

# THE MANTLE

## Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

### How Can Faculty Be Like Mrs. Lennon?

by Johnny W. Lott, Director

When my son was in the second grade, he came home from school one day visibly frustrated and out of sorts exclaiming, “Why can’t my teacher be like Mrs. Lennon?” Mrs. Lennon had been his first grade teacher and had made quite an impression on both him and me. Both Mrs. Lennon and my young son’s question helped to form an ideal for teaching at all levels with the following qualities: knowledgeable, passionate about student learning, compassion for her students, and open to suggestions to improve classroom learning. As this academic year starts at the University of Mississippi, let’s explore each quality and how they might apply to our classes here.



Dr. Johnny Lott

#### Knowledgeable

Most teachers on this campus are knowledgeable in their fields. However, in addition to content knowledge learned as graduate students, for dissertations and for important monographs, teachers also need to know how to translate that knowledge for today’s students. For example, the first presidential debate on this campus in September gives rise to opportunities for the direct application of knowledge in the classroom. Classes studying demographics and polling may want to slant normal topics to incorporate those presidential campaign and debate issues. Classes studying food, customs, and journalism may want to determine how Oxford’s foods and customs are depicted by the media and how the media reports events and the political culture of a

small southern town. How cartooning and satire are parts of the political media is another potential application of knowledge. In other words, classroom knowledge should be related to our students’ world and we have an opportunity to showcase how it can be done here.

#### Passionate about Student Learning

Working with students on content as well as establishing the means and desire for continued learning are major goals of teaching. As “Mrs. Lennon-type” teachers, we must show students that what we are doing is important to us and that we care about it being important to them. Being aloof and above the fray of student learning is not acceptable. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of dismissing students because of their lack of academic background; they come here for academics and to improve on backgrounds. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of ignoring whether or not they get what we “present”. If we are passionate both about our discipline and our students’ learning, we will consider how to make sure that they are a part of that whole learning process. Our passion about our disciplines needs to be extended to the creation of students’ passion for their learning.

#### Compassion for Students

Likely the most common concerns of our students are that no one knows me or no one “cares” about what I think. As teachers, we must make sure that our students know that we know them and that we do care about them

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# Ryan Bubalo—A Teacher in Progress

Ryan Bubalo, Department of English master's student, was presented with the inaugural Graduate Instructor Teaching Excellence Award by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in the spring of 2008.

Ryan grew up among teachers with parents involved in Missouri high schools. He is a product of both of their backgrounds and their fields of English, journalism, history and psychology with further interests in current events and civil rights. Studying English and writing at the University of Mississippi and working for the Department of English allows him to continue to develop those interests as well as branch off in other directions.

Ryan came to Mississippi from Seattle where he worked with a politician. He has a degree in English and writing from the University of Southern California with a concentration on film writing. Being from the midwest helped round a varied background that students seem to



*Ryan Bubalo*

through high school for piquing his writing interest. The exposure to good teachers has continued here. Mr. Bubalo says, "The impact of having good teachers in language, reading, and writing was really important to me. And it continued with what I heard and was encouraged to do at home. My parents were always willing to talk, discuss ideas, and to give me space to read and write from an early age."

At the University of Mississippi where Mr. Bubalo is studying not only writing but the art of teaching writing, he identifies some definite challenges. "I had to learn that as an instructor I always have something that I think is interesting to discuss, but most of the time everyone gets more out of the class when I'm willing to just listen. That being a teacher doesn't mean telling students everything I know may be the most important thing that I've learned as a graduate instructor."

Ryan identifies a specific challenge. Good instruction also involves trying different teaching strategies. Ryan says, "As an instructor, it is easiest to cover a single topic each day, but it's terrible to be a student in that class. The more variety I can bring to a lesson plan, the better the class is for all of us. For me, free writes are a good way to start. They spur discussion and shift the emphasis from just knowing something to actually communicating it to others."

As suggested in the Quality Enhancement Plan for the university, Ryan identifies freshmen writing as a basic foundation for critical thinking. His down-to-earth approach, including using texting structure as a vehicle quickly outlines point-counterpoint arguments, use of rhetoric to defend ideas, and use of factual claims to develop academic discourse.

When asked about things from a graduate instructor's perspective that inhibit good classroom teaching, he identified the need for classroom updates with technology and equipment readily available, clean classrooms, and desks that are moveable and easily arranged into more than one setting. He believes that quality teaching is a vital issue at any university and within any department. He says that developing a balance between teaching, research, and service requires coordination and consistency.

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**"The more variety I can bring to a lesson plan, the better the class is for all of us."**

—RYAN BUBALO

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appreciate here. "I try to get my students to think as someone else for a little while. To develop a cogent argument, you have to consider how other people approach your arguments and where they'll disagree with you. Writing is an exercise in empathy. It's a great way for students to re-create what other people go through, to learn how other people see the world and approach problems."

Ryan says that he enjoys the process and challenge of both writing and teaching. He states flatly, "Good writing is a point of college. The writing process opens up new possibilities for students and provides them with avenues of exploration that every good college should. Writing is a safe venue for students to explore new ideas that they might otherwise never try."

He credits some very good teachers from elementary

## Teaching Tip

50 Must-Read Up and Coming Blogs by Teachers: see <http://www.teachingtips.com/blog/2008/06/30/50-must-read-up-and-coming-blogs-by-teachers/>

## Teaching Resources

Academic freedom has long been considered a resource by professors. See the website listed for one set of thoughts about how that is changing: <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/04/02/adjuncts>

Baldwin, Roger G., and Jay L. Chronister. *Teaching without Tenure: Policies and Practices for a New Era*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001.

Trautmann, Nancy M. "Learning to Teach: Alternatives to Trial by Fire." View at <http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/May-June%202008/Comments/comments-learning-to-teach.html>

## Survey: What are you doing in your department and classroom to help students be successful?

by Susan Mossing, Assistant Director

The article title was the focus of a summer 2008 survey by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to academic departments conducted on behalf of the University's Retention Task Force. Responses are summarized in the following.

### Restricted Access to Programs and Courses

Several departments restrict access to certain courses and programs in an effort to improve student success. Access is based on a variety of factors: ACT subscores, "C" minimum in pre-requisite courses, and minimum grade point averages calculated on major or minor coursework, core curriculum, and all coursework. One department experiences success using a proficiency exam to determine appropriate placement when students transfer courses from other institutions. The few departments offering financial aid, set minimum standards in terms of progression, grades, and attendance for students to continue receiving that financial aid.

### Inside of the Classroom

A wide range of practices designed to promote success within the classroom were cited, beginning with the course syllabus. A syllabus outlines clear goals for the course, expectations for students, and publicizes office hours. Offering smaller classes, learning students' names, closely monitoring student attendance and performance, creating a classroom climate of trust and cooperation, and using discussions and problem-based learning were also described. Some departments set rigorous expectations for students and help them meet those expectations by providing extensive feedback on their work and personalized assistance. Loftier goals held for students

include planning and practicing self change programs, improving research, writing, and documentation skills, and general education literacy.

### Outside of the Classroom

Most departments provide additional assistance outside of the classroom through office hours, tutoring, additional review sessions, or in some cases, drop-in help-rooms. Additional services to promote student development include mentoring, social and academic clubs, and opportunities for directed studies. In many cases, these services are also offered to majors and non-majors alike, with more mentoring and directed studies offered to majors. A few departments describe initiatives that serve students outside of their department more than their own majors. These initiatives are in addition to "service" courses offered to all students in English, math, and science.

Advising is recognized as an important service provided by most departments on campus and is associated with mentoring and career services. Many departments recognize the importance of providing opportunities for students to interact with faculty. These opportunities include mandated student-professor meetings outside of class (e.g., to plan or get feedback on assignments or just to get to know each other), departmental seminars and lecture series, film nights, social gatherings, and career days or majors fairs.

### Invitation to Expand Your Initiatives

If you would like assistance in using these and other effective practices, please contact [tlcenter@olemiss.edu](mailto:tlcenter@olemiss.edu) for an individual or an entire departmental discussion.

## Mrs. Lennon continued from Front Cover

and how they are doing. Obviously this does not mean that teachers should party with students or become their best buds, but it does mean that we should acknowledge students, speak with them as individuals, and take opportunities to show that we care about their work. This may mean writing individual notes on papers, speaking with them as they enter the class, scheduling office conversations or using email office hours when students contact you. Most teachers care about their students, but do the students know that?

### Open to Suggestions for Improving Teaching

Mrs. Lennon opened her class to parents and other teachers and used their suggestions for class improvement. That may or may not be realistic at a university setting. Faculty members could consider inviting peers to their classes and requesting feedback through a peer review of teaching. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning ([www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/cetl)) can and will help in any way needed to improve teaching including class observations, setting up structured peer review of teaching, videotaping classes, and in other means. Additionally, there are upcoming programs for professional development. Call us at 1391 for information or see the website and *The Mantle* for opportunities.

This can be a great year for you and your students. Try to be your own version of Mrs. Lennon of the University of Mississippi.

### Upcoming Professional Development Luncheons for Fall 2008

<b>September 3</b>	Dr. Donna Nelson-Beene, Bowling Green State University, Writing
<b>October 14</b>	Dr. Mary Harrington, University of Mississippi, Our Students
<b>November 5</b>	CIEE Presentations: Jacob Kathman, Political Science; David Rutherford, Public Policy Leadership; Tamara Warhol, Modern Languages, University of Mississippi
<b>December 3</b>	Retention Task Force Report on the Importance of Faculty in Retention, the University of Mississippi

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