

Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

From Suits to Wikis: An Evolution of Teaching Techniques

By Jennifer Ross

As technology and new theories continue to change our perceptions of teaching, how do we as educators respond to such changes? Do we adapt and innovate? Do we remain rooted in tried and true methods with which we've grown familiar? Or do we simply store all these tips and tricks in what Theodosia Robertson calls "a little reticule of trusted techniques" from which we select what we think will work best for the situation?

Recently Dr. Robertson, or Teddy as many call her, retired from full-time teaching in the History Department and now holds a position as an Associate Professor Emerita of Polish, Russian, German, and Holocaust history. When asked to reflect on her teaching experience, Robertson asserts that her teaching technique has evolved significantly since she first started as an adjunct, morphing from rapid-fire lectures to classes incorporating integrative PowerPoint presentations, stimulating class discussions, and active learning-based activities.



Teddy Robertson
Associate Professor Emeritus
History

Robertson says of her retirement, "I am now a happy adjunct. A free-lancer, with the luxury of focus." The focus, she says, "has taken me back to the basics, philosophical and ethical. Do no harm. Admit error. Admit lack of knowledge. Confide in students . . . Have faith that the real learning may happen later, beyond this class."

Having come full circle, back to these basics, what factors contributed to the development of Robertson's teaching technique and her evolution as a teacher? One of the

first influences on Robertson's teaching style, she states, occurred while she was still an undergraduate at Dominican University in San Rafael, California. It was a "small school, very personal," she says. In considering its influence, Robertson explains, "It has been said you teach the way you were taught . . . since I was taught in a way that was so personal that's the way it ended up for me." But, when Robertson began her professional career, she encountered a very different teaching style: "I wore a suit, and I lectured. That's how people taught." Despite that, Robertson reports that her experiences at Dominican University continued to exert an influence on her own teaching methods. She explains, "I mastered that [lecture style of teaching], but it was more interesting to be more personable with students."

As with many things, the theories of teaching changed. And Robertson changed with them. Robertson began creating PowerPoint presentations to accompany her lectures, thereby incorporating both visual and auditory learning components into the class. Additionally, she often supplied students with an outline version of the presentation before class began so that they could familiarize themselves with the basic material and fill in more substantial notes during the lecture. Moreover, she structured both the lectures and the PowerPoints so that students would find "hooks to hang on," or interesting tidbits to grab their attention until "you can get to the important stuff."

Robertson also integrated class discussion into her lectures. As a European history professor, one of her goals was to "convey something that was very German, or very Russian"—in other words, something very distinct about the people and culture students were studying. Robertson explains, "I think that students get a sense of what makes the uniqueness of a people and if I could open that up to students . . . that was very satisfying." To

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that end, she would try to communicate a sense of the culture's idiosyncrasies. For example, the influence of Old Russia, religious icons, and the continued specialness of Russian Orthodoxy remains engrained in Russian culture, even among those who are not, or are no longer, religious. Robertson also resisted presenting just the facts. "The chronology of events is not everything," she says. To that end, she took time to answer students' questions, engaged with discussions that sometimes led to tangents on German or Russian culture, and provided further resources for students to explore outside of class.

As much as Robertson enjoys class discussions, she does admit that there is "no single formula" to guarantee good discussion. Class discussion is "always a question [and] partly depends on the nature of the material," as well as the dynamics of the class as a whole. In an effort to spur student preparedness, Robertson supplied handouts of readings and points to consider either in hard copy or on Blackboard. Doing so seemed to help, but even so, Robertson found that discussion "is still chancey" because of its reliance on participation levels.

Looking back, Robertson recognizes the large role technology played in the evolution of her teaching style. Because of technology, not only was she able to include visual aids via PowerPoint or the Internet, but she also created discussion boards and class Wikis where her students could interact with the material by researching and working as groups to post definitions or descriptions accessible to the rest of the class.

Robertson asserts, "One of the advantages to technology is that it levels the playing field – [it is] a great equalizer between students and professors." Students, she says, feel less of an authoritarian divide while interacting through and with technology, and are more likely to engage comfortably with unfamiliar material and concepts through a medium they may find more interesting and accommodating.

At the same time her students learn, so too does Robertson. She states, "I'm not particularly good at technology, but it's fun." In her experiments, Robertson found that the Wiki worked especially well. Students were given a list of terms pertaining to aspects of German, Russian, or Holocaust history and were divided into groups in order to define these terms in detail. Students would then post their findings to the class Wiki, creating a resource similar to that of the ever-popular Wikipedia. Robertson reports that this

assignment "allowed students to do the work . . . [and] look up the information," but also enabled her to assess students' understanding.

In a similar vein, Robertson discovered "another trick" to gathering student feedback. Before a test, Robertson would provide students with a 3x5 notecard on which to write how they felt about the test and material it covered. In providing the notecard, Robertson's goal was to amass instantaneous feedback. Although she also tried a more high-tech approach by sending an application through Google Forms to her students' phones, Robertson found that the 3x5 card worked better because there was no time lapse, since students filled them in right after the test.

Asked what was most enjoyable about her years of teaching, Robertson smiled and said, "It wasn't really work – it was an identity." Robertson concedes, "In a certain sense...we work all the time," but she relished the wide variety of reading or research topics that could still find some relevance for her as a teacher. In fact, much of that reading, she reports, "fertilized the courses I was teaching," making them richer and fuller for both her and her students.

Since the start of her career, Teddy Robertson has dared to explore new teaching techniques and modify her style based on her findings. By viewing new theories and technological developments as an opportunity for adventure, Robertson was willing and able to experiment with new ideas, broadening the scope of traditional lectures to include images, class discussion, and innovative assignments such as the class Wiki. Now that her course load has dropped significantly, Robertson looks forward to the time she finds in retirement. She expects to finish some research listening to Holocaust testimonies, revisit French and start on Italian, become a better writer and communicator in part by writing for her blog, and enjoy gardening. But, for Robertson, teaching was and continues to be "a great way of life" in which "care for each individual person is, as it always has been, at the heart."

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