

Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

Embracing Alternatives in Teaching

by Jennifer Ross

For many, intellectual engagement is the goal of teaching. In the last twenty to thirty years, the methods of accomplishing such engagement have changed dramatically. For Richard Hill-Rowley, an Associate Professor in the department of Earth and Resource Science, successfully engaging students' intellect meant not only modifying his teaching techniques, but also developing opportunities for active participation, community involvement, and problem solving.

Hill-Rowley, who earned his PhD from Michigan State and recently retired from UM-Flint, admits that "teaching hasn't come naturally." When he started teaching in the early 1980s, the professors he worked with used "fairly traditional lecture presentations, essays, and reading." In the late 1980s Hill-Rowley became involved in outreach, where he received two multi-year grants from the Kellogg Center and became the Director of Applied Environmental Research. When he returned to campus in 2000, the



Richard Hill-Rowley, Associate Professor
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lecture format he had started out using no longer worked for his students. New developments in technology had altered both student learning and teaching techniques. To reorient himself to the altered teaching topography, Hill-

Rowley assessed the new landscape of teaching and discovered a need for online learning, community engagement and hands-on techniques.

Online learning was one area in which Hill-Rowley became particularly interested. From the 1980s to the mid-1990s, students "were really engaged and active" in the introductory World Regional Geography and Human Geography courses under the traditional model of teaching. When Hill-Rowley came back to teaching in 2000, he tried to continue using the model that had worked so well in the past. "I tweaked it and played with it for a while," he says, but end-of-semester evaluations revealed that the engagement students had previously demonstrated under the traditional model would no longer manifest given the new approaches to teaching and learning. According to Hill-Rowley, "I needed to figure out this online learning." To that end, he changed World Regional Geography and Human Geography over to online courses and made them interactive by including pictures, maps, and videos for students to work with, and linked course material to current events and societal trends. This new model proved to be "way more successful," garnering more interest and better discussion.

Since then, Hill-Rowley has "become a real fan of online introduction courses." He explains, "In those intro social science sort of interactions, online was a lot more interactive and interesting to do . . . If you teach online classes, you have a lot more interactions with students." He has extended his scope of online courses to include

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his Environmental Science course, a combination of online lecture and real-world laboratory. However, he does caution that online classes are not meant for everyone: “Online classes don’t work unless you’re on all the time. They are a lot more time consuming.”

Even as Hill-Rowley experimented with online teaching, he also tried to incorporate more community engagement and student involvement. In the mid-2000s, when Mundy Township began work on recreational plans Hill-Rowley got his students in Advanced Land Planning involved in township planning meetings and even had them prepare a draft of a recreation plan. Ultimately 90% of their plan was included in the proposal the township submitted. In another instance, Hill-Rowley had his students identify and categorize forest, rural, urban, and wetlands sub-basins during his watershed class. He then had them go out to the areas and study pollution in each of these basins. Another year, he actively involved them in monitoring the watershed, identifying and proposing solutions to management issues.

Perhaps the biggest example of Hill-Rowley’s combination of community and student engagement is the university’s Urban Alternatives House, located in the Central Park neighborhood. Hill-Rowley states, “As an idea, the Urban Alternatives House was something students were really excited about” and something they wanted to be involved in bringing to life. In class, Hill-Rowley challenged them as to how they would organize and sustain such a house and created a wiki for them to use as a research repository. Now that the house is operational, students are gathering energy data and examining how the garden will work. The house has spawned a number of spin-off projects, such as a rain collection system, which is being worked on by Marty Kaufman’s students, a study on transportation led by Greg Rybarczyk, and involvement from students in an alternative energy course from Mott. Incorporating students into real-world projects is “really good experience” and allows them to

connect their experiences with classroom learning.

For Hill-Rowley, the best part of his time teaching centered on working with students, especially on projects. Hill-Rowley states, “I actually wish I was starting my teaching career now.” He explains, “The opportunities for students to be involved in the community have really expanded” since the 1980s when he first began teaching at UM-Flint. Consequently, there have increasingly been “active opportunities for students to be more involved in problem solving.” It is operating within a combination of student projects, community engagement, and academic study that Hill-Rowley truly thrives with his students: “You can do really fun and interesting things when you’re in an academic setting and involve the community and students as well.” Student and community involvement with the Urban Alternatives House speaks to Hill-Rowley’s success with, and commitment to, this model. Even though he has retired, Hill-Rowley plans to stay involved with the Urban Alternatives House throughout the spring and summer ; he has received certification as a Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) home at the platinum level.

It is perhaps Richard Hill-Rowley’s feeling that “teaching hasn’t come naturally” that made him embrace changes in teaching as they arose and ultimately develop a highly integrated method of teaching that combined academic rigor, community engagement, and student involvement. Through his attention to altered teaching trends, Hill-Rowley was able to bring together not only student and community populations, but substantial ideas as well.

Written by **Jennifer Ross**

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