key, Grant says, as well as pushing beyond a simple transactional task to develop a strong supervisor-student relationship.

Todd says one of her greatest challenges as a mentor is helping students make their thesis a priority among the many other pressing demands they have in their lives.

“Students are often hoping they’ll have more time next month, but in general next month turns out to be just as busy,” she says.

“That’s why they really appreciate regular meetings and feedback, feeling like they have somebody to check in with. It can be very isolating and lonely... but having somebody to sit down and strategize with really helps.”

If you’re interested in learning more about supervising grad students, the website houses a number of resources for faculty including a list of responsibilities and expectations, as well as templates, forms and policies.
Should we retire the term ‘learning styles’?

By: Maristela Petrovic-Dzerdz, EDC Instructional Designer
June 2015

In 1983, psychologist Howard Gardner proposed a new theory, of multiple intelligence. We have all run into this list: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal (he later added more types). Gardner recognized that we all have our stronger and weaker “intellectual capacities” (not all of which are tested in traditional “IQ tests”) and made us think more about ourselves as learners.

What Gardner apparently didn’t anticipate is that the world of education, always seeking for ways to improve student learning, would adopt this model and turn it into a theory of “learning styles.” The simple premise would be that if we teach students so that we accommodate their individual learning styles, then they will learn better. It sounds very intuitive and it quickly got adopted by a large audience. The simplicity is always attractive but this premise also gave a lot of headache to us teachers who now felt obliged to somehow a) find out what the “learning styles” of our students are, and b) accommodate them all. Simply put, it’s an almost impossible task for teachers of large classes, but maybe worth trying, if it works?

Each time I crossed paths with this theory (in my BEd studies, MEd studies and in my career as a teacher and instructional designer), it sparked a debate. In 2013, Professor Gardner, who now teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, discussed in The Washington Post his thoughts on the misinterpretation of multiple intelligence theory, specifically the confusion of multiple intelligences with learning styles. This came after numerous research apparently found no conclusive data about the positive impact of accommodating teaching and assessment to individual student “learning styles.” Some research actually showed that students learn better if they have to step outside of their “learning comfort zone.” Yet many still argue that we all learn differently, and that this is what “learning styles” are about.

Learning preferences, attitudes or personalities are probably the terms we could be using instead. Students also have different levels of (temporary or permanent) abilities and we need to address them with universal design. If someone can’t hear well, or doesn’t speak a language well and would benefit from video captions and notes, this is not because of their “learning style,” and neither is it their preference or attitude, but a necessity, based on the (lack thereof) current ability. The premise of universal design is that if we design for those in need, we will benefit everyone because all of us will, at some point, need some accommodations. For example, you might not be using a wheelchair but you will benefit from automatic doors if you are pushing a baby stroller or pulling a heavy luggage.

It is surely important to be cognizant of the fact that our students are different in many ways, which will impact their learning success, including, for example, prerequisite knowledge and meta-cognitive skills. Teaching so that we adjust the modality based on what is being taught, and the context in which it is being taught, teaching difficult concepts using a variety of examples, taking into account students’ preconceptions and prerequisite knowledge, providing some flexibility in assessment so that students feel “in charge” of their learning and being sensitive towards students’ attitudes will surely improve the learning environment for all.

Whatever our personal attitudes and beliefs on this topic are, it is worth reading Gardner’s statement published by The Washington Post in order to, as he puts it, “set the record straight” regarding his own theory and beliefs. While he urges for further research, stating that the “absence of evidence does not prove non-existence of a phenomenon; it signals to educational researchers: back to the drawing boards,” at the end of his post he provides a clear lesson for educators: “Drop the term ‘styles.’ It will confuse others and it won’t help either you or your students.”

If we want to improve student learning, do you think that we should, for now, put this term to rest, and use others that better describe the complexities of teaching and learning? 🎓
Rob Smart: Carleton educator on and off the court

By: Lindsay Campbell, TLS Freelance Writer
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Rob Smart is no new face to Carleton University. As a faculty member for the school of business and a long-time member of the coaching staff for the Ravens men’s basketball team, teaching is second nature.

During his 12 years of coaching at Carleton and nine years of teaching, Smart recalls many highlights of working with young people both on the court and in the classroom. He says he likes helping others achieve their goals in different environments.

“My favourite thing about teaching is challenging people,” he says. “I love it when people push their limits and don’t care if others think their goals are ridiculous or that they shouldn’t have them.”

In one of his courses, Smart essentially teaches fourth year students how to teach a class of second years. He says it is one of his most preferred classes because of its interactive structure.

“I get to work with my students closely in that class and it’s great because some of them have a real passion for it. They really enjoy the teaching and that makes it a lot of fun for me,” he says.

He added that it is always interesting to watch his students’ progress over the school year.

“Last year one of our best teachers was one who said ‘I’m too quiet,’” he says. “Throughout the year we tried to make her more aware of her strengths and how that helps her as a teacher. When she saw how her differences were strengths, she became one of the best and that was really great to see.”

While Smart enjoys the classroom environment, he says his coaching career has generally been more rewarding because of the relationship he has with his players.

“You’re a lot closer with your players, just because you see them everyday and you see them in a more emotional setting,” he explains.

While he does favour the court over the classroom, Smart stresses that he keeps one important thing in mind wherever he is teaching.

“My main goal has always been to never have them forget what I’m here for. I’m here to help people get through their struggles so they can enjoy the things they’re doing and get better at it.”