Hunter-Hamilton Award tribute to John Wertheimer

The “highly innovative” professor whom we honor today artfully combines “ebullience, intelligence, and ‘joie de teaching’” with a great variety of teaching techniques. When he lectures, one student noted, “he is precise in his phrasing, clear in his articulation, and electric in his eye contact. His subtle humor and witty responses to students’ questions transform a history lesson into a combination of a Robin Williams stand-up routine and a Ken Burns documentary. He leaves his students both laughing and wanting to know more.”

Other techniques are designed to help students learn skills in research, in critical thinking, in public speaking, and in working with others that will benefit them throughout their lives. In one class, students in groups of two pick a court case, write briefs, and make oral arguments in front of the class. In another class, a student commented, “my classmates and I gave lectures, performed scenes from historical novels, and led small-group discussions.” Reflecting upon his experience in another of this professor’s classes, a student wrote that the teacher “fostered an incredible spirit of scholarly exploration and collaboration. My classmates and I were excited to come to class each week to discuss one another’s findings and determine what distant archive or library we had to visit next. Throughout the process, our teacher was equal parts scholar, co-collaborator, mentor, and cheerleader.”

This teacher’s classes also are challenging. A colleague noted that he is “very demanding in his numerous and diverse assignments.” A student observed that “he will mark your paper up until it appears to be covered in red ink; but when you read his comments, you inevitably come to agree with each one of them. As a result, each student becomes a better writer, researcher, and investigator.” Another student wrote that he “demands much, and he receives what he asks for and more from
students of all abilities.” He has a remarkable ability to “graciously motivate unprepared students such that the next time around they generally nail whatever comes their way.” Because “he derives genuine joy from his students’ accomplishments, they are encouraged and emboldened to strive for greater heights.”

Students are willing to work so hard in his classes because they know that he is “a caring person who is genuinely interested in students and their lives.” He “makes an effort to get to know each student, what each student’s story is, what their interests are outside the classroom, and what they want to do after leaving Davidson.” He also “understands that if a student is struggling in other areas of his life, his or her academic work will be affected.”

Students also thrive in his classes because he genuinely enjoys meeting with them in his office and answering their e-mails. One of his honors students noted that, “in addition to our weekly seminars, he would meet with me individually for an hour or more each week to discuss my progress. He truly enjoyed being able to work with me so I could create the best work I was capable of.” Another student commented that he “would spend at least an hour a week listening to me divulge the trials of writing a thesis, the horror of a Rhodes interview, or the happiness experienced in receiving a Rotary scholarship.”

Students praised this professor’s involvement in campus activities and his willingness to welcome current and former students into his home. One student appreciated his “becoming one of us on the Court as bass guitarist for his popular band Impacto.” Another warmly recalled “the times that we played guitar together in his living room, teaching each other songs we had written.”
Summarizing the views of many, one student noted that this teacher “treats his students as equals, as fellow scholars, and as friends. In so doing he lives up to an ideal of liberal arts education that is often discussed but rarely realized.”

For your dedication and commitment, for the excitement you bring to your teaching, and for inspiring students to accomplish more than they thought possible, we honor you, Professor John Wertheimer, with the 2008 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.