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Dr. Shelly Wismath receives prestigious 3M National Teaching Fellowship

University of Lethbridge professor Dr. Shelly Wismath can count herself among the best university teachers in Canada. She is one of 10 university teachers to receive the 3M National Teaching Fellowship, an award that recognizes exceptional teachers in post-secondary education.

Dr. Jan Newberry, Wismath's nominator and U of L sociology professor, describes her as a "teaching ninja" who possesses a subtle and diplomatic style.

"Shelly has served as mentor and inspiration to me and to many other colleagues and students," Newberry wrote in her letter of nomination. "She represents the best of what teaching can be as a career, a vocation and a model for life and learning."

Wismath spent many years as a mathematics professor and researcher in abstract algebra. In 2009, she moved to the Liberal Education program and began focusing her research on the scholarship of teaching and learning. She played a key leadership role in building and sustaining the U of L Teaching Centre and became the inaugural Board of Governors Teaching Chair in 2007. Wismath is currently spearheading the revitalization of Liberal Education.

"My reaction was stunned silence on the phone. I couldn't believe it," says Wismath. "It's a huge honour to be in that group. I love teaching; it's always been a part of what I do. It's amazing to have that kind of recognition."

Wismath's philosophy of teaching arises from her experience in both mathematics and liberal education. She combines the logical reasoning and search for pattern that characterizes mathematics and the critical thinking and problem solving that mark liberal education into a philosophy that hones in on how people think, learn and reason.

"My goal is to share with my students the interactive process of asking questions and formulating and testing out answers, and engaging in vibrant discussion to learn more about ourselves and the world around us," she says.

Wismath works hard to build relationships with her students so they feel comfortable in the learning environment and the approach works. One student wrote “I recall the many thought-provoking articles she assigned with the hopes that we, as students, would question the content of. She did not want us to merely read and accept blindly what the authors had argued, but to come to our own conclusions and situate the information within our own understandings of the world.”

“The great thing about teaching is that we learn as much from our students as they learn from us and that’s been really true for me in the last few years with a problem-solving course I designed,” she says. “That course has been the capstone of my teaching career. I’ve learned that you don’t teach people problem solving. You facilitate their learning. It was a steep learning curve for me but the students were just tremendous. They taught me a lot and were very generous with their reflections, their attention and their thoughtfulness about their learning.”

Wismath also credits the U of L for providing her with the flexibility to continue her education and to pursue topics she’s passionate about.

“The U of L has been a great place to nurture teaching as well as research,” she says. “I’ve been very lucky to have had the flexibility that I’ve had to spend time on teaching instead of research at certain points in my career or to combine them or to take on projects.”

The 3M National Teaching Fellowship brings several opportunities. In addition to becoming a life member of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and the Council of 3M Teaching Fellows, Wismath will be invited to attend the annual conference in Halifax and a teaching and learning retreat. This is the second time a U of L professor has been awarded a 3M National Teaching Fellowship. Dr. Patricia Chuchryk, a sociology professor, received the award in 1999.

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