



Christian Blouin maps the road to better education

For Christian Blouin, the rewards of teaching are simple. “I like to find a way to explain difficult concepts by way of example and analogies,” he says.

This attitude earned him the first-ever Dean’s Teaching Excellence Award, an honour bestowed by the Faculty of Computer Science (FCS) for Dr. Blouin’s efforts in the classroom and for his brainchild, Daedalus: a software system for curriculum mapping.

Charting a course

Dr. Blouin has been teaching in the Departments of Computer Science and Biochemistry for almost a decade now, joining FCS in 2003 after completing his PhD at Dalhousie.

Dr. Blouin is grateful for the environment in which he works, finding inspiration among his colleagues. “There are many others—both in computer science and in biochemistry—who are passionate about teaching,” he says. Dr. Blouin gave back to his fellow faculty members by creating Daedalus, a system that maps curriculum by dividing the content of courses and programs into individual tasks to teach. Daedalus also relates tasks to one another and associates them with student learning outcomes.

Michael Shepherd, Dean of FCS, believes that Daedalus “should lead to better courses across the entire curriculum for the students.”

Pointing people in the right direction

Dr. Blouin’s work with curriculum mapping and student learning outcomes ties into his teaching philosophy: that a positive student response is key to successful instructing. “Teaching should be a dialogue with students,” he explains. “Otherwise, teaching is simply going over a laundry list of learning outcomes. I see our role as instructors to explain to students why they want to know about different things. Once they know why something matters, learning happens (almost) without effort.”

His faculty profile provides a long list of research interests, publications and conference presentations, ranging from protein evolution to high-performance computing to geometry. Dr. Blouin speaks about his work modestly: “I do a bit of a lot of things.” He admits that he has a full plate, but believes that it’s a good problem to have when there are so many opportunities available at once.

Going the extra mile

During the past academic year, Dr. Blouin taught two new first-year informatics classes and was very pleased with the student response. “I make a point to know students in my course,” he says, “even if there are 80 of them. I try to treat my students like co-workers and see them progress throughout their degree even after I’m done teaching them.”

Dr. Shepherd describes an excellent professor as someone who takes the passion for education outside of normal work hours. “What most people do not understand is that to be a great teacher in the classroom requires a huge amount of preparation before you even get close to the classroom,” he says.

A selection committee composed of the associate dean academic and three faculty members chose the recipient for the new award based on components that demonstrated innovation and excellence, including student teaching evaluations.

In the coming school year, Dr. Blouin will co-teach two first-year classes titled, “Concepts of Computing”, and “Applications of Computing”, as well as a bioinformatics course. He will also offer an upper-level seminar in bioinformatics.

When asked, he offers the following analogy for the secret to successful teaching:

“It is about selling exciting problems. You open the box of Lego, explain what each block looks like, how they fit together and ask [students] to make something awesome with it.”