
What better way to celebrate college
classroom teaching than by interviewing
major teaching award winners!

An Interview with Dr. Linda Wilson

• • • •
by Gary Hunter, University Teaching Services

GH: *Suppose a graduate student informs you that s/he wants to become a great instructor like yourself. What advice would you give?*

LW: Have high expectations for students' efforts and successes and have high expectations for your own effort and success.

GH: *How do you communicate high expectations to your students?*

LW: I make the objectives of the learning experience explicit. I let them know what I expect them to bring to it and what I'm going to bring to it. I outline my expectations. I'm very explicit on how papers will be graded. They receive a mark sheet. I tell them what each component of the total mark will be and where they can find relevant reference books. A number of years ago, I was assigned a fourth year seminar. One of the assignments required students to deliver oral presentations. Obviously, there are core ways of presenting yourself. So I made sure that I laid out all the ingredients of an effective presentation. I was determined to leave nothing to chance. I made the implicit explicit.

GH: *It strikes me that if you diligently communicate the ingredients of an effective oral presentation you are conveying higher expectations of your students than an instructor who assigns his or her students oral presentations, but neglects to provide any explicit about what constitutes an effective oral presentation.*

LW: As a matter of fact, what I found was that the more explicit my instructions and materials became the more student performance improved and the more student anxiety was allayed. I transferred the idea of making the implicit explicit to every course that I have taught since then. So I look upon that experience as an epiphany.

GH: *In making the implicit explicit, you are ensuring that they get the message that your expectations are high, while simultaneously ensuring that they are crystal clear as well.*

BIO:
Dr. Linda Wilson

Linda Morrissey Wilson has degrees from Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts and from Kent State University, Ohio.

She has been with the Department of Psychology at The University of Manitoba since 1978. Her specialty is behavioural neuroscience, the study of the brain (and nervous system) bases of behaviour.

She received a Dr. and Mrs. H. H. Saunderson Award for Excellence in Teaching (1985), has been honoured at the first annual UMSU/UTS celebration - the Students' Teacher Recognition Reception (1993) - and has been nominated for the 3M Teaching Fellowship (1997), before receiving the Olive Beatrice Stanton Award for Excellence in Teaching at the Spring 2000 Convocation.

LW: Exactly. Remember the times you spent as an undergrad trying to figure out what the assignment was all about, what it was supposed to show, what a well-written paper or lab report was supposed to be, what the point of the class discussion or lecture was? Now I reflect upon these questions to clarify what I want to say, what I'm going to distribute, and what I need to demonstrate.

GH: *What other advice would you give a graduate student who has aspirations of becoming a great instructor?*



LW: I believe that it is very important for an instructor to be comfortable with releasing control of the learning situation to promote better learning. For example, try diverse ways to, say, stimulate critical thinking and be prepared to bravely accept the fact that some attempts will soar, while others will plummet. You won't know unless your students let you know. Seek feedback via one-minute papers, suggestion boxes, and course home pages, or through a combination of these strategies. Your students are your best source of information on whether their needs are being met. Be open and accessible to them. Finally, seek out your departmental colleagues, UTS, and books and periodicals on teaching. I found many of the best strategies for facilitating student learning by using these resources.

GH: *How do you maintain your enthusiasm for teaching?*

LW: The interpersonal interaction with students gives me a real high. It's so reinforcing - the one-on-one immediacy and feedback I construe teaching not just as lectures or interactive lectures, but also as working with students, one-on-one and in small groups, towards a

common goal. Oftentimes, a wonderful synergy occurs and that synergy carries over into my other teaching. It's very energizing. At the beginning of every school year, I have a ritual. From an issue of the 1984 American Psychologist, I read an address given by Henry Gleitman, the winner of the American Psychological Association's Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award and who specializes in cognitive psychology. In the address, he comments solely on his experience in reaching introductory psychology classes. He talks about who he is actually teaching, and who he is teaching for, and I find it to be one of the most motivational pieces I've ever read.

"I make the objectives of the learning experience explicit. I let them know what I expect them to bring to it and what I'm going to bring to it."

GH: *You say he talks about who he is actually teaching, and who he is teaching for. Can you elaborate?*

LW: He points out that the vast majority of introductory psychology students are not going on to graduate school in psychology. Therefore, instructors should not be teaching with this goal in mind. For the vast majority of introductory psychology students, this will be the one and only course that they will take in psychology. So if you don't get it right, there will be nobody after you to redress wrongs or to change their impressions of the discipline.

GH: *What a responsibility when it's put that way! You will be the psychologist, anthropologist, economist they are going to remember and associate with that discipline for the rest of their lives, for better or worse.*

LW: It's a tremendous responsibility. That's why I read that particular speech every year before I begin teaching. It always gives me a major boost.